

## **WHAT THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES SHOULD SAY ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH**

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It is the final debate of the Presidential race in 2008. As a follow up to his question on health care, Jim Lehrer asks, "As we all know, mental health is critical to human well-being. What would you do to promote mental health in America if you become President?"

Here's what we'd like to hear a Presidential candidate say:

*"Thank you, Mr. Lehrer for raising that question. For far too long mental health has been a distant afterthought in health policy debates. But as the Surgeon-General said a decade ago, 'There is no health without mental health.' Mental and substance abuse disorders are second only to cardiac conditions as causes of long-term disability. Untreated depression vastly complicates the treatment of diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic medical conditions, increasing the likelihood of disability, early death, and the cost of medical treatment. Mental illness reduces the productivity of American workers and the chances for educational success of our nation's children. Mental illness also contributes to avoidable institutionalization for as many as half the people in nursing homes. But sadly, the American health care system pays scant attention.*

*Did you know, Mr. Lehrer, that more than one in four Americans suffer from a mental or substance use disorder each year, and one in two over their lifetimes? And do you know that only 40% get treatment and that our children, minorities, and older adults are even less likely to get the service they need.*

*All this must change, Mr. Lehrer. Here's what I'd do. First, I would end the stalemate in Congress regarding parity of mental health coverage. People should have the same coverage for mental health as they do of physical health, and my plan to phase in universal health coverage builds that in.*

*But parity alone is not enough. A recent national study revealed that primary care physicians provide "minimally adequate mental health care" less than 13% of the time and that mental health professionals achieve that standard less than 50% of the time. We need to ensure that primary care physicians and mental health professionals consistently*

*provide excellent care. That means better translation of current research findings into everyday practice as well a research agenda dedicated to improving the chances of recovery.*

*Improving existing care starts with ensuring that mental disorders are identified. Easy-to-use screening tools are available for depression and other common and treatable conditions. They should be used as a standard part of annual health examinations as is the case for heart disease, cancer and diabetes. The federal government could advance this through quality standards in Medicare and Medicaid.*

*We also need to build mental health service into our nation's system of long-term care. Too many individuals end up in nursing homes because of unidentified and/or untreated mental disorders and behavioral problems that become unmanageable for formal and family caregivers. Our nation relies on family caregivers to help people with disabilities remain in their home, but they are prone to depression, anxiety, and physical disorders. They burn out. Jim, do you know that the financial value of the care families provide is about \$350 billion a year? If families can't keep it up, the cost to our nation will be enormous. Families need support and people with mental illnesses need treatment, and when I am President I'll see that they get it."*

*In addition, our society has a profound obligation to people with severe mental disabilities—people with serious and persistent mental illnesses, people with developmental disabilities including children with autism, and people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Investment in home and community-based care has helped, but we have much more to do to meet our obligations to integrate these populations into our communities."*

*We also have a responsibility to our veterans, whose suicide rate, by the way, is double the general population's. This reflects serious emotional problems in response to war that we as a nation can and must help them overcome.*

The above is what we would like to hear a Presidential candidate say. Impossible? Until recently, few believed that a woman or a black man could be elected President. 2008 is a time of change. Let it also be the year when the Presidential candidates lead America to break down the barriers that have prevented mental illnesses from receiving their proper place in mainstream medicine despite the compelling evidence of the prevalence and burden of mental illness. Let's not stop at the margins when we know we can do so much for so many.

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