Editorial: State needs to address mental health

By DAILY RECORD EDITORIAL BOARD

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The long-term ramifications of the state’s inability to resolve how best to adequately fund K-12 education have extended far beyond the classroom and the school grounds.

A case could be made the harshest impact has been on the state’s mental health care system.

Public education is a primary purpose of the state. It is constitutionally obligated to adequately fund K-12 education. This sets up an annual scenario where funds are either directed toward education or tied up until education funding for the year is resolved.

Education is a big-ticket item — the price tag is in the billions of dollars. Unfortunately it is not the only spendy service provided the state.

The Legislature is trying to comply with the state Supreme Court’s McCleary ruling to fully fund education, but it faces court decisions criticizing the mental health system as well.

The session is just underway but there are positive signs the mental health system will be addressed. The Associated Press reported earlier this week that a bipartisan legislative committee has sent a list of recommendations to the governor for improving the state’s mental health care system.

Everything in Olympia is political to a certain degree, but it should be noted that a bipartisan committee to devise recommendations on education did not reach agreements on a set of recommendations. The fact a group reached agreement on recommendations for mental health is a positive sign for success in the full Legislature.

There is across-the-aisle agreement on the need to improve the state’s mental health system. Where disagreements typically arise is on how to pay for what is needed.

There have been ongoing problems with the state’s psychiatric facility — Western State Hospital.

There are issues with the hospital failing inspections and with inadequate staffing levels. Beyond that there is the question of how best to care for people with mental health issues. The panel recommendation to Gov. Inslee is to increase use of inpatient psychiatric care in community settings and explore diversion options.
Our inability to properly care for people with mental health problems is having an impact across society. Talk to any law enforcement officer or emergency responder and they will tell you about the tremendous amount of time spent responding to people with mental health issues.

Obviously there is a cost to addressing complex mental health system needs but there is a hefty cost to not addressing the needs as well.

This is not just an issue confined to state government. According to an Associated Press article, Kitsap County is creating a Behavioral Health Care as a diversion program for people who commit crimes as a result of their mental illness.

It is hard to predict what will be done in regard to the mental health system until there is more clarity on how much of the funding pie education will consume this session. But there is a consensus that something has to be done. That's a good start.