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HealthVoices

The Mental Health System in Georgia: The Perfect Storm

Issue 3, 2010

Mental health is "a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity" (Healthy People 2010). Mental disorders represent a significant health burden and have profound effects on a range of diseases and health conditions. Like other health conditions, mental illnesses are equal opportunity disorders with broad population disparities identified in prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Individual and population-based interventions have shown great promise in reducing the risk for mental disorders and their consequences among vulnerable populations. To move forward in providing health care for those living with mental health challenges, Healthy People 2010 has established a goal to "improve mental health and ensure access to appropriate, quality mental health services."

"Georgia hospitals spent \$68.8 million last year treating uninsured psychiatric patients in emergency rooms, an increase of almost 50 percent since 2006."

Alan Judd, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (June 20, 2010)

This issue of *HealthVoices* addresses public perceptions of mental health issues in Georgia, in the context of recent federal legislation and Georgia's current crisis in the structure, delivery and financing of mental health services.

In 2008, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) estimated that between 232,000 and 446,000 adults in Georgia were living with a serious mental illness and that approximately 180,000 youth between the ages of 9 and 17 were living with a serious emotional disturbance. The state's availability of in-patient and out-patient services is severely limited and cannot meet the increasing demand for both the adolescent and adult populations.

However, a series of events over several years have resulted in creating the "Perfect Storm," providing new opportunities to generate real change. The convergence of the current legal

battle between the state of Georgia and the U.S. Department of Justice, coupled with the creation of a new Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, have set the stage for rebuilding the state mental health system. Strong leadership will be required in this challenging environment in order to create a comprehensive system of care that is the gold standard nationally. Although many experts have weighed in on what Georgia should do to correct the current system, little is known about public perception of mental health.

To learn more about public awareness and perception of mental health services, Healthcare Georgia Foundation engaged The Schapiro Group, an independent strategic consulting firm, to conduct a public opinion poll of Georgians.



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About the Poll:

From February 2-8, 2010, The Schapiro Group conducted a telephone survey of Georgia voters. The questions were designed to assess participants' overall awareness and knowledge of mental illness. Data were generated from a sample of 500 residents aged 18 or older. Estimates based on this sample are subject to a sampling error of +/-4.4%.

Who Participated?

Among the 500 Georgia residents 18 years or older who participated in the poll:

- 55% were women, 45% men
- 61% were White, 26% Black, 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic, 7 % multi-racial/other
- 21% were age 18-29, 18% age 30-39, 20% age 40-49, 18% age 50-59, 20% age 60+
- 47% were from Metro Atlanta, 19% North Georgia, 19% Middle Georgia, 14% South Georgia

Key Findings:

- **Structure and delivery of mental health services**—89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that all Georgians should have access to mental health care services regardless of their financial situation; 91% agreed or strongly agreed that it “shouldn’t be any more difficult to get needed mental health care services than to get needed physical health care.”
- **Perceived prevalence of mental illness**—Respondents thought mental illness is a fairly common issue among adults (42% common, 25% very common) as well as children

and adolescents (42% common, 15% very common). African-American respondents were more likely than Whites to believe that mental illness is a “very common” problem.

- **Perceived stigma toward mental illness**—Respondents reported very little stigma associated with mental illness and receiving mental health care. Among respondents, 84% agree that “most people who receive mental health care services are not that much different from you and me.” 92% indicated they would feel comfortable seeking mental health care for themselves if they felt care would be helpful.
- **Perceived availability of mental health services**—The poll addressed multiple aspects of access and availability of mental health services and found 45% of the respondents agreed that there are enough mental health care resources available in the community; 63% agreed that they could afford mental health services if needed; 76% agreed they would know where to go for mental health care.

“Primary medical care should be available in community behavioral health care agencies for those consumers who view these organizations as their health homes.”

