

The Seattle Times

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Opinion

Originally published Saturday, August 16, 2014 at 4:04 PM

Washington can do better in mental-health system

Editorial page editor Kate Riley invites readers to join The Seattle Times editorial board's conversation around Washington's mental-health challenges and what can be done about them.

By Kate Riley

Times editorial page editor

The apparent suicide last week of Robin Williams focused the nation on the tragedy of mental illness. In the wake of Monday's announcement, fans of every stripe, across generations fondly remembered his uncanny, energetic stand-up and his wide-ranging acting roles. He was a marvel.

The news was shocking, although by now most people have come to understand how the demon of depression and other complicating factors might have played into Williams' tragic final moments.

Williams was one man, struggling for years with an illness.

Multiply that experience by millions and bring it into family rooms across America, and the pervasiveness of mental illness begins to take shape. As our package of editorials on the facing page notes, one in four adults each year struggles with mental illness, ranging from mild depression to schizophrenia. Many get by, many recover, many get help with medication or therapy. But, for reasons ranging from the stigma associated with mental illness to insurance that does not cover mental health as it does physical health, as many as 40 percent never get treatment and struggle throughout their lives. That can significantly affect their prospects for education and employment, not to mention the general quality of their lives and of their families' well-being.

The Affordable Care Act has opened a door to solutions, providing insurance to those who had none. Washington is ahead of many states because the Legislature embraced Medicaid expansion. But this state has also failed in some ways.

We can do better.

For several months, editorial writer Jonathan Martin has been exploring the state of mental-health care in Washington as a recipient of a 2013-14 Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism. The fellowship provided several days of briefings on mental-health issues in Atlanta and a stipend to cover reporting expenses.

Jonathan's interest in the issue stretches back to his 10 years as a reporter covering the social-services beat for The Seattle Times, and before that The Spokesman Review. Like most Americans, he also has family members who have struggled with mental illness.

After Jonathan joined The Times editorial board in January 2013, his first column was about the alarming practice of "boarding" people with mental illnesses, untreated, and left on gurneys

in emergency rooms because of a shortage of beds in psychiatric facilities. It was the first recent mention in Washington state media of this outrageous practice, and helped to nudge the Legislature to approve more operational funds to support psychiatric beds. However, not enough capital money to build capacity has been approved.

Soon news reporters at The Times and The News Tribune in Tacoma followed with investigations. Recently, the state Supreme Court ruled this practice unconstitutional, and state officials now must scramble to end the practice and find beds for patients in need.

Jonathan has uncovered some next steps for Washington state through months of conversations with mental-health professionals, policymakers, elected officials and the people who have been caught without the help they need — people with mental illness, and their families. Throughout the coming week, we will continue this conversation with guest columns from some of those dealing with mental illness, either in their own families or as professionals trying to help.

On Thursday, please join us for an online video chat as we discuss the challenge in Washington and explore solutions. And please send in your own stories and responses to the content throughout the week to letters@seattletimes.com.

In a separate matter, I want to introduce readers to the newest member of The Seattle Times editorial board. Robert J. Vickers has been a journalist for 15 years, starting at the Cleveland Plain Dealer and most recently at the Harrisburg Patriot-News and Daytona Beach News-Journal. In between Cleveland and Harrisburg, he spent 10 years as a professor of communications and journalism at Syracuse University where he earned a master's degree in international relations.

Read more in Robert's post introducing himself on the editorial board's Opinion Northwest blog: blogs.seattletimes.com/opinionnw

Judging from how his former colleagues describe him, Vickers will be a tenacious journalist who likes to look at issues from all angles. He also has a propensity to surprise. So stay tuned.

Kate Riley's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times. Her email address is kriley@seattletimes.com



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