



Whole Health Campaign Policy Brief: *Promoting Wellness through Public Health*

The Current State of Public Health

Public health systems play a vital role in promoting healthy lifestyles, preventing disability and disease, encouraging lifelong management of chronic disease, monitoring health trends, and linking people to needed health services. Unfortunately, the current public health system has been declared “broken,” “chronically underfunded,” and “outdated.” Even though public health spending results in significantly improved health care outcomes and quality of life, only 1.8 percent of the nation’s health expenditures go to public health (13). This spending is divided between the federal government (about 60 percent of the \$35 billion total) and state and local governments (about 40 percent).

Any health care reform proposal must seek to bolster the public health infrastructure in the United States.

Mental Health and Addiction in Public Health

Too often, mental health and substance use disorder services are not well integrated into public health systems. Individuals with mental health conditions and substance use disorders are at significant risk for poor health outcomes. For example:

- According to the World Health Organization, mental illness is the leading cause of disability for people between 15 and 44 in the United States and Canada.
- Life expectancy for individuals with severe mental illnesses is about 25 years less than for the general population.
- Primary care providers fail to diagnose about half of the mental disorders with which their patients present
- A study of six states found that Medicaid pays significantly more for in overall medical costs for individuals with untreated substance use diagnoses than for patients who did not have those disorders.

The costs of untreated mental illness and addiction are not limited to the health care sphere. For example:

- In 2002, mental illness and addiction resulted in approximately \$193 billion in lost productivity.

- Unemployment of people with serious mental illness is 70-80% (significantly higher than for other individuals with disabilities) and only a small proportion of those who want to work have employment.
- The economic cost of drug, alcohol and tobacco use costs schools \$41 billion a year in truancy, violence, disciplinary programs, schools security and other expenses.

The economic, social, and personal costs of untreated mental illness and addiction are staggering and affect all areas of society. Contrariwise, effective prevention, treatment, disease management, and recovery support result in savings well beyond the health care system itself. Substance use prevention in community-wide contexts saves about \$7 for every \$1 spent (in reduced treatment and criminal justice costs). Adolescents who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence, whereas each additional year that the onset of drinking is delayed reduces the probability that they will ever be alcohol dependent by 14 percent. Similarly, many mental health conditions begin in childhood or adolescence, and treatment outcomes are most effective when started soon after onset.

Reforming Public Health Systems to Promote Wellness

Public health systems offer an irreplaceable opportunity to prevent mental health conditions and substance use disorders before they become severe, to help families and, and to promote lifelong recovery.

To increase wellness by preventing mental health conditions and substance use disorders, health care reform should:

1. Cover the full range of prevention, treatment, and recovery support services for all chronic diseases, including mental illnesses and substance use disorders, and ensure that these services are available to all those in need
 - Access to treatment for people who need it and recovery support services are the best way to increase wellness and prevent relapse in people who already have mental illness or addiction.
2. Ensure that wellness and chronic disease prevention initiatives include provision of information to prevent mental illness and substance use disorders, and link them to primary health care
 - Create public education campaigns to educate the public on what mental health and substance use disorders are and how to access care; promote screenings and check-ups, with a special emphasize on adolescents.
3. Create and fund a “health and wellness” fund to promote and improve health and prevent chronic diseases, including mental illness and substance use disorders
4. Utilize a public health model for preventing substance use through the mobilization of multiple community sectors to organize, plan, implement and evaluate appropriate strategies and programs using an array of public and private resources

5. Ensure that wellness and chronic disease prevention initiatives include the community-wide capacity to implement environmental strategies and supports needed to promote prevention and sustain long-term recovery from mental illness and/or substance use disorders
 - Lifelong management of a mental illness or substance use disorder must include life supports such as housing, transportation, education, employment, and social connectedness—public health systems have a unique and critical role to play in these areas.
 - Peer-to-peer support services have been demonstrated to help sustain recovery and encourage wellness—they should be encouraged and supported in the public health infrastructure.
 - Legal barriers that discriminate against people seeking recovery from mental illness or addiction should be eliminated.

Additional measures that should be incorporated into a comprehensive health care reform plan include:

- Ensure that mental health and addiction services are available in the wake of natural or man-made disasters, including terrorist attacks.
- Conduct studies (and resulting action plans) to better understand the social determinants of health (including mental health and addiction), such as the impact of trauma, violence, poverty, and family dysfunction.
- Appoint mental health and addiction experts to the various federal agencies and commissions that oversee public health systems.
- Ensure accountability of public health systems by rigorously collecting and analyzing treatment and outcomes data and rewarding innovative and effective programs.

Mental health conditions and substance use disorders are among the top public health challenges facing the United States. Fortunately, there are many prevention and wellness strategies that can reduce the incidence of these diseases and help those already suffering from them to live healthier, happier lives.

Specific Reform Recommendations on Mental Health and Substance Use Care and Prevention

Three documents have been prepared to define in detail the specific recommendations of the mental health and substance use fields around national health reform. These three documents are:

Benefit Design and Delivery of Care
Reforming the Healthcare Delivery System
Wellness Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention Initiatives

We will be glad to provide either an e-version or paper copy of each of these documents.

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