Legislators are poised to make progress on mental health care

Improving mental health resources in Texas is a top priority for the 84th Legislature as it crosses the halfway point. And it is on track to do so not just by spending more, but spending more wisely.

Recent surveys show that two-thirds of Texas voters and clear majorities in every party believe that state and local systems should invest more in mental health care. However, it is critical that we also take steps to ensure that the right investments are made to provide the care Texas need and deserve.

The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute was launched last year to help Texas become a leader in the delivery of effective and efficient mental health services. We approached the 2014 legislative session focused on five principles: behavioral health care should be accessible and effective, there must be accountability for taxpayers; delivery of care must be based on local systems; quality of care is data-driven; and robust workforce is needed.

The positive news is that forward-thinking legislation is under consideration and heading in that direction.

Texas has the second-highest veteran population in the nation. While most returning veterans and their families readily make the transition back home, many experience challenges related to the strain and trauma of war. Senate Bill 55 was introduced by Sen. Jose “Chuy” Hinojosa, R-McAllen, and House Bill 1429 by Rep. Susan King, R-Abilene, to expand the Texas Veterans Initiative, a public-private 36-10 program to fill gaps in community transition support related to mental health needs. So far, it was voted unanimously out of the Senate.

More than 20 percent of the people in Texas jails have a mental illness. An initial study by institute and the Texas Conference of Urban Counties conservatively estimated that county jail costs alone for this group were nearly half a billion dollars.

Rep. Elliott Naishtat, D-Austin, has introduced two bills—HB 839 to help juvenile offenders access post-release care through the Texas Children’s Health Plan, and HB 1777 to establish a forensic director at the Department of State Health Services to address mental health issues. A 2013 state report found 207 of 254 counties are experiencing such shortages.

The Texas pipeline for training psychiatrists and mental health professionals has not kept up with our growth. To address this, 13 senators are sponsoring SB 82 to expand graduate medical education capacity in Texas, and Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, introduced SB 239 to support education loan repayment for critical mental health professionals who will practice in underserved areas. Coleman and Lozano have brought this to the House with HB 2434 and HB 3281.

Rep. John Zerwas, R-Richmond, and Schwertner introduced HB 661 and SB 590 to enable Texas to join the Interstate Medical Licensure Compact allowing eligible physicians from participating states to become licensed more readily in Texas.

With two months remaining, the Meadows Institute is optimistic that the 84th session will help us move toward becoming the national leader in the delivery of effective and efficient mental health services. We can’t afford not to.

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