

INTRODUCTION

Mental Health Reform: The Challenge of Bridge-Building for Multiple Care Systems

When health policy discussions turn to “systems of care,” one of the last and least frequent topics listed is mental health. Mental health programs and policies, along with policy issues related to developmental disabilities and substance abuse, are among those less well understood and advocates for these programs have a particularly difficult time keeping these issues on the public agenda. This is surprising, given the prevalence of these conditions in our society and the availability of increasing varieties of effective treatment options if only we had the will and the means of making them accessible to those who need them.

North Carolina, like many other states, has faced substantial difficulties in dealing with mental health issues, and the future needs in this area are great. Despite several decades of frustration in the development of appropriate and accessible systems of mental health care at the state and local levels, an aggressive, but modestly funded, effort is underway toward the reform of North Carolina’s mental health services system. As with any major reform effort, there are those who are thrilled that reform efforts have begun and who see important signs of progress; others see these reforms as either too-little-too-late or administrative changes headed in the wrong direction. The Editors of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* feel that now is the time for a careful examination of efforts toward mental health system reform in North Carolina, so we have sought the input of a wide range of stakeholders in making this analysis possible.

We were fortunate in being able to call on two of the nation’s most expert researchers who have studied mental health policy developments throughout the United States, Marvin Swartz, MD of Duke University and Joseph Morrissey, PhD of the University of North Carolina, to write the issue brief on this topic. Their review is panoramic and describes in some detail the efforts over many years to restructure and reorient both state and local programs in a way that public and private sector providers can play an effective role in serving our state’s population in need of these services and programs.

This review comes just three years after the release of a comprehensive study of the state’s mental health services and systems by the Office of the State Auditor. In this issue of the *Journal*, we have asked State Auditor Ralph Campbell to offer a commentary on the previous report and events which have transpired since its release.

Representative Verla Insko, one of several members of the North Carolina General Assembly who has worked tirelessly on these issues, offers an insightful legislative perspective.

In addition, we have asked a number of other stakeholders to contribute their own perspectives on both the need and the desirable characteristics of mental health reform. Among this group of commentaries is a summary by Contributing Editor Donald L. Madison, MD, of the experience of one North Carolina family in search of appropriate mental health services for their child.

We hope that the content of this special issue of the *Journal* will underscore the importance of addressing these issues, of keeping them on “the front burner” of NC health policy, and for addressing the complex issues surrounding intergovernmental relations, multi-disciplinary interrelationships in diagnosis, care and treatment, and the social and economic supports necessary to ensure that persons with mental illness and developmental disabilities have the opportunity to live full and rewarding lives.

As always, we hope and expect to receive Letters to the Editor helping to keep the discussion of these issues moving forward in the interest of the betterment of health for all North Carolinians.

—Gordon H. DeFrieze, PhD
Editor-in-Chief and Publisher