



Sen. Murphy targets community mental health care needs in Norwich

Published January 23, 2015 6:06PM Updated January 24, 2015 11:54AM

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Publication: theday.com

Norwich – U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., said he believes improving mental health care services is one area where Democrats and Republicans can work together, and he hopes to present a report and recommended legislation by spring to get the discussion started.

Murphy is hosting mental health services forums throughout the state, which included an hourlong session at United Community and Family Services on Friday afternoon.

The 20 health care professionals in various service fields who attended Friday's session did not need much prompting to offer their opinions. Murphy received an hour's worth of answers to his lead-off question: "If there is one thing you could change in how the federal government interacts with the mental health system, what would it be?"

Several speakers said the basic problem is the perception that mental health care or behavioral health care are different from physical health care and services. Insurance companies, businesses, the public and the government fail to recognize that "good mental health care is primary to good health," said James O'Dea, director of Behavioral Health Services for Hartford Health Care East Region, which includes The William W. Backus Hospital and Windham Hospital.

Families "systematically" face months of waiting to get appointments with the few mental health professionals available — especially for children and adolescents — even during traumatic crises. And providers face a paperwork battle to receive what amounts to insufficient funding or reimbursements.

"We spend so much time not providing care, because we spend so much time proving they need care," said Nancy Cowser, vice president of planning for UCFS.

Even when reimbursements are approved, they don't cover the many necessary hours of coordination between physicians and mental health care providers to integrate a patient's care. That problem is compounded when the patient is a child, when schools and parents become involved.

David Burnett, executive director of Reliance House — which provides mental health services, homeless outreach, housing and case management — said mental health care providers themselves need to stop talking about the "stigma" of mental illness.

"Every time I talk about stigma, I am reinforcing the stereotype," Burnett said.

The need to improve mental health services emerged as a hotbed issue in the wake of the Dec. 14, 2012, Sandy Hook school shooting by Adam Lanza. Lanza's deep-rooted mental illness has been the topic of much study in the aftermath of the deaths of 20 young children, six teachers, Lanza's mother and Lanza himself.

Murphy is leading a Senate Democrats' effort to research shortcomings in the health care delivery network — private insurance, Medicare and Medicaid, as well as government contract funding to providers — and will report recommendations.

Murphy raised one controversial issue as Friday's session was winding down: whether the government should support involuntary outpatient commitments of patients to inpatient settings.

Jennifer Gross, executive director of the Eastern Regional Mental Health Board, urged Murphy not to support legislation that would require involuntary commitments. She said mental health patients need to develop trust in their care providers and in the health care system, and forcing them into hospitals or other inpatient facilities hurts that trust.

But Murphy said many parents have urged the opposite position, feeling involuntary commitment is sometimes their best option.

Another controversial issue arose as Murphy prepared to leave, when Stephen E. Johnson, president of the Windham Hospital United Employees Union Local 5099, submitted a letter to Murphy asking that the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration issue an emergency temporary standard that would address workplace violence.

Johnson said hospital emergency room staffs often face the threat of violence, including patients, brought in by police, who are hiding guns. Johnson attended a seminar on workplace violence Thursday and presented his request on behalf of 130 union leaders who unanimously endorsed the concept, Johnson said.

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