

Panel: Stigmas remain in mental health issues

By ANN MARIE AMES

Tuesday, March 30, 2010

Photo 



Robert Spoden

Photo 



Sandy Pasch

JANESVILLE — If a broken leg didn't heal and you made a return trip to the emergency room, no one would think twice about it.

But if you got drunk and threatened to kill yourself after a fight with your spouse—again—people might blame you for a second—or third—trip to the emergency room. And you might have a hard time finding and paying for treatment to help you get sober.

Stigmas about addictions and mental health as well as the lack of parity in mental health treatment were the topics Monday at the “Making Parity Real” symposium. The discussion among local mental health advocates and politicians at UAW Local 95 Hall in Janesville was the fourth such symposium in the state.

The audience included members of the Rock County Board, the Janesville School Board, the Janesville City Council and local mental health workers.

Reps. Kim Hixson, D-Whitewater, and Mike Sheridan, D-Janesville, participated in the panel discussion along with Whitefish Bay Rep. Sandy Pasch, D-Whitefish Bay, who authored a mental health and substance abuse parity act. The legislation in December passed through the Assembly Committee on Health and Healthcare Reform and now waits for passage by the full Assembly.

Pasch described some aspects of mental health care that she says are broken. For example, some people having a mental health crisis fall into the legal category of being imminently dangerous to themselves or others. Although this does not qualify as a crime, the person is taken in handcuffs in the back of a police car for a psychiatric evaluation at a local emergency room.

That experience might deter people from seeking help the second time or from seeking less expensive preventive care, Pasch said.

Increased access to quality preventive treatment could lower the high cost of emergency mental health care or inpatient treatment, many advocates said. In the current system, county governments foot much of the bill for those costs.

If the medical field better treated mental illnesses, the burden wouldn't fall on counties, Pasch said. You don't hear about long waiting lists for hip replacements paid for by the county, Pasch said.

“It (mental health care) should not be a county program,” Pasch said. “It should just be part of the medical system.”

Panelist Bob Spoden, Rock County sheriff, said state legislators should let local governments and advocates decide how to spend state funding. Local people know their community's needs and could spend the money more cost effectively without state and federal mandates, Spoden said.

“Every community is different. Every one has its strengths and weaknesses,” Spoden said. “Allow us the freedom to develop our own programs.”

QUOTES

“What I fear is happening—because county budgets are under pressure—is we are defaulting to systems that are focused on crisis intervention.”

—*Kate Flanagan, mental health/AODA division manager for Rock County Human Services Department.*

“When someone is physically ill, we do not consider it to be reflective of his or her character. If they have high cholesterol, it's not because they are a bad person. They have a medical issue that's beyond their

control.”

—*Rock County Sheriff Bob Spoden*

When people criticize patients who make repeat trips to emergency rooms for treatment for mental illness, “we are blaming the person who’s not getting treatment because we are not providing treatment.”

—*Rep. Sandy Pasch, D-Whitefish Bay*

“It is a very bad situation that we’re in.”

—*Rep. Kim Hixson, D-Whitewater, on unfunded mandates and spending caps placed on counties by the state Legislature.*

Published at: <http://www.GazetteXtra.com/news/2010/mar/30/panel-stigmas-remain-mental-health-issues/>