

American College of Mental Health Administration



ACMHA ARM CHAIR REFLECTIONS The Road Ahead: Setting Navigational Beacons

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The American College of Mental Health Administration's (ACMHA's) 30th anniversary will be celebrated during 2009. It is difficult to think about three decades of an organization's existence without looking back at the political, economic, cultural, and environmental realities that have served as co-travelers over this past third of a century. In that time Americans have experienced war around the globe. We have dealt with attacks at home such as Oklahoma City, September 11, and natural disasters like Hurricanes Andrew, Katrina, and Rita. We have seen economic booms and busts. We have seen our demographics shift as hundreds of thousands of individuals and families, documented and undocumented, from around the world seek economic opportunity and religious/political freedom in the US. We have grappled with our consumption of natural resources and our impact on the planet. And we now stand in the midst of a political election cycle that will bring ever new changes to the American landscape.

This same period has seen fundamental shifts in our health care system. The enormous societal costs of rampant chronic illnesses like cardiovascular disease and diabetes are taxing the system. Over 45 million Americans lack basic health insurance. The percentage of uninsured children is on the rise, despite the State Children's Health Insurance Program's establishment of the late 1990s. The last 15 years have seen the birth, flourishing, and now questioning of a managed care enterprise whose main goal has been to readdress the distribution and utilization of services along the lines of medical necessity criteria and "least restrictive environments." At the same time, there has been a growing tendency to "specialize" in the healthcare field, which has manifested itself in part as an artificial separation between mind and body. We are a country frustrated with the mismatch between rising healthcare costs and our disappointing healthcare outcomes.

Over this time, the fields of mental health and substance abuse care have struggled to invent, reinvent, and renew themselves over and over again. We have attempted to manage the unintended consequences of well-intentioned policies that lacked effective implementation strategy. Examples include de-institutionalization and the establishment of neighborhood-based mental health and substance abuse programs. We have seen centuries of stigma and prejudice readdressed over these three decades as skilled advocates and individuals prominent in the public eye are publicly scrutinized as they grapple with the road to their recovery from both mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders. And we now have evidence that individuals living with chronic mental health and substance abuse disorders are dying 25 years earlier than the rest of the population.

Our field faces numerous challenges which include: mental health parity; stigmatization and prejudice; significant disparities in access and quality of care; issues around treating undocumented residents in our cities and rural areas; the continued reintegration of physical and mental health services; workforce concerns including troubling shortages; the redefining of the relationship between private industry and public sector healthcare coverage; and the incorporation of a consumer-driven, recovery-centered model of behavioral health care.

As ACMHA reflects on its mission for the next third of a century and beyond, these issues present themselves as opportunities for innovation, creativity, and redefined purpose. The College has long positioned itself as the organization that brings consensus from controversy, tackling the foremost issues facing mental health and substance abuse care. In many ways there appears to be no better time for ACMHA to hone this mission and address the challenges that lie ahead. ACMHA has served, since 1979, as a place where individuals from diverse areas of our field can come together both at the Santa Fe Summit and throughout the year to bring synthesis and synergy to meeting these challenges. Historically, many of the nation's leaders in healthcare have served as key ACMHA members and in their roles have been principals in the development and implementation of significant advances over the last three decades. The challenges that lie ahead require no less than the full and active engagement of this and the next generation of leaders. We remain confident that these challenges will only serve to stoke the imagination and strengthen the resolve of the talented and energetic individuals from across the country who gather to renew energy, clarify purpose, and sharpen their vision for the opportunities that lie ahead. Join us March 13 – 15 in Santa Fe as we once again recalibrate our navigational beacons and plot our course...together.