July 27, 2021

News Conference with Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police
RE: Mental Health Funding
Remarks from Bruce Cruser, Executive Director
bruce.cruser@mhav.org 804.257.5591 ext. 102

Since our founding in 1937, Mental Health America of Virginia has worked to improve state hospital conditions, increase public awareness of mental health, and establish community mental health services.

For several years, Virginia has ranked around 41st in the country for access to a trained mental health workforce. For several decades, Virginia has underfunded mental health services, and over-relied on hospitals at the expense of care in the community.

The pandemic’s impact on the mental health of Virginians has brought an already stressed system to a crisis point. The result has been systemic failures, with frightening results for some individuals living with a mental illness and their families.

- Adults and children in crisis are waiting indefinitely in emergency rooms for a treatment facility.
- Local jails hold many whose incarceration could have been prevented with access to services.

This is not the way we should treat someone with a serious illness.

State hospitals must be safe, at all times, for all patients and staff, and be equipped to provide the best opportunities for patients needing long term care. At the same time, a permanent solution to the current bed crisis requires a diverse and equitable system of community care, in all corners of the state.

We have an opportunity now to transform the system. Use federal funds and recurring state funds to:

- Provide the hospitals what they need to be fully staffed and safe.
- Provide our public Community Services Boards what they need to deliver services that prevent a need for hospitalization.
- Provide incentives for more types of mental health services to meet needs in underserved communities.
- Increase Medicaid payment rates to treat mental illness to at least equal the rates for treating substance use (IOP and PHP rates for providing mental health services are half the amount for treating substance use).
- Build out crisis stabilization services closer to home that prevent many individuals from needing hospital care. This also means law enforcement would spend fewer hours transporting those in crisis to hospitals across the state. It’s less expensive, with less trauma for children and adults.

What can the public do now? Get help before things reach a crisis point. Treat mental health as part of everyone’s overall health. If you or a loved one are not well, talk about it with someone you trust to be supportive. Make an appointment with a mental health service provider. There may be long waiting lists, but the sooner you make those contacts, the sooner you will feel better.

Meanwhile anyone can call the MHAV Peer-Run Warm Line: 866.400.6428.

If we address hospital care in concert with a range of private and public mental health services, we can solve the crisis in our mental health system.