

## Mental Health America of Virginia **2021 Policy and Legislative Priorities**

### **Increase Access to Community Based Mental Health Care**

All Virginians with mental health issues deserve access to community-based care that is person-centered, trauma-informed, evidence-based, anti-racist, timely and affordable.

- *Support efforts to grow a **diverse mental health work force** across the Commonwealth to ensure that all Virginians can access care from providers that look like them, speak their primary language, and understand their lived experience.*
- *Recognizing that “Housing is Health Care,” support efforts to ensure that all Virginians with mental health needs have affordable, safe, and **stable housing and the support necessary** to maintain their housing.*
- *Support the joint DBHDS/DMAS Behavioral Health Enhancement initiative and other efforts to develop a full **continuum of person-centered, trauma-informed community services** that are easily accessible, and **adequately reimbursed by Medicaid**.*
- *Support **parity measures** to ensure that **private health insurance plans offer equal access** to mental health and addiction treatment as they do to physical healthcare.*
- *Ensure that all Virginians wanting **treatment for substance use** can begin treatment at an appropriate level of care within 24 hours.*

### **Decriminalize Mental Illness and Address the Needs of People with Mental Health Challenges in the Criminal Justice System**

Many Virginians who need mental health services are instead arrested and incarcerated. All localities should screen for diversion at the earliest stage of the criminal justice process. For those who are confined, services must be timely, professional and based on individual needs.

- *Support policies and training for **law enforcement officers and prosecutors to exercise appropriate discretion** when considering bringing charges against a person with serious mental illness.*
- *Support development of a **comprehensive behavioral health crisis system**, with interventions shown to reduce interactions with the criminal justice system.*
- *Require mandatory minimum sentencing laws to **consider the mitigating impact of unmet behavioral health needs**.*
- *Support the development of **pre-plea mental health dockets** across the state for misdemeanor and felony defendants with a mental illness.*
- *Support adoption and **enforcement of minimum standards for mental health care in Virginia’s local and regional jails**, and data sharing agreements necessary to ensure access to and continuity of care between jail and community-based providers.*
- *Support the use of the Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity plea for defendants with serious mental illness to ensure diversion to treatment rather than incarceration.*

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### **Expand Opportunities for Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialists**

Peer support is an evidence-based service that reduces crisis relapse and increases successful community engagement.

- *Encourage public and private agencies throughout **the continuum of care to include peer support.***
- *Encourage **expanded third-party reimbursement of services provided by Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialists** in health care, supportive housing, employment, criminal justice and other settings.*
- *Require a **minimum wage of \$15/hour** for Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialists in all settings*

### **Endorse Effective Strategies for Reducing Suicide**

Every eight hours a Virginian dies by suicide and suicide is the second leading cause of death among Virginians 15-34 years of age.

- *Support efforts to **restrict access to lethal means**, including **Extreme Risk Protection Orders.***
- *Support **public education about the “Do Not Sell Registry”** and actively promote voluntary registration across the Commonwealth.*
- *Encourage **responsible media guidelines** for articles related to suicide.*
- *Encourage primary care physicians to include **depression and suicide risk screening** as part of every patient contact.*
- *Support increased **mental health education and resources in schools**, training and support for school personnel, and school-based prevention and treatment services.*

### **Protect the Civil Liberties of People with a Mental Illness**

People living with a mental illness, even when experiencing a crisis, are entitled to due process and equal treatment under the law.

- *Oppose any extension of the expiration time for **Emergency Custody Orders**, with few exceptions. Special exceptions could include extension up to 24 hours if: The individual is in a complicated medical or detox condition, or at a facility with trauma-informed psychiatric care and admission to the unit for less than 24 hours could prevent a temporary detention order.*
- *Support increased **funding and creative solutions** to discharge all civilly committed Virginians in state hospitals waiting on **the extraordinary barriers to discharge list.***
- *Support efforts to **prevent/reduce involuntary civil commitments to in-patient psychiatric hospitals.***