

Healthcare Reform's Impact on the Quality of Allegan County Public Mental Health Services

By Marianne Huff, Director Allegan County Mental Health Services

When J.F.K. signed the "Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act of 1963" into law on October 31, 1963, it created the United States community mental health system that provides services and supports to 1) persons with serious, persistent mental illness; 2) persons with developmental disabilities; and 3) children with serious emotional disturbance.

The law meant important changes in the U.S. approach to services for persons with disabilities. Until 1963, individuals were institutionalized in large state hospitals or asylums. However, with advances in medication, the emphasis was shifted to community-based treatment that emphasized medication and outpatient mental health services.

From the start, the community mental health system has been subject to political, financial and social challenges, and with the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) on March 23, 2010, the healthcare system is currently being overhauled. These changes at the state and federal level are both challenges and opportunities for the public mental health system.

The Impact on Allegan County Community Mental Health Services

As a community mental health agency, Allegan County Community Mental Health (ACCMHS) is facing these challenges.

ACCMHS has been providing mental health services to residents of Allegan for over forty years. It is the **only provider** of services to persons with significant psychiatric and developmental disabilities in Allegan County. Proudly, ACCMHS

mission is: *“We strive to enhance the behavioral health and quality of life of the people of Allegan County through Prevention, Supports and Treatment.”*

However, ACCMHS' ability to continue to provide the current level of mental health services may be in jeopardy due to the changes occurring at the state and federal level. For example, the political changes in Lansing, have resulted in a focus on accountability and cost savings; and has generated a discussion about regionalizing community mental health (CMH).

Is it always true that "bigger" is somehow "better"? Currently, one of the core values of the CMH system is the emphasis on providing localized services. The creation of large, regional CMHs would potentially impact local control and service quality at the county level. Cost savings is a major concern for all of us in the CMH system, however, our primary concern is to provide quality services and support our mission and core values.

I believe the biggest threat to the public mental health system is the potential loss of these core values. They not only make the public system exceptional, but are the result of the hard work of many disability rights advocates over the past hundred years, and include the concepts of self-determination and person-centered planning, and recovery.

Values such as a recipient's right to be treated with dignity and respect and the right to be free from abuse and neglect were adopted as a result of hundreds of years in which persons with disabilities were subject to inhumane treatments. Truly, one of the merits of the public mental health system is that it embraces these ideals and implements them into its programs.

Yes, there are many challenges and opportunities that the CMH system will be dealing with over the next four years. Many of those challenges are being driven by a desire to save money, understandable in these challenging times. However,

the CMH system is currently a good system of care with a strong mission and focused on solid core values. I am optimistic that ACCMHS will successfully negotiate the obstacles and will become, as a result, a much more effective provider of excellent services to the citizens of Allegan County.