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Opinion

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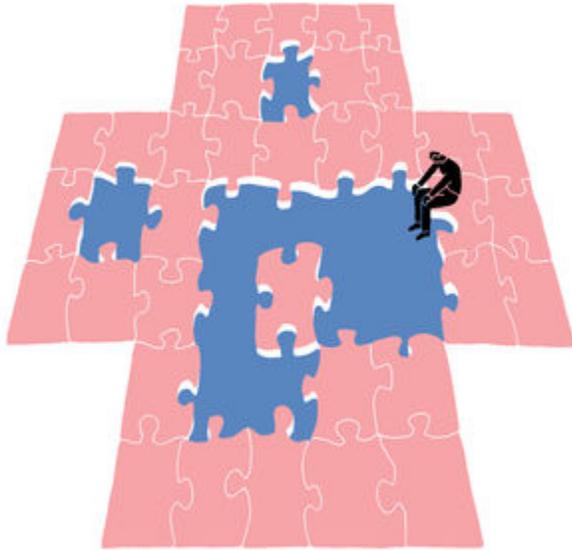
Corrected version

Guest: Finding the will to treat people with mental illness

The state needs more facilities to treat people with mental illness, writes guest columnist Abe Bergman.

By Abe Bergman

Special to The Times



IT is hard to imagine any disagreement with the need for treatment and housing facilities for individuals who are pursued by demons, who feel invincible, and who are instructed by voices to commit violent acts.

A staple of American life has become news reports about terrible crimes committed by persons with mental illness and mentally ill persons shot for threatening behavior. Follow-up stories describe the grief of the victim's family and community, a psychological dissection of the perpetrator that invariably includes unquestioned signs of prior mental illness, and lamentations about the inadequacies of our mental-health system.

Yet despite the collective hand-wringing, there is virtually nothing being done to

remedy the situation. The number of treatment facilities and transitional housing units continue to shrink. The excuse, of course, is that we cannot afford to create more facilities for the mentally ill. I disagree. The problem is not lack of money; it is lack of will.

Funds are always found for projects deemed vital for the public good. Like fixing the cracked pontoons of the Highway 520 bridge, replacing the Skagit River bridge, forging ahead with the Highway 99 tunnel or developing the Seattle waterfront. Mental-illness facilities are not being built because a constituency possessed with both passion and political expertise does not exist.

My interest in this issue is highly personal. For the past year, my teenage son has been lodged at the intersection of the criminal justice and mental-health systems. He has been arrested four times, served three stints in jail and has been hospitalized twice in psychiatric facilities. Blessedly, he has not injured anyone, or himself. But I have no idea what the future holds.

We desperately need a capital construction program that allows jails and prisons to house criminals, and hospitals and halfway facilities to accommodate individuals with psychoses. How can that happen? By concerted political action — a public referendum is probably needed.

A striking example of how the combination of personal passion and political expertise can be effective is the Joel Law (SHB 2725), which was just considered by the state Legislature. Joel Reuter, a 28-year-old software engineer with a bipolar disorder, was shot and killed by police on the balcony of his Capitol Hill condo last summer. His parents, Doug and Nancy Reuter, set up temporary residence in Olympia to promote a bill that would enable families to play a role in involuntary commitment proceedings. Though technically still alive, in a familiar bait-and-switch tactic, the Joel Law was emasculated by the Senate Ways and Means Committee and is effectively dead.

Nevertheless, the legislation proceeded further than ever imagined because: a) Doug Reuter is a former state representative from Minnesota who is familiar with the intricacies of legislation; b) the Reuters were joined in their lobbying by an impassioned band of parents of children with mental illness; and c) support came from legislators of both parties.

Similar bipartisanship in dealing with mental illness was demonstrated nationally in 2008 with passage of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, named for senators at opposite ends of the political spectrum, the late Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, and Pete Domenici of New Mexico. What brought them together? Wellstone's brother had crippling depression; Domenici's daughter had schizophrenia.

Few American families, including those of politicians, are spared some contact with mental illness. That, along with considerations of public safety and compassion, is why money will be found to treat individuals with mental illness in a humane fashion.

Abe Bergman, a Vashon Island resident, is a physician and professor emeritus of pediatrics at the University of Washington.



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