


Date: October 17, 2006

To: Honorable Mayor and Councilmembers

From: Bonnie Lowenthal, Vice Mayor 
Gerrie Schipske, Councilmember, 5th District G.S./z

Subject: Request for the City Manager to study the feasibility of creating a full-time Mental Health Coordinator position within the Department of Health and Human Services

Mental illness is an under-addressed issue that has a strong impact on people in the City of Long Beach. In terms of resources, programs, education and funding, mental health does not exist on parity with physical health. But the debilitating effects, costs and amount of human suffering caused by mental illness are equally grave and serious. Erasing the negative stigma, shame and ignorance regarding mental illness are important responsibilities in the fight for services and treatments.

Many members of the general population do not have adequate information and access to needed mental health care. Mental illness occurs with varying degrees of severity, ranging from mild to severe and can affect all people regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status.

Background

According to the Washington DC based Center for Mental Health Outreach, about one in five adults suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year. About 20 percent of children are estimated to have mental disorders with at least mild functional impairment, and twelve percent of all children experience serious emotional disturbances. Unfortunately, nearly two-thirds of all people with diagnosable mental disorders do not seek treatment. When these data are applied to the City of Long Beach, approximately 100,000 are estimated to suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in any one year, 66,000 of whom do not seek treatment. The impact of non-treatment is seen in a number of settings, from worksite absenteeism to diminished performance in schools to incarceration in jails.

The problems associated with mental illness are often compounded by lack of health insurance coverage. In Long Beach, over 14,000 children and 64,000 adults have no health insurance.

In the Long Beach community, programs and services do exist to address mental health needs, but the services are inadequate and overwhelmed agencies are often unable to meet the demand. As an example, the LBPD Mental Evaluation Team (MET) is a partnership between law enforcement and mental health clinicians that provide immediate emergency assistance to all parts of the city in response to 911 calls whenever mental illness, psychiatric or emotional crisis is reported or suspected. Long Beach MET handled 2215 cases in 2005 and 1232 cases in the first 6 months of 2006.

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Another example is Long Beach Mental Health run by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. They report that 2400 clients have open case files at the Center. Each month, at least 200 new clients are evaluated, approximately 100 cases are referred to other agencies, and 100 new cases are opened, with 65% of clients served currently on Medi-Cal. Long Beach Mental Health does not have the resources to treat persons who are not seriously and persistently mentally ill. While clients seen are diagnosed with a spectrum of disorders, the most commonly treated at this site are major depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

While some individuals utilize private practitioners or nonprofit services, the data reflect that only a fraction of people affected by mental illness are receiving treatment or are aware of the treatment options available to them. Additional funding and capacity building are needed to fully address the problem.

In order to eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness and help individuals with mental illness to receive referrals and treatment, the City of Long Beach must be committed to providing the public with accurate information and resources regarding access to mental healthcare services.

Based on the successful model of the Homeless Services Coordinator and the Child Care Services Coordinator within the Department of Health and Human Services, the City stands to benefit from creating a full-time Mental Health Coordinator.

The Coordinator would be responsible for acquiring grants, educating the community, and developing additional programs and services. The Coordinator would spearhead a variety of projects, including coordinating a public education campaign, studying the gaps in services and putting together a task force or citywide master plan that would begin to address this critical situation.

Through advocacy and education, the Mental Health Coordinator could make major strides in erasing the stigma, shame and ignorance that prevent the nearly two-thirds of all individuals affected by mental illness from seeking treatment. The Mental Health Coordinator would provide knowledge and understanding of mental health issues, bring awareness that mental illness affects people from all walks of life, and enable the people of Long Beach to seek care for themselves, their families and their loved ones.

RECOMMENDATION:

We respectfully request that the City Manager look at the feasibility of creating a full-time Mental Health Coordinator position within the Department of Health and Human Services to be potentially funded by non-local government sources, including Prop 63, private grants and other non-general fund sources.