



March 15, 2009

## Mental-health system faces a severe crisis

And just when you thought things couldn't get any worse.

With the nation's economy in the tank, people losing their jobs and those dumb Tennessee legislators who are ready to allow people to carry guns into restaurants, and even parks.

Can't get any worse than that, can it? That's what I thought, too, until I got an e-mail Thursday afternoon urging me to take a look at a national report card on how states are faring when it comes to their public mental-health care system.

"In 2006, Tennessee's mental health care system received a grade of C. Three years later, the grade has fallen to a D," the National Alliance on Mental Illness said in its Grading the States 2009 report. "Tennessee is on a downward slide. Changes to TennCare have put great strains on the system, and many people don't have access to needed services."

The report praised Tennessee for several innovations, such as being a national leader on supportive housing, progress on jail diversion and law enforcement training as well as its peer-support centers throughout the state.

But it listed three urgent needs:

- Expand the safety net program for former TennCare recipients.
- Protect funding.
- Address severe work-force shortages.

"We've got a lot of good things, such as approximately 8,000 homes being created for the mentally ill across the state, the crisis intervention team in Memphis, the mental health court in Nashville and the crisis stabilization unit for people who voluntarily need short-term care, but our biggest problem is money and threats to funding certain programs," said Sita Diehl, executive director of NAMI Tennessee. "The Department of Mental Health has been doing a good job, but some of the money that was supposed to be re-invested into the community is now going into the state's general fund because of shortages in state funds.

"We also have a high number of people with mental illness in county jails that are not set up to deal with the mentally ill. ..."

That's part of the reason the National Alliance on Mental Illness said in its 2009 report that "Our national mental health care system is in crisis. Long fragile, fragmented and inadequate, it is now in serious peril.

"In 2003, the presidential New Freedom Commission presented a vision for a life-saving, recovery-oriented, cost-effective, evidence-based system of care. States have been working to improve the system, but progress is minimal. Today, even those states that have worked the hardest stand to see their gains wiped out. As the country faces the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, state budget shortfalls mean budget cuts to mental health services."

The report added: "One in four Americans experience mental illness at some point in their lives. The most serious conditions affect 10.6 million people. Mental illness is the greatest cause of disability in the nation, and twice as many Americans live with schizophrenia than with HIV/AIDS."

As I asked earlier, can it get any worse? Unfortunately, yes it can. Or, perhaps I should say, just as

bad.

On Tuesday, a day before the report about mental health was released, the National Center on Family Homelessness issued a report saying that one out of every 50 — or approximately 1.5 million — American children go to sleep without a home of their own each year.

The report says Tennessee ranks 24th nationally, with 16,584 children being homeless. That's 6,965 children under 6 years old, 7,906 enrolled in grades K-8, and 1,713 enrolled in grades 9-12.

The report card on child homelessness said, too, that one in 24 children in Tennessee do not know where they will get their next meal.

Well, Dwight, you haven't mentioned the Johns Hopkins University report released Thursday saying Tennessee's high school graduation rate rose from 61 percent to 72 percent 2002-06, more than any other state.

I think that is great, and I wholeheartedly applaud those students who are staying in school, their parents and loved ones and the educators who worked with them. But we can't be pleased with just one phase of our society; we have to look and work to take care of all people who live here.

Children shouldn't have to be homeless, and the mentally ill shouldn't have to want for care. I hope you see by now, Tennessee, we have to do a better job. We can't let it get any worse than these reports showing us how awful we are now.

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