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MENTAL ILLNESS MILESTONE

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In a historic milestone, California's Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission has approved more than \$713 million for programs to promote mental health and prevent negative consequences of mental illness for all of California's 58 counties, including \$74.5 million in San Diego County. These programs are funded by the Mental Health Services Act, approved by voters in 2004 as Proposition 63, which imposed a 1 percent tax on personal incomes above \$1 million. Twenty percent of MHSA funds are reserved for prevention and early intervention.

Such an extensive investment in mental health across the life span is historic and unique in the nation.

Before the MHSA, California's public mental health services were generally limited to treatment, often medication, for people with the most serious illnesses, disabilities and crises. This approach ignores the well documented positive health, social and economic impacts of mental health promotion and prevention, which are chronically underfunded compared to treatment. The MHSA aims to reverse the suffering and financial burdens associated with a "fail first" system by increasing services that work for people with serious mental illness and adding new "help first" resources and supports.

The commission approved San Diego County's prevention and early intervention plan in January 2009, including efforts to:

- Reduce stigma and discrimination toward people living with mental illness.
- Prevent suicide.
- Provide telephone support for people with mental health concerns, including specialized services for youth.
- Provide supportive services for veterans and their families.
- Identify and provide timely links to integrated treatment for people with both mental health and substance- use disorders.
- Enhance the mental health of Alzheimer's patients and the people who care for them.
- Address the negative aftereffects of trauma for families living in South County.

Many of San Diego County's newly funded prevention programs are located in accessible community settings like primary medical care, schools, senior centers, homes, places of worship and recreation centers. Programs are designed to build on the strengths, resources and resilience of people and communities, and to identify and connect people to mental health treatment and other kinds of community supports. Nearly half the population will suffer from a mental health and/or substance-use disorder in their lifetime, 26 percent to 30 percent will experience at least one mental disorder in any given year, and about 6 percent have a mental disorder serious enough to impair their ability to perform everyday activities for an average of three months. More than 40 percent of veterans who sought treatment from a Veterans Affairs hospital from 2002 to 2008 suffered from a mental health disorder or related behavioral problem.

More American soldiers died from suicide than from combat from 2001 to 2009.

For many people, the current economic crisis, including unemployment and foreclosures, is precipitating major mental health problems.

Recovery from mental illness is not only possible but likely with timely and effective support and treatment, with recovery rates comparable to or better than results for other ongoing illnesses.

But nearly half of people suffering from mental illness don't get any treatment, 70 percent don't get effective treatment and two-thirds of U.S. children with severe mental health problems receive neither evaluation nor treatment. Unlike people suffering from other physically based chronic illnesses, people with mental illnesses frequently experience negative attitudes – their own and others' – about their illness, which limits access to affordable, high-quality services and treatment.

The World Health Organization has declared that untreated or inadequately treated mental disorders have “staggering economic and social costs,” including social service and disability payments, complications in treating other chronic illnesses that often accompany serious mental illness, lost productivity and premature death. Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the United States. Besides the economic burden, personal costs to individuals with mental illness and their families are staggering. Persons with serious mental illnesses die 25 years younger than the general population.

The catastrophic consequences of mental illness can be drastically curtailed. The MHSA targets prevention and early intervention to reduce suicide, school failure or dropout, unemployment, prolonged suffering, homelessness and removal of children from their homes that may result from untreated mental illness.

The next critical stage of this prevention and early intervention effort will be to measure its impact. The hope and expectation is that these programs will improve and enhance people's lives and make better use of scarce public funds.

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