

American Academy of
Child & Adolescent
Psychiatry
American Psychiatric
Association
American Psychological
Association
CHADD - Children and
Adults with Attention-
Deficit/Hyperactivity
Disorder
Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance (DBSA)
Federation of Families for
Children's Mental
Health (FFCMH)
Judge David L. Bazelon
Center for Mental
Health Law
National Alliance on
Mental Illness (NAMI)
National Association of
County Behavioral
Health and
Developmental
Disability Directors
(NACBHD)
National Association of
State Mental Health
Program Directors
(NASMHPD)
National Council for
Community Behavioral
Healthcare (NCCBH)
National Empowerment
Center (NEC)
National Mental Health
Association (NMHA)
National Mental Health
Consumers' Self-Help
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NEWS RELEASE

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NEW BIPARTISAN MENTAL HEALTH CAUCUS ANNOUNCED BY U.S. SENATORS DOMENICI, KENNEDY, SMITH and HARKIN

*Members of President's New Freedom Commission Reconvene on Capitol Hill;
Mental Health Groups honor Rosalynn Carter, Sen. Smith, Rep. Kennedy*

Washington DC (April 3, 2006) – U.S. Senators Pete V. Domenici (R-NM), Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), Gordon H. Smith (R-OR) and Tom Harkin (D-IA) have announced establishment of a Senate Caucus on Mental Health Reform.

The Senate Caucus, intended to increase national awareness of mental health issues, was announced in conjunction with a March 29, 2006 meeting on Capitol Hill of former members of the President's 2002-03 New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. The reconvening was sponsored by the Campaign for Mental Health Reform (CMHR), a coalition of 16 national mental health organizations, and included panels on: **(1) mental health needs of returning veterans; (2) suicide as a national priority; and (3) mental health in the workplace.**

According to CMHR, more than one-third of veterans returning from Iraq are seeking mental health treatment; 30,000 American lives are lost each year to suicide—a largely preventable public health problem; and as much as \$105 billion each year is lost in economic productivity due to mental illness.

The mental health commissioners heard from leading experts, including Dr. Frances Murphy of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA); Dr. Ileana Arias of the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; and Dr. Ron Finch, of the National Business Group on Health; as well as Stefanie Pelkey, who shared the tragedy of losing her husband Captain Michael Pelkey, an Iraq veteran, to a self-inflicted gunshot wound after being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); and a college student, Marley Prunty-Lara, who survived early onset bipolar disorder and a suicide attempt to become a leading national advocate for mental health reform.

The Commission meeting was opened by CMHR President Michael Fitzpatrick, chaired by Michael Hogan—former Commission Chairman—and began with remarks from Kathryn Power, Director of the Center for Mental Health Services at SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration. **The full meeting was *webcast* by the Kaiser Family Foundation and can be viewed at: www.kaisernetwork.org/healthcast/mhreform/29mar06.**

Dr. Murphy noted “(T)he numbers of veterans seeking VA care for behavioral health conditions is rapidly increasing. For example VA reports a 30% increase in PTSD diagnoses....(Recent data) suggest that current estimates of utilization of healthcare services including mental health and substance abuse...may be significantly higher than originally estimated.” Joy Ilem, of the Disabled American Veterans, concluded that “VA must be sufficiently funded to treat newly returning veterans with mental health issues without displacing older veterans with chronic mental illnesses.”

Ms. Pelkey told commissioners that “although PTSD is evident in (her husband's) medical records ...the Army has chosen to rule Michael's death a suicide without documenting this serious

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illness....He is a casualty of war....He came home from war with an injured mind....There are so many soldiers suffering from this disorder and so many families suffering the aftermath....(G)ive our Armed Forces the...funding they need to take care of our soldiers. I don't want my Michael to have died in vain."

During the panel on suicide, Dr. Arias of the CDC reported that "in 2003 over 31,000 people died by suicide and over 410,000 people were treated...for suicidal behavior....Suicide is a critical public health issue." Ms. Prunty-Lara related that "in my struggle against my (bipolar) disease, I not only had to overcome the racing thoughts and ominous lows, but I also had to rise above the seemingly endless obstacles in order to attain adequate health care." Calvin Nunnally of the Virginia Department of Health conveyed the positive news that new funding under the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act is enabling his department to extend its prevention efforts and Jerry Reed of SPAN USA urged the Congress to fully fund the program.

