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Reform care for mentally ill

The Chicago Tribune's stories about nursing-home care in Illinois have sparked new interest in ways the state could improve care for people who are severely mentally ill. While much of the reporting has focused on specific horrors, such as deaths that have occurred from housing the elderly and other populations together, many Illinois psychiatrists and other advocates for both the elderly and the chronically mentally ill have been sounding alarm bells for years.

The Illinois Psychiatric Society believes Illinois should overhaul how it provides care for people who are severely mentally ill by redirecting its funding to programs that are proven to help.

Here are some changes we recommend:

-- Allocate the vast majority of state and federal funds to agencies that provide community-based care, such as housing assistance and continued rehabilitative services in local mental health clinics. Currently most state and federal money is directed toward warehousing mentally ill patients in nursing homes. Many studies, including one from researcher Patrick Corrigan of the Illinois Institute of Technology, have shown that people who suffer from chronic mental illness fare better if psychosocial rehabilitative services are provided after discharge from hospitalization. As a result, these sons, daughters or other loved ones could live more productive and independent lives in the community. This allocation would save the State of Illinois money. Community care is less expensive and the state could receive federal matching dollars.

-- The Illinois Department of Mental Health must certify more community mental health centers and provide adequate funding for existing clinics. In the last five years, no centers have been certified and, in fact, some have closed. Many people who suffer from chronic mental illness could be treated at these mental health centers and helped with case-management assistance, instead of in nursing homes.

-- The Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services must do a better job of making sure its funding for treating the severely mentally ill is being well-spent. Any therapy for people who are severely mentally ill in nursing homes must meet generally accepted psychosocial rehabilitation protocols, and there must be strong oversight of the facilities conducting rehabilitation.

-- Individuals who have a violent criminal history and who are severely mentally ill should be housed in an appropriate setting that keeps the community and the individual safe. It also is important for them to receive necessary social rehabilitative services, such as substance-abuse

treatment or other harm-reduction therapies. Organizations exist, such as the John Howard Association of Illinois and St. Leonard's Ministries, that provide housing and other support services for those released from prison.

-- *Lisa A. Rone, M.D., president, Illinois Psychiatric Society, Chicago*

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