

Speak out about mental health 'chaos'

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A series of investigative articles by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution revealed profound problems in Georgia's mental health system. Then the Department of Justice investigated and issued a scathing report. In response, the governor created a commission to address the problem, only to receive a partially plagiarized report.

Those are the facts.

For months, I, like many other Georgia residents, have been following this tragic story. And like them, I have been waiting and hoping that the governor and other legislative leaders will do something meaningful to solve this crisis. That hasn't happened.

I now realize that citizens like me need to get involved.

I asked myself: What should I do? How can I make a difference? I thought about picking up a book I'd received for Father's Day -- it's about social activism (no kidding). Instead I picked up the Bible and opened it to Chapter 2 of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah felt God's call to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in order to protect its inhabitants. He saw a need, and he acted. He organized, managed, supervised and encouraged others.

I, too, realize that I am called to do something . . . to speak out and act on behalf of those who can't or won't -- those who will suffer the consequences of our state's lethargic response to the mental health crisis.

As a psychiatrist in private practice, I am very familiar with the challenges of treating the mentally ill. I routinely see patients who need hospitalization for their own safety. Whether they are suicidal, abusing drugs or alcohol, severely depressed or psychotic, they need help fast.

Our state needs a hospital system that can give these patients the help they need, when they need it, for as long as they need it. We cannot, in good conscience, ignore the Department of Justice finding that "continuing clinical chaos" actually makes these patients "safer outside" than in the current state mental hospital system.

I am also familiar with the stigma of mental illness. It often creates a barrier between those who need help and those who provide it. It compounds suffering by isolating and separating the mentally ill from the rest of society.

This stigma, along with a perceived wall of separation, has reduced pressure on the governor to address the mental health care crisis.

People often imagine a wall of separation between those who are mentally ill and those who aren't. This imaginary wall makes those who are healthy feel immune to the threat of mental illness.

But, in fact, no such wall exists.

Mental illness is a great equalizer. It strikes both rich and poor, white and black, young and old. From large cities like Atlanta to small towns like Thomaston, mental illness is everywhere.

We are all potentially at risk. And so we all have a stake in ensuring the safety net will hold if or when we need it.

That's what our state mental health care system represents -- a safety net. Not just for the chronically ill, the indigent and the homeless. But also for the unexpectedly foreclosed on, the recently jobless who have lost their insurance, and the insured with no remaining benefits.

As long as Georgians believe the mental health crisis is really someone else's problem, our elected leaders will be free from constituent pressure to fix it. Free to reallocate funds set aside for mental health care. Free to ignore gaping holes in our collective safety net.

So what should we do?

We can get involved. One way is to contact the National Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health America, to volunteer time and effort to tackle this problem. I have done this, and I plan to do much more.

Remember Nehemiah? He was tireless in pursuing the vision of a safe, protected Jerusalem. He overcame ridicule, criticism and threats. He worked day and night, with urgency. Why? Out of obedience -- and a love of his fellow man.

Today, each of us can choose to be an everyday hero -- like Nehemiah -- and help those with mental illness. It's a moral call for me.

I urge you to make it yours, as well.

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