In light of the tremendous economic costs of mental health, Ron Finch of the National Business Group on Health (NGBH) and Henry Harbin, former Chairman of Magellan Health Services and Chair of the NGBH behavioral health work group, related that behavioral health disorders are serious, common and expensive and that spending less on behavioral health services increases general medical costs. Dr. Nada Stotland emphasized that the lack of parity for mental health coverage by most health insurance plans "is a set-up for...serious problems....Mental illnesses are as real and as treatable as...hypertension and diabetes...."

The day's events followed up on the Commission's findings in 2002 that "the mental health delivery system is fragmented and in disarray...lead[ing] to unnecessary and costly disability, homelessness, school failure and incarceration." The Commission in 2003 called for a "fundamental transformation" of the mental health system. Following up on the Commission's recommendations, in July 2005 the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) released a *Federal Action Agenda*, and the Campaign for Mental Health Reform released a *Roadmap for Federal Action on America's Mental Health Crisis*. See http://www.samhsa.gov/Federalactionagenda/NFC_TOC.aspx and www.mhreform.org.

The 16 national organizations that comprise CMHR joined together in 2003 to raise public awareness of the goals established by the Commission, and to make mental health a national priority and early access, recovery and quality in mental health services the hallmarks of our nation's mental health system. CMHR Executive Director Charles Konigsberg said "we are very pleased that the establishment of the new Senate Caucus by Senators Domenici, Kennedy, Smith, and Harkin will give invaluable bipartisan political support to making mental health a national priority."

Following the Commission meeting on March 29, CMHR hosted its inaugural National Awards Dinner for Leadership in Mental Health honoring: former First Lady Rosalynn Carter with the Lifetime Achievement Award; Senator Gordon Smith and Representative Patrick Kennedy with Congressional Leadership Awards; Dr. Frances Murphy of the Veterans Health Administration with the Leadership in Government Award; Helen Darling, President of the National Business Group on Health, with the Private Sector Leadership Award; Dr. Michael Hogan for chairing the President's Commission; Representative Grace Napolitano for co-chairing the Mental Health Caucus in the House of Representatives; and artist Jerome Lawrence with the Consumer Advocacy Award.

Mike Wallace of CBS' 60 Minutes was Master of Ceremonies at the event and special guests included Senators Edward Kennedy and Bob Kerrey and Surgeon General VADM Richard H. Carmona. The full testimony of each of the presenters at the March 29 Commission meeting and further details on the new U.S. Senate Caucus are available at www.mhreform.org

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Comments on the Senate Caucus on Mental Health Reform by Senators Domenici, Kennedy, Smith and Harkin

“I want to use this new forum to increase the knowledge and understanding among Senators of the importance of making mental health a national priority. As we move beyond the stigma of mental illnesses, early access, recovery and quality in mental health services must become the hallmarks of our nation’s mental health system,” Domenici said.

Senator Kennedy said, “the Senate Mental Health Caucus will work in a bipartisan way to educate the Congress on the importance of addressing mental health as a national priority. No one is exempt from the human toll of mental illness, and it is time to end the discrimination and stigma that millions of Americans face each day.”

In particular, Senator Smith noted that one example of the Caucus’ efforts will be to “help those of us who care deeply about mental health to educate our colleagues about the devastating impact of mental illness and the vital importance of access to mental health coverage for all Americans.”

Senator Harkin noted the “importance of raising awareness in order to end discrimination against millions of Americans with mental health disabilities and the significance of prevention and early intervention during childhood, before there are consequences in terms of disrupted lives and disability.”

In all, more than 20 million adults and children have mental illnesses. But tragically, one out of two does not receive treatment due to lack of access to effective mental health services, as well as the lingering stigma associated with mental illness.

The 16 organizations that comprise the Campaign for Mental Health Reform joined together in 2003 to educate policymakers, the public and the media about the vital goals established by the New Freedom Commission.

The Campaign’s members are: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, CHADD – Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA), Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (FFCMH), Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors (NACBHD), National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD), National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare (NCCBH), National Empowerment Center (NEC), National Mental Health Association (NMHA), National Mental Health Consumers Self-Help Clearinghouse, Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA), and United States Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (USPRA).

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