

Ventura County has a mental health crisis

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We have a mental health crisis in Ventura County. The closure of state hospitals led to a mass de-prioritization of the needs of the seriously mentally ill so they landed untreated, warehoused in jails, emergency rooms, and on our streets.

The failure of our county to see the bigger picture and prioritize their treatment continues to create havoc in the healthcare system. Instead of dealing with these problems, Ventura County looks the other way and treats the seriously mentally ill like hot potatoes, passing the responsibility from law enforcement to hospitals, to out of county facilities, back to law enforcement, to homelessness, and back to hospitals. Ventura County had a chance to begin to change direction when it started to receive Prop. 63 funds in 2005. Other counties have done more.

I have served on the county's Behavioral Health oversight board since 2015. I am the co-chair of the Assist Implementation Workgroup, formerly known as the Laura's Law Implementation Workgroup and I am on the board's Lanterman Petris Short ("LPS") Act workgroup. The de-prioritization of the seriously mentally ill has become institutionalized in the culture of the Behavioral Health wing of the county's healthcare system. Many seriously mentally ill are turned away in emergency rooms and taken out of the county far from family supports because there is a dire lack of emergency treatment services and beds in the county.

Behavioral Health funds programs that serve people with mild to moderate or no mental health issues at all while many who need help the most are left untreated with no supports. It is clear that the ability to get mental healthcare in Ventura County is inversely related to need as there are few front end services for the seriously mentally ill.

Since 2005 when the county began receiving millions of Prop 63 dollars, in-patient psychiatric bed capacity for the seriously mentally ill decreased by 50%. Health policy experts recommend that the standard ratio for population and psychiatric beds should be 50 beds for each 100,000 residents. Ventura County has 30 beds, or 3.7 per 100,000 in population. We should have 425.

Emergency services that have been implemented with fidelity in other counties are sorely lacking in Ventura County. Individuals in psychiatric crisis are brought to hospital emergency rooms and forced to wait hours or days because there is no qualified staff, no security measures in place, no beds, and no investment made to handle the evaluation and treatment of individuals in a psychiatric crisis. Law enforcement has confirmed that they wait hours, sometimes days, with 5150 holds in hospital emergency rooms. Sometimes they wait so long that a 72-hour hold expires before an individual

receives treatment or is transferred. When this happens, a person who has been deemed gravely disabled or a danger to self or others is discharged back into the community without treatment.

In 2014, the county told stakeholders that it was creating a Psychiatric Emergency Services program to alleviate hospital emergency room overcrowding and to provide better services for people in psychiatric crisis.

Five years later, Ventura County unveiled a very small and seriously understaffed four-chair Crisis Stabilization Unit that does not reduce emergency room boarding or provide the level of care others in the state are afforded. Law enforcement still has to bring individuals to hospital emergency rooms and wait for hours or days and individuals in need are shipped out of county.

It is way past time to take the needs of the seriously mentally ill seriously.

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