

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Stakeholders See California as National Model for Revamping Mental Health Care Services

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Some stakeholders say that California's mental health care system could serve as a model for improving mental health services nationwide. This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Deirdre Kennedy.

Darrell Steinberg, state Senate President Pro Tempore, says it's time for Washington, D.C., to take mental illness seriously. The Sacramento Democrat is asking Congress to invest \$10 billion, and says California can teach national policymakers how to create mental health services that really work.

(Steinberg): "We have led the nation by being the only state in the country to pass a ballot initiative that invests a billion dollars a year in mental health care focused on the right kind of system, prevention and early intervention, and whatever it takes to help people who are most ill have a real hope of recovery."

California voters passed Proposition 63 in 2004. Since then, it has launched and maintained a number of ambitious programs, including Full Service Partnerships -- FSPs -- that provide comprehensive care for clients with severe mental illness. That can include drug rehab, psychotherapy, medication, case management, housing and food. Rusty Selix is executive director of the California Council of Community Mental Health Agencies and co-author of Prop. 63. He says it's totally changed public strategies for getting people off the street.

(Selix): "Which was to have them approached by social workers and by former homeless that they could relate to better, instead of having the police deal with the homeless, and then offer them an array of services that included housing and supported their life and that totally changed the dynamic."

A recent UCLA study estimates that county FSPs have enrolled some 27,000 Californians. In fiscal year 2009-2010 alone, the program saved taxpayers \$63 million in psychiatric and medical services and nearly \$27 million in potential criminal justice costs. Despite those achievements, Selix agrees with critics who say Prop. 63 has provided mental health services to only a

fraction of the people who most need them. Mental health officials estimate another 50,000 or 60,000 people in the state are falling through the cracks.

Twenty percent of Prop. 63's funds are earmarked for prevention and early intervention.

Kirsten Barlow is associate director for legislation and public policy with the California Mental Health Directors Association. She says many counties have Early Psychosis Intervention programs to identify and assess kids with a history of behavioral problems.

(Barlow): "So they're able to work with schools and parents -- to help them really identify the earliest signs of a young person who might be developing symptoms around a psychotic disorder ... and then get that child and their family into some intensive treatment and help the child avoid having to develop a more full-blown mental illness like schizophrenia."

Sonoma County's Crisis Assessment, Prevention and Education -- or CAPE -- provides a wide range of services for 16- to 25-year-olds in high schools and colleges. Team members train teachers, parents and students to recognize signs of addiction, depression, anxiety or self-harm. County mental health director Michael Kennedy -- the founder of CAPE team -- says what makes the program so effective is that it empowers people to take action when someone needs help.

(Kennedy): "It really gives people good information on -- if somebody is suicidal, yeah you should ask them, 'Are you thinking about hurting yourself?' A lot of times I've talked to family members or people at schools where there's been either a suicide or some kind of incident and a lot of times people will say, 'I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what to do, and I didn't know what it was.'"

But California's mental health system is still a patchwork quilt with no way to track patients between counties or help them get from one appointment to the next. Steinberg says too many patients just disappear from the system.

(Steinberg): "What we now need to do on a statewide basis -- while giving counties the ability to determine the best way to accomplish the goal -- is to make sure that we link places where people with severe mental illness come into contact with systems or people who can help with the right level and the right kinds of services -- so that they can get help and not be a statistic that ends up on the street or worse."

Steinberg says he's hoping for a California budget surplus this year. In the meantime, he says, he'll keep working with federal partners to secure more funding for mental health care services.

This has been a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Deirdre Kennedy, thanks for listening.