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Wrapping Up Mental Health Awareness Month

By: Senator Sarah Keyeski

May was Mental Health Awareness Month, and as a mental health provider, I am thrilled that this critical issue continues to receive added attention in Wisconsin! Statewide, there is increasing awareness that we need accessible and affordable treatment, and I am pleased to support these efforts. Beyond this, however, I have been trying to highlight the underlying, societal factors that contribute to our growing mental health crisis. As a new legislator, it has become increasingly clear that some of these negative factors are the direct result of conscious policy decisions made, historically, by elected officials, and I believe they must be reconsidered.

The United States is in the throes of a mental health epidemic. Many of our loved ones, friends, neighbors or even ourselves are experiencing it. In fact, one in five adults in the country experience mental illness each year. Half of all lifetime mental illness in the U.S. begins by age 14 and 75 percent begins by age 24. What is especially troubling and, frankly, heartbreaking, is that suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-14 nationally. It's overwhelmingly clear that we need to take bold action to address this crisis.

With growing awareness by folks on both sides of the political spectrum, mental health is now being recognized and addressed as the critical issue that it is. As a mental health provider who has been on the "front lines" of this growing crisis for the past 26 years, I am deeply grateful. However, addressing the mental health crisis in America requires an understanding and approach that goes beyond merely hiring more mental health providers and providing more crisis stabilization facilities. While these are critically important steps, it is also much too short-sighted to think increasing the number of professionals and resources in the field will alone solve our problems. That's a response to a problem, not a solution for a problem.

It is imperative that we look squarely at the environmental and social drivers contributing to the growing emotional instability and distress in our people. Then, we must address them with robust, prevention strategies. Indeed, our current mental health crisis can be largely attributed to specific societal inequities and environmental changes that have intensified over the past few decades and have been created and supported by local policy decisions. This includes issues like economic inequality, lack of access to affordable healthcare, housing instability, insufficiently funding our public schools, gun violence, food insecurity, and climate issues.

Let's use healthcare as an example. Not being able to afford or access the care you need hurts both your physical health and is a tremendous emotional stressor. Barriers to care like a lack of local clinics and hospitals facilities, lack of insurance or excessively high deductibles, difficulty accessing transportation to see a doctor further away, and inadequate services available due to lack of providers, all lead to unmet physical and mental health needs. Marginalized and rural communities face increasingly greater barriers to receiving healthcare. So, how can legislators work to address this?



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Medicaid helps kids, seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income individuals afford the healthcare and long-term care they need, enabling our communities to be physically and mentally healthier. More specifically, Medicaid plays an important role in delivering healthcare in our rural communities. In fact, one-third of kids in rural Wisconsin are covered by Medicaid! Yet, year after year, Wisconsin's Republican legislature chooses to not expand Medicaid. Now, we are one of just 10 states who have not adopted Medicaid expansion. Not only does this lead to worse health outcomes for Wisconsinites, it also means our state will lose out on \$1.9 billion in state healthcare cost savings over the next two years. This is a policy decision that exacerbates the physical and worsening mental health issues of Wisconsinites. Worse yet, if cuts are made to Medicaid at the federal level, these issues will grow exponentially.

If we want to be meaningful champions of mental health issues, we must consider investing in the education, housing, safety, wellness and economic stability of our communities on the front end. If we don't, we will continue to pay much, much more in the long run. Cost effective, early interventions can significantly alter life trajectories and, ultimately, reduce the long-term economic cost of mental health issues on our collective society - like crime and incarceration, loss of employee hours or medical leave, advanced disease and high medical costs, school dropout rates, inpatient hospitalizations, police calls, and more.

Ultimately, to comprehensively address our mental health crisis, we must prioritize policies that help Wisconsinites be safer, healthier, and economically stable. In doing so, we will reduce the impact of systemic issues that are increasing our mental health needs, and create a healthier Wisconsin for all. I am committed to this work as a State Senator.