

Harmeet Kaur  
Professor Shelia Tefft  
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### Mental Health Policy Op-Ed

Jails and prisons have become the new insane asylums. This statement by Illinois' Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, in a ["60 Minutes" episode](#) is part of a greater narrative surrounding our country's fragmented mental health system.

The story begins in the 1950s with the policy of deinstitutionalization. Mentally ill people who were being housed in psychiatric hospitals were moved out of these institutions and sent back into the community, with little more than a bottle of pills. Subsequently, such mental institutions were closed down, leaving those affected with mental illness with no form of adequate care or treatment.

Without the necessary services to treat their conditions, mentally ill people were often criminalized for the disturbances they created in their communities. These people were effectively transferred from psychiatric hospitals to prisons, providing no solutions in helping these people lead a normal life.

Statistics compiled by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) state that about 349,000 adults out of Georgia's approximately 9.7 million residents live with mental illness. Only 21% of these 349,000 are benefiting from Georgia's public mental health system.

Furthermore, in 2008, approximately 12,600 adults with mental illnesses were incarcerated in Georgia prisons.

The underlying premise of these numbers is that not enough people with mental illnesses are receiving the care that they need. Community health care (also known as behavioral health care) is an emerging model that provides solutions to many issues in mental health care. While there are numerous community mental health centers throughout Georgia and the rest of the country, such centers are often inaccessible to uninsured and low-income Americans due to cost.

Enter the Excellence in Mental Health Act. Currently being debated by Congress, the Excellence Act would provide \$1.4 billion in Medicaid funding over the next 10 years to implement Certified Community Behavioral Healthcare Centers (CCBHCs) nationwide.

Currently, community mental health centers are ineligible for many federal funds because there are no federal guidelines that regulate the services provided by these centers. The establishment of CCBHCs creates national standards for community mental health centers to adhere to, thereby improving Medicaid reimbursement to these centers. Implementing CCBHCs around the nation also means better access to quality mental health care for low-income and uninsured Americans coping with mental illnesses.

Standards for community mental health centers as a part of the Excellence Act include: providing integrated mental and primary health care services, providing clients with a

variety of treatment options, employing culturally competent staff, and providing services regardless of an individual's ability to pay.

The Excellence Act thus provides hope for the nation's mental health system by improving access to community health care centers. There are several reasons why community health care is an important model to invest in. First off, its preventative approach to health care is cost-effective and reduces the need for emergency room visits and hospitalization.

Community health care's provisions for integrated care help to de-stigmatize mental health treatment by treating it equal to primary health care.

Despite the apparent advantages of enacting this legislation, the Excellence Act has faced obstacles. It was originally introduced in February 2013 in the wake of the Newtown, CT, shooting as a part of a package of legislation surrounding gun control. When the gun control debate did not reach a consensus in Congress, the Excellence Act was shelved as well.

It is unfortunate that this important piece of legislation was forgotten while tangled up in a debate over an entirely different issue. It is important to keep the issues of gun control and mental health distinct from each other. While the perpetrators of recent tragedies such as the Newton, CT, and Aurora, CO, shootings were afflicted with some sort of mental illness, such cases are outliers. The majority of people afflicted with mental illnesses do not end up committing violent crimes. In fact, mentally ill people are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators. Providing easier access to quality mental health care will

benefit all Americans affected by mental illness, possibly even preventing such tragedies that could have been attributed to mental illness. Regardless of the connection between gun control and mental health however, more adequate treatment for the mentally ill should be a pressing issue in itself.

We should encourage our senators and representatives to vote to enact the Excellence in Mental Health Act. This legislation will significantly impact the quality and accessibility of mental health care and treatment for the mentally ill. It will help prevent the criminalization of the mentally ill, correcting many social injustices. It will also put forth reforms that will repair our broken mental health care system. Providing federal funding and creating nationalized standards for community mental health centers will improve the quality and consistency of mental health care across the country, leveling the playing field for Americans with mental illnesses.