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April 28, 2016

Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Mental Health
As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee is responsible for the programs – Medicare and Medicaid – that spend more on mental health than anybody else in America. That’s why this committee, working in conjunction with others including HELP and Judiciary, must develop a fresh approach for protecting and caring for Americans with mental illness. The focus of that approach should be breaking health care, social service programs, and law enforcement out of their individual silos and bringing them together in a coordinated system that deploys their strengths to help people dealing with mental health issues.

The Wyden family knows a little bit about this subject. My brother struggled with schizophrenia for decades, and he had a lot of health care bills covered by Medicaid. In and out of halfway houses. Confrontations with law enforcement officers. Problems securing funds for services or treatments. It was certainly something that has confronted millions of families and demonstrates the need for a fresh approach to helping those with mental illnesses.

Instead, because of the lack of appropriate places to go, patients who deal with a lot of the same issues Jeff Wyden did have been boarded in emergency rooms. They’ve been in fights with police, sometimes deadly. Or they’ve wound up in prison, where more than half of all inmates suffer from mental health problems, and minorities are vastly overrepresented.

I’ll be the first to say that mental health is not an issue that falls neatly under any one Senate committee’s jurisdiction. A lot of different members with different areas of expertise will have to pull the same end of the rope to make progress on this front. Senator Stabenow, right on this committee, is a champion of mental health. Senator Murray, the Democratic leader on the HELP Committee is also right at the forefront.

In my view, our efforts on mental health have to be concentrated on three priorities. First, there needs to be a sharp new focus on preventing mental illness. People need better care earlier on to keep illnesses from escalating. And furthermore, there are nearly two million low-income, uninsured Americans suffering from mental illness or addiction in states that have not expanded their Medicaid programs. That’s two million Americans who, without treatment or help, are far more likely to fall into homelessness, far more likely to be incarcerated, far more likely to suffer from addiction, far more likely to commit suicide. The choice to expand Medicaid and give new hope to those two million individuals and their families, in my view, should be an easy one to make.

Second, services from health care to social work need to be better coordinated. It doesn't make much sense to tell a person struggling with an illness that they're on their own managing treatments, figuring out what specialists to see, scheduling appointments and handling medications. Even outside the doctor's office there are a lot of areas where people with mental illnesses often need help they're not getting today. Paying the bills. Making it to appointments. Maintaining a home. Taxpayer dollars need to reach deeper into our communities and improve coordination to help people who the system today overlooks.

Third, there needs to be a better link between mental health and law enforcement. In a lot of cases that's going to mean more training on what to do when responding to a person with mental illness. Too many people who should be in proper health care facilities are winding up in jail cells instead. In Portland, the Police Bureau has recently put a lot of work into building a team of specially-trained officers to handle these challenges safely, and it's paying big dividends in the early going. In my view, more agencies around the country ought to follow suit.

The big hurdle in all of this is funding. Each year, mental illness costs the U.S. \$450 billion, only a third of which is actually spent on medical care. At roughly \$75 billion combined, Medicare and Medicaid make up the biggest slice of the pie. Those are huge numbers, and a lot of the overall total goes to emergency room visits and jail time. In my judgement, if you can shift some of that funding to the three priorities I talked about – preventing mental illness, better coordinating care and services, and linking law enforcement with mental health – you'll see a lot more people successfully managing their mental illnesses and living healthier lives.

This is a tough challenge, and it's going to require a lot of bipartisan teamwork. But I'm optimistic that members will come together to make real progress, and I look forward to today's hearing.

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