

HEALTHY OUTCOMES OR TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES?

Finding Effective Paths to Treating Mental Illness

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, August 2011

The death of 37 year old schizophrenic Kelly Thomas during a violent encounter with Fullerton police officers cries out for change. Mr. Thomas was homeless and in need of intensive psychiatric care, but refused it. While the City of Fullerton is reviewing their policy and procedures for dealing with people with severe mental illness, health systems continue to be faced with how to help mentally ill patients who refuse treatment.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, five percent of the population has serious mental illness, yet only a fraction receive treatment, resulting in homelessness, incarceration, injury and even death.

Often mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, manic depression) begins in people in their late teens and early twenties. Those who become ill often led normal active lives until being stricken with what amounts to a debilitating illness of the brain. Their thought processes suffer and lead to such conditions as paranoia, severe depression, irrational fears, feelings of exhilaration or grandeur, or erratic behavior.

By recognizing the early onset of mental illness and getting help from professionals, one can reduce the extent of the severity of the disease and increase the chances for recovery. Early intervention is all the more critical when you realize that without help it is more likely people may not recover and could become mentally ill for life. One of the biggest impediments to intervention is the stigma of mental illness. Concerned with what others may think, people are reluctant to ask for help and treatment.

Efforts to reach people who are suffering before their illness grows worse and becomes harder to heal is a model that is used not only with our County Behavioral Health Department, it is also a model of our Health Care Agency. The model saves lives and dollars by getting people treatment at the onset of their illness so they can be healthier and less likely to need emergency rooms and hospitals.

We must do all we can to keep people who have mental illness from getting worse through early intervention, reaching out to them when they are ill, providing effective treatment, and responding humanely when they are in crisis. We also need to do our part to decrease the stigma of mental illness that keeps people from reaching out and getting help.

Too often people with mental illness end up on the streets and are arrested. Jails across the State have become defacto institutions for housing mentally ill people. To reduce the number of mentally ill people going in and out of our jails, the County recently instituted a "warm hand-off" procedure so mental health service providers are contacted in advance and a plan is in place for when mentally ill prisoners are released from jail. This coordinated system has already been found to lower their re-arrests.

There is still much to do to turn around this disease and to make living with mental illness manageable for individuals and their families. Finding effective ways to help those with severe mental illness-- including those who refuse treatment, and intervening at the early onset of the disease, will help us avoid the tragic circumstances that led to Kelly Thomas' death.