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Don't cut mental health to fund education in Maryland

March 23, 2011 | By Russell K. Snyder

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I am an advocate for adequate funding for public education. I understand how important it is that our schools have the resources they need. However, I am also the leader of an organization that provides high-quality services — including mental health services — to thousands of people in this region, and I am deeply disturbed that mental health funds are being used to restore cuts to education, an area that has historically remained untouched while mental health funding has taken a beating, year after year.

As the president and CEO of Volunteers of America Chesapeake, I am outraged by the actions taken last week by the Maryland General Assembly's House Appropriations Health Subcommittee to increase cuts by more than \$6 million to an already slashed public mental health system.

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Each day, I see first-hand the need for the mental health and rehabilitation services our organization and others provide. Through our five mental health services programs in Maryland, Volunteers of America Chesapeake serves hundreds of mentally ill men and women in the state through area group homes, supportive permanent housing units and community-based rehabilitation programs.

It is important to note that these cuts — whether the \$6.7 million proposed by the House or \$4.2 million as proposed by the Senate — would be on top of the cuts already in Gov. Martin O'Malley's budget. The governor's budget includes an \$11.3 million cut for community mental health (a 2.5 percent rate reduction, far greater than any other health provider group).

At a time when demand for these services is at an all-time high, and barely two months after the Tucson tragedy revealed the potential consequences when mental health issues go untreated, I believe such measures as those proposed are nothing short of irresponsible.

If these cuts are put into action, the impact on community health — and the individuals served by organizations like mine — will be devastating. The number of people served by Maryland's public mental health system has grown by 40 percent in just four years, yet funding has grown by only 17 percent. Our industry is currently facing a workforce crisis, with turnover rates around 41 percent for direct care employees. In the past three years, Volunteers of America Chesapeake alone has witnessed a 12.5 percent increase in the need for our supportive mental health services. Yet, in that same time, we have been forced to cut more than 10 percent of our mental health rehabilitation services staff.

Simply stated, Maryland deserves better. Maryland employees looking to obtain (or keep) mental health jobs deserve salaries that are not competing with unemployment benefits. Maryland residents currently dealing with mental illness deserve the services necessary to live the lives they desire. Because mental illness can attack any person at any point in his or her life, or — as the tragedy in Tucson illustrated — impact any person at any point, all Maryland residents and employees deserve a system that will protect and support them.

The challenges men, women and children suffering with mental illnesses face can often result in being unable to work, support their families or afford shelter. Our organization is a place these people can turn to, but when funding decreases, it has a direct impact on the services and support we can deliver. Cutting the budget will ultimately cut off our clients' hope.

Those who would cut these critical services to restore funding for education would do well to note that, according to Mental Hygiene Administration research, 1 in 5 children are currently living with mental illness in Maryland. Your investment in their education is wasted if they cannot receive the treatment that will permit them to learn.

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The proposed cuts send the message that Maryland is turning its back on mental health and walking away from an industry—and individuals —already struggling to survive. I urge the House of Delegates to think twice.

Russell K. Snyder is president and CEO of Volunteers of America Chesapeake, which provides services to more than 9,000 men, women and children in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. His e-mail is rsnyder@voaches.org.

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