

Mental health services need continued support from Beacon Hill

By Vic DiGravio

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The state fiscal year 2013 budget process got under way earlier this month when the Office of Health and Human Services held a hearing at Boston University on its spending plan for next year.

The fiscal year runs from July 1 through June 30, so Gov. Deval Patrick will file his budget next month before the House and Senate debate it in the spring.

Despite the huge impact the state budget has on millions of Massachusetts residents, few people pay attention to the first round of debate. That is unfortunate, because indications are that this will be another tight budget year, and cutbacks will be the theme once again.

One vital area that cannot sustain another year of spending cuts involves services for individuals living with mental illness. Since 2009, according to a report issued by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, overall funding for the Department of Mental Health alone has been cut by more than \$55 million.

In February of this year, as a response to the death of Stephanie Moulton, a mental health worker at a DMH-funded community program, Commissioner of Mental Health Barbara Leadholm formed a task force to conduct a study on staff and client safety in the community.

Among the recommendations contained in the final task force report was a recommendation that urged the Patrick administration and Legislature to significantly increase funding for public mental health services over five years.

Individual members of the DMH Task Force on Staff and Client Safety recently submitted testimony urging the Patrick administration to increase funding for the commonwealth's publicly funded mental health system for the FY 2013 budget.

According to the testimony, the Task Force's recommendation to "increase funding over the next five years" was based on findings that years of budget cuts "have negatively impacted service delivery and safety issues" in multiple ways, including reducing the overall range of services available to individuals receiving DMH services.

The state Legislature responded to this recommendation by voting to increase funding by approximately \$20 million in FY 2012. However, according to the task force's testimony, more funding is desperately needed to fully implement its recommendations.

For this reason, the testimony from 13 of the Task Force members explains, "We are now requesting that Governor Patrick include a significant increase in funding for both the Department of Mental Health and MassHealth so that the commonwealth can fully implement the recommendations our Task Force submitted in June of this year."

The Task Force recommendations from June aim to "ensure that individuals receiving DMH services have meaningful access to a full array of recovery-oriented services and treatment provided by adequate numbers of skilled and experienced hospital and community professionals funded to provide coordinated care as an integrated team."

The Task Force report, which is available on the Association for Behavioral Healthcare website (www.abhmass.org), describes the serious structural problems created by underfunding the system of community-based mental health and addiction services. Only by restoring our commitment to behavioral healthcare can we meet our obligations to our friends and family who are struggling with behavioral health challenges.