



TESTIMONY OF GEORGE DELGROSSO

Chairman Harkin and Sen. Alexander, thanks for giving me the opportunity to appear before the Senate HELP Committee on behalf of the Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council and the National Council for Behavioral Health. My name is George DelGrosso and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Colorado Behavioral Health Council (CBHC).

The CBHC is a statewide organization composed of 28 behavioral health organizations including all of the 17 Community Mental Health Centers, 2 specialty mental health clinics, 4 managed service organizations and 5 behavioral health organizations. The latter organizations are the management entities throughout the state for substance use disorder and the State's Medicaid mental health managed care program.

Our members provide psychiatric care, intensive community-based services and addiction treatment to over 120,000 Coloradans each year. About 50% of our mental health center consumer/patient caseload is composed of adults with severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. We also serve children with serious mental and emotional disturbances referred to us by their families, the Colorado juvenile justice, special education and foster care systems.

I will be devoting the bulk of my testimony today to the Colorado Mental Health First Aid program because we believe that it's an exciting new public health approach to early identification of mental illnesses and other mental health disorders. You will hear other witnesses testify today that mental disorders often begin manifesting themselves by as early as 14 years of age. According the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the first obvious symptoms of severe mental illnesses occur between ages 18 and 24. But, on average, it takes us eight (8) very long years to begin mental health care for these Americans. By the time treatment does begin, the costs of mental health care services are higher and their clinical effectiveness is reduced.

That's why both the National Council and the CBHC are so excited about Mental Health First Aid. It is an evidence based practice that represents an early intervention and early detection program that --if implemented broadly enough -- could permit America's community mental health providers to help millions of our fellow citizens in psychiatric distress. In brief, Mental Health First Aid teaches a diverse array of audiences three important sets of skills:

- Recognition of the signs and symptoms of common mental illnesses like bipolar disorder, major clinical depression, PTSD and anxiety disorders.

- Crisis de-escalation techniques.

- A five step action plan to get persons in psychiatric distress referred to mental health providers including local Community Mental Health Centers.

In sum, this training is somewhat similar to first aid classes taught by local chapters of the Red Cross for physical health conditions.

In our state, we receive some funding from the Colorado Office of Behavioral Health, which is the state mental health authority, and use Community Mental Health Center resources to provide Mental Health First Aid in various locations throughout Colorado. People who want to attend a Mental Health First Aid class can log on to a Website, or contact their local mental health center and enroll in classes happening in their local communities. All of our Community Mental Health Centers have trained Mental Health First Aid instructors.

As I indicated at the outset, a diverse array of training audiences is key to the program's public health approach. For example, Mental Health First Aid Instructors have conducted trainings with the State Sheriff's Association and the Colorado Department of Corrections. In fact, the DOC has a goal of training all their corrections and parole officers.

The Committee might be interested to know that we've trained Governor Hickenlooper's Cabinet members, Department Heads, and the middle managers at many State agencies. CBHC is currently organizing Mental Health First Aid training for all the rabbis in the Denver Metropolitan Area. We would also like to extend the training to schools districts and institutions of higher education throughout the state. The ultimate goal is to increase the understanding of mental health issues, help our citizens be able to identify when a friend, co-worker or family member is having mental health distress, and help them get involved in treatment when it is necessary. Someday we hope to see Mental Health First Aid Instruction as common place as physical health first aid.

In all candor, the tragic movie theater shootings in Aurora, Colorado added

a strong impetus to all these efforts in Colorado. Indeed, in the aftermath of the enormous tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT., there has an outpouring of bipartisan support for improving the mental health care system in this nation. Voices as diverse as the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, the libertarian Cato Institute, President George W. Bush's former speech writer and, now, Vice President Biden's Gun Violence Task Force have all endorsed various proposals to enhance mental health care in schools and improve services for people with severe mental disorders. In fact, the task force explicitly endorsed Mental Health First Aid.

We note that there is a common policy thread running through all these proposals. In some form or fashion, they all endorse "early detection" of mental illnesses. The National Council and CBHC strongly endorse Mental Health First Aid because – from a prevention standpoint – that is exactly what the program does. It permits us intervene early in the lives of individuals who later may be in desperate need of more intensive community-based mental health services.

Last week, Rep. Ron Barber introduced the Mental Health Aid Act of 2013 (H.R. 274). Congressman Barber was grievously wounded in the tragic Tucson, Arizona shooting that almost took the life of former-Representative Gabrielle Giffords and left six other persons dead including a 9 year old girl. We have it on good authority that Sen. Mark Begich will soon introduce the companion bill in the U.S. Senate. He will be joined by Sen. Kelly Ayotte from New Hampshire.

In a recent letter to Vice President Biden, Congressman Barber wrote the following: "I urge you to endorse common-sense, bipartisan proposals like the Mental

Health First Aid Act. We have failed to give the mental health care needs of Americans
Due attention for too long – and we paid too high a price for this neglect.”

In the perhaps divisive legislative debate to come, we hope that the
Senate HELP Committee can come together to enact the “common sense, bipartisan
proposals” that Rep. Barber referred to in his correspondence the vice president.

Again, thanks for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions
you may have.

George DelGrosso, CEO
Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council

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