Ellice P. Martin and Tod Citron,
The Atlanta Journal Constitution
(July 22, 2010)

- **The state's role in mental health**—When asked to identify who should be primarily responsible for paying for mental health services, 71% identified health insurance providers, with patients (33%), the federal government (26%) and state government (20%) less frequently identified as a payer. Finally, respondents gave mediocre ratings to the job the state has done in providing mental health services for all Georgians and for providing mental health services for children and adolescents. Among those who had an opinion on how the state delivers mental health services, more than 70% believed it to be either “fair” or “poor.” Still, more than 80% recommended that the state should invest more in the mental health of its children and adolescents.
- **Perceived importance of mental health**—Among the respondents, 17% reported mental health care as one of three most important health issues affecting Georgia (behind education and employment).
- **Perceived relationship between mind and body**—81% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that there is a direct relationship between a person’s physical health and mental health. Further, 95% agreed that staying healthy means “addressing both your physical and mental health.”

Further information regarding the survey methodology and results can be obtained from The Schapiro Group info@schapirogroup.com, 404-584-5214 ex.112.



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Conclusions

Perceptions of Georgia voters responding to The Schapiro Group poll on mental health indicate that: mental health services are not the most important health-related issue facing Georgians; that mental health services are affordable and easy to access; and the state should not be the primary funder of mental health care services.

Public perception regarding access and affordability of mental health services may not accurately reflect reality. Accessibility and quality of services for the underinsured and uninsured appears inadequate and largely unavailable in many community settings. Individuals are often warehoused in either substandard institutions or dumped into hospital emergency rooms to await treatment. Supporting access and utilization of mental health services without stigma should become the societal norm. Services that are provided in a community setting and are integrated with primary health care, promote the patient-centered medical home and stress a holistic approach to health care services should become the new standard of care. While public perceptions of access and affordability diverge from the daily reality for many individuals and families managing a mental illness, the belief prevails that all Georgians should have access to mental health services regardless of their financial situation.

Practice and policy implications—As a private independent foundation with a statewide mandate, Healthcare Georgia Foundation commissioned The Schapiro Group to assist in identifying public perceptions regarding the structure, delivery and financing of mental health services in Georgia. The Foundation also engaged key informants and mental health policy leaders to better understand the barriers and opportunities related to providing quality mental health services. Our discussions have helped shape our own appreciation of the complexity of mental health services and mental health supports, as well as the challenges we will certainly face as we consider the following actions:

1. Promoting the integration of mental health/behavioral health and primary health care.
2. Advocating for a patient-centered medical home supporting mental and physical health services.
3. Fostering greater attention to mental health/behavioral health care issues among children and adolescents seeking care from safety net providers.
4. Supporting culturally competent mental health services and support systems.
5. Addressing mental health workforce issues that contribute to unequal access and treatment.

"Growing numbers of children are suffering needlessly because their emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs are not being met by the very institutions and systems that were created to take care of them."⁵

Dr. David Satcher, Former U.S. Surgeon General

According to Former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., "the burden of suffering by children with mental health needs and their families has created a health crisis in this country." This health crisis extends to Georgia's children and families and requires urgent attention, especially given the economy, health reform, and the re-structuring, delivery, and financing of in-patient and community-based mental health services.



Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Healthy People 2010 Objectives, 1998.
2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009) *Results from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-36, HHS Publication No. SMA 09-4434). Rockville, MD.
3. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, June 20, 2010
4. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 22, 2010
5. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, www.surgeongeneral.gov/news/pressreleases/pressreleasechildren.html, January 3, 2001

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Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a catalyst for better health and health care in Georgia.

Through strategic grantmaking, Healthcare Georgia Foundation supports organizations that drive positive change; promotes programs that improve health and health care among underserved individuals and communities; and connects people, partners and resources across Georgia.

HealthVoices is published periodically by Healthcare Georgia Foundation as an educational service to Georgians interested in health policy.

HealthVoices is available online at www.healthcaregeorgia.org. For further information, please contact Toni Almasy, Avatar Communications, 404-688-9005 or toni@getavatar.com.

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Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a statewide, private independent foundation whose mission is to advance the health of all Georgians and to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities.

