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POINT OF VIEW MENTAL HEALTH CARE

## Slim funding makes tragedy of illness

Public mental health systems around the nation are struggling to meet the growing demand for services. The situation is acute



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in Florida, which ranks 49th out of 50 states in the nation for funding basic programs. Here in South Florida, according to the Mental Health Association of Southeast Florida, neither the state nor local governments has adequately increased funding to meet the growing need and rising costs of mental health.

The deficiencies date back to the 1960s when mental health organizations moved people out of long-term psychiatric hospitals and back to their communities, where patients were to be treated with short-term and outpatient care, family contact and medication. The increase in the utilization

of short-term and outpatient facilities was intended to provide additional avenues of care to reduce the social stigma associated with mental illness and improve public health. Unfortunately, the shortfall in funding has the effect of contributing to law enforcement officers being the first responders when people with mental illness are experiencing a crisis, even when no crime is involved, and increasing the frequency of trips to the emergency room for medical care. These shortsighted and short-term measures have proved to be inadequate for helping people with mental illness, particularly the poor and minority segments of our community.

There are many tragic stories in South Florida, some of which make it into the news, of people who do not get the long-term care they require and proceed to hurt themselves and others. Without an adequate system in place, some mentally ill people stop taking

medication, exhibit antisocial behavior or commit crimes and end up on the streets or in jail, with prisons assuming the functions that hospitals and health care professionals should provide. These real-life stories typically illustrate the desperation of family members whose frantic calls for help were unanswered by a system hampered by tragically inadequate resources.

Too often with issues involving mental health, government waits until something terrible happens before resources are mobilized. The need is immediate, and now is the time for legislators, the governor and local agencies to show through their budgets that mental wellness in this state is a priority.

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