

Mental Health Awareness Month (and Every Other Month) Must Be a Time to Act and Move Forward

May 1, 2016 - When the first national Mental Health Awareness event was held in May of 1949, much of the discussion regarding people with mental illness concerned what we could do "for" and "to" them. Dramatic scientific advances in our understanding of the functioning of the brain - including how it would be affected by new classes of medications - were still decades away. Our impulse was to care for people with mental illness in the most humane ways possible to help them get better.

But if those good intentions failed, we were apt to turn to considering what we could do to these people. And what we did was pretty striking: Locking them in institutions because we thought it would keep them safe and us safe. Writing off people as being "hopelessly insane." Segregating them from the community because we saw them as a burden and an embarrassment.

Over the years, our nation has turned in new directions, learning to look differently at mental health and mental illness. For more than 40 years, the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law has been in the forefront of this change, treating mental health as a civil rights issue and promoting policies that empower people with mental illness to do for themselves and to make their own choices to the greatest extent possible. We helped bring about the realization that institutionalization of people with mental illness was happening too frequently, and that doing so unnecessarily is a violation of human rights.

So we've come a long way from where we were during that first Mental Health Awareness observance in 1949. But have we come far enough? Not nearly. We turned away from institutionalization with a promise of replacing it with a system of community-based care. This is a promise that remains unkept. In our legal work and our public policy advocacy, the Bazelon Center calls for mental health services that are accessible to people in their communities - that are available when and where people need them, and that support them in their recovery.

We know these programs work. Supportive housing and employment for people with serious mental illness and other mental disabilities connect them with their communities and enable them to be active participants in the community mainstream. Services such as Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams and peer supports are effective in helping people who are at risk of or are already in a mental health crisis. Children with emotional disorders who receive positive supports in the classroom have a shot at succeeding rather than being pushed out of school by punitive practices.

Investing in programs and services like these is essential to creating the 21st Century mental health system we need. In the long run, that investment would cost less and pay dividends compared to what we now have. Yet movement in that direction remains slow. What's worse, there are powerful forces pushing to put the nation on a path back toward the failed mental health policies of the past that would increase the use of institutionalization and again reduce people with mental illness to the status of those we do things for and to.

This year's National Mental Health Awareness Month **as proclaimed by President Obama** gives us all an occasion to reflect on the direction we take on this critically important issue. At the Bazelon Center we devote our resources and our energy fighting to ensure that the nation moves forward on mental health instead of turning back.