



## STRENGTHENING OUR MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

Tough economic times take a toll on individuals, families and communities in myriad ways. Unfortunately, tough economic times also mean fewer revenues for government services. This creates pressure to cut spending on public safety net programs such as mental health services just as the need for such help swells.



Recent events across the United States are grim reminders of the toll that untreated mental illness can take. The suffering is tremendous to the victims of violence as well as to the families of those who are ill. Recent events, too, at Eastern and Western State hospitals underscore the urgent need for greater protection of patients and the staff who care for them. Laws aimed at preventing the criminalization of the mentally ill require individuals found not guilty by reason of insanity to be remanded to the state hospital for treatment. Hospitals such as Western State then have to provide safe therapeutic treatment environments for the mentally ill. As a result, there are dangerous patients at the state hospitals who pose huge issues in balancing mental health treatment and safety.

Clearly not all mentally ill individuals are violent. Nevertheless, opportunities must be seized to help prevent tragic events that have stunned us all.

At the same time, we are seeing more boarding of unstable psychiatric patients in emergency departments and medical units of community hospitals. We are also seeing growing numbers of individuals with mental illness and drug or alcohol addiction in county and city jails, many of whom have been charged with nonviolent misdemeanor crimes.

It is time to take a serious look at modifications to our mental health system that would boost both appropriate treatment and community safety. To these ends, Governor Gregoire proposes several investments in our mental health system that would achieve the following goals.

### STRENGTHENING THE COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

**Improve the behavioral health system:** Washington's behavioral health treatment system — for both mental health and substance abuse treatment — provides critical services to help people with mental illness or with drug or alcohol addiction to recover and work in the community. The Governor believes that a strategy to improve our behavioral health system is needed. The system should be accountable for outcomes, including less frequent use of hospital or emergency room services, less involvement in the

criminal justice system, stable housing and employment, and better health for consumers. Improvements in the system must be based upon proven treatment and practices.

The strategy to improve the adult behavioral health system will include defining the outcome measures for the system's performance in addition to assessing the capacity of the current system to provide evidence-based and research-based practices. The strategy must also include developing and increasing use of those practices, as well as instituting services and financing mechanisms to assure quality and promote improvement. A steering committee involving stakeholders from local government, law enforcement, courts, providers, consumers and their families will guide these efforts.

(Funded with current resources)

With the Medicaid expansion option in the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, we have an opportunity to extend Medicaid coverage to low-income childless adults and parents. This coverage includes mental health and drug and alcohol treatment services. This expansion is an important avenue to deliver treatment before a person's mental illness becomes severe or a crisis strikes. The Medicaid expansion also presents an opportunity to ensure that our taxpayer dollars are wisely invested in effective treatment.

**Set up community-based care for individuals with unique needs:** An effective care system acknowledges the higher level of need for some patients, including those with dementia, traumatic brain injury, developmental disabilities or other challenging behaviors. To serve these individuals, the Governor proposes the creation of enhanced service facilities. These are community-based facilities with more intensive staffing levels to safely care for individuals with unique needs and are reimbursed at a higher per-patient rate. By the end of the 2013–15 biennium, 42 beds would be available in the community to serve this population.

This level of care addresses the need to build capacity in the community to safely discharge patients who no longer need state hospital services, but whose care needs cannot be met safely in our current community-based settings.

(\$1.4 million General Fund-State, \$2.8 million total funds)

## IMPROVING COMMUNITY SAFETY

### **Performing firearm background checks:**

Washington law requires law enforcement agencies to obtain mental health background checks from the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) for individuals who are applying for or renewing a concealed pistol license, applying for or renewing an alien firearm license or purchasing a pistol. An individual is prohibited from possessing a firearm if he or she has ever been ordered by the court to receive mental health treatment.

In 2010, DSHS processed an average of 1,050 mental health background check requests a month. That number has ballooned to at least 19,500 requests a month. This is due to greater numbers of individuals purchasing firearms and seeking concealed weapon licenses, as well as a Washington State Patrol audit of law enforcement agencies in May 2011, which determined that many agencies were not requesting DSHS mental health background checks. The department has five days to respond to these requests. The Governor addresses this public safety issue by proposing that two additional staff process background checks. (\$185,000 GF-S, \$285,000 total funds)

### **Making security improvements at Western and Eastern State hospitals:**

Today, 350 mental health patients are housed on forensics wards at state hospitals. Recent events at Eastern and Western State hospitals highlight a compelling need for greater protection of patients and staff. To ensure that treatment is delivered most effectively to patients, the Governor proposes that nursing and attendant staff in wards with high-risk patients be increased. The Governor also proposes to improve staff training to recognize and manage patients who are at risk of exhibiting violent behavior.

(\$4.6 million GF-S, \$5.7 million total funds)

**Keeping up with changes in the involuntary commitment standard:** Recent legislation will modify the standards for involuntary commitment to mental health treatment. Persons with mental illness who have a history of noncompliance with treatment — and violent behavior during the time they are noncompliant with treatment — can be involuntarily committed before a violent act occurs. This year, the Legislature set a Jan. 1, 2015, effective date for changing the involuntary commitment standard. The Governor proposes new state hospital capacity to care for these individuals.

(\$7.5 million GF-S, \$11.2 million total funds)

**Replacing lost federal funding:** Washington uses federal Medicaid disproportionate share hospital funds to help finance services at our state hospitals. Anticipated reductions in those funds, beginning in 2014, create a need to backfill that funding loss so state hospitals can continue to serve individuals whose needs can't be safely met in the community.

(\$5.7 million GF-S)

**Examining the state's forensic mental health system:** The Governor proposes that a study be conducted of how the state's forensic mental health system should be modified to provide an appropriate treatment environment for dangerously mentally ill offenders while enhancing the safety and security of the public, and other patients and staff, at forensic treatment facilities. (\$80,000 GF-S)

**Serving juvenile offenders:** Approximately 70 percent of the population served by the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration has significant mental health needs. The Governor proposes to increase staffing at Echo Glen and Green Hill School to meet the mental health treatment needs of the youth at these facilities. (\$566,000 GF-S)

In addition, the Governor proposes to restore funding for intensive parole. This will enhance transition services for youth, including those with mental illness, who are leaving Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration facilities and returning to the community. (\$3.9 million GF-S)

**Serving adult offenders:** The Washington State Penitentiary holds a significant number of offenders with a mental health diagnosis who are placed on intensive management status. As a result, these offenders are often assigned to intensive management units. The department has a 36-bed intensive treatment unit at the Monroe Correctional Complex dedicated to housing the highest-risk offenders with a mental health diagnosis. The Governor proposes to add 18 beds to this unit, increasing the opportunities for appropriate mental health interventions and the transition of these offenders to a less-restrictive setting. (\$645,000 GF-S)