

Mental Health is Real Health

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

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<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/depression-suicidebygun-s5.jpg>



Sen. Smith highlights the challenges Wisconsin faces in addressing the mental health needs of communities.

MADISON - So much can be said about mental health and yet so little has been done. We all know someone struggling with mental illness. So few receive the help they need.

Over the past few weeks, I've been at eleven budget listening sessions. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive about Governor Tony Evers' budget. Time and time again, many of the conversations I have with attendees is about mental health.

Some people are born with mental illness, some form destructive habits after experiencing traumatic events. Despite the causes, we fail to treat the seriousness of the issue.

Last week, I attended a briefing by the Children's Caucus, a bipartisan group of legislators tasked with finding ways to help our children get the care they need. The briefing was about the importance of early childhood mental health consultants. Before we can crawl we are susceptible to mental illness. It takes a keen eye to spot it and it takes early intervention to treat it.

Childhood trauma can lead to serious mental illness. Children are resilient, but they struggle with communicating their needs. As parents, grandparents, teachers and child care

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professionals, we all play a part in identifying mental health needs. Excessive worrying, problems concentrating, extreme mood changes, avoiding social activity, changes in sleep activity, substance abuse, and hyperactivity are just a few indicators of mental illness.

According to the World Health Organization, 1 in 4 individuals will be affected by mental or neurological disorders. Two-thirds of those with mental illness will not seek help due to the stigma associated with the disease.

For those who do decide to seek treatment, there is a serious lack of qualified professionals in Wisconsin. According to a study done by the Wisconsin Policy Forum in 2018, 55 of Wisconsin's 72 counties has a significant shortage of psychiatrists, and 20 counties have no psychiatrists at all. Compounding the problem, the average age of psychiatrists in Wisconsin is 50 years old.



If someone needs mental health treatment, it is covered by insurance thanks to a law I helped pass in 2008 called the Mental Health Parity Bill. That was a good start for treating mental illness, but very little has been done since.

Governor Evers' budget, developed by listening to the people of Wisconsin, makes big investments for mental health treatment -- especially for kids. Schools will receive \$44 million in categorical aids over the biennium for mental health professionals like nurses or counselors. He also adds \$14 million for grant programs to help schools districts collaborate with community health organizations for mental health services.

The Governor also makes critical investments at our state treatment facilities. He adds 24 new beds and 58 new staff positions at Winnebago Mental Health Institute. He adds 14 new beds and 50.5 new staff for Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center. He adds 58 new beds and 34 staff to the Wisconsin Resource Center so inmates can receive the treatment they need.

For low-income individuals, the Governor invests \$37 million for crisis intervention services and \$23 million for postpartum care. Additionally, for substance abuse treatment, the Governor proposes creating three "hub-and-spoke" models designed to help regional hospitals refer

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patients to treatment centers, physicians and social service agencies.

We have a lot of work to do, especially for substance abuse challenges. Opioids and meth continue to ravage our state. Treatment alternative and diversion programs are a great way to keep people focused on healing from addiction rather than being locked up for it. The Governor adds an additional \$2 million in grant funds for the program.

No one is immune to mental illness. Too many times we've seen people take their own lives because they didn't get the help they needed or the pain was too unbearable. The illnesses we can't see on an x-ray or in a blood test are the hardest to overcome. Mental illness is real and "toughing it out" isn't how to handle it. We owe it to all those suffering to do whatever we can to help them through the hardest times in their lives.