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CLARK: IT MAKES SMART ECONOMIC SENSE FOR COLORADO

Investing in mental healthcare isn't crazy

With the advent of national healthcare reform come countless changes to how healthcare is delivered and paid for in America. Over the next several years the provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordability Act of 2010, requiring that all Americans have health insurance coverage, will go into effect.



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Another major factor of healthcare reform is that now millions of Americans will have mental health coverage included in their health insurance policy under the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008, requiring mental health and substance abuse treatment to be equivalent to physical health coverage. As a result, there is an expected substantial increase in the number of people seeking treatment for mental healthcare services in Colorado and the Denver Metro area.

Today, it is estimated that one in five adults and one in four children are in need of mental health care services because they have conditions ranging from mild, to moderate, to severe. For years, they have gone without mental health treatment because it was not covered in their health care plans and was otherwise unaffordable and unattainable. Currently there are 750,000 to 770,000 uninsured Coloradans. With the implementation of healthcare reform, 500,000 more people in Colorado will have access to coverage. That means there could be as many as 125,000 more individuals seeking mental health and substance abuse treatment in our state. Add to that the current unmet need for mental health services. In Denver, for example, there are 12,813

more adults and 3,554 more children needing mental health services, as well as 43,597 additional people needing substance abuse services. Thus, it is easy to see why Colorado and Denver's mental health system is already operating at maximum capacity.

The Mental Health Center of Denver (MHCD), Denver's largest community behavioral health provider, treated 15,400 people last year, up from 13,600 the previous year, which equates to about half the need, which is estimated around 30,000. Even though MHCD was able to increase its capacity, sadly the organization still had to turn away one out of every two people seeking treatment. I believe Colorado and Denver are at a critical juncture in healthcare reform. Policy makers and legislators must make it a priority to plan now for the anticipated increase in demand in people seeking behavioral healthcare. It will save our state money and make it a healthier place in which to live and work.

Part of the shift needed in reforming healthcare is making a culture change from a "sick care" system that treats people once they are ill to a true healthcare system where we keep people well by increasing the focus on preventive treatment. In the case of mental healthcare, investing in and treating early mental health symptoms can prevent a mental health problem from getting worse and prevent other general health issues from developing. If an individual is suffering from a mental health issue too often other major physical health issues are ignored and go untreated, such as heart disease or diabetes. Today, most people are uninsured for mental healthcare and substance abuse, and the cost of their overall healthcare is *three times higher*. If we don't treat mental health issues the cost of care rises and must

be carried by the state or in higher insurance premiums.

Investing in behavioral healthcare drives down overall healthcare costs, saves taxpayers money, as well as decreases our state's bottom line by reducing the strain on community services such as jails, courts, police, human services, emergency rooms, lost workforce productivity, and others. Investing in mental healthcare can actually save the Colorado healthcare system and state millions on the back end by providing more access to mental health treatment on the front end.

As the state remains focused on budget cuts, it may appear that investing in mental healthcare is simply a priority it cannot afford at this time. In reality, Colorado cannot afford *not* to invest in mental healthcare given current unmet needs and anticipated increased demand. No matter what shape healthcare reform takes in Colorado, providing greater access to behavioral healthcare services will ultimately drive down all healthcare costs. Investing in Colorado's mental health systems is good for our citizens and smart for Colorado's budget and future economic and social wellbeing.

Dr. Carl Clark is the current CEO of The Mental Health Center of Denver, a private, not-for-profit, community mental health care organization providing comprehensive, recovery-focused services to residents in the Denver metro area. He currently serves on the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare (NCCBH) and Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council (CBHC) boards. Dr. Clark is also Assistant Clinical Professor at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.