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**MENTAL ILLNESS AWARENESS WEEK OCT. 5-11: OKLAHOMA PROGRAMS EFFECTIVE, BUT STILL NOT ENOUGH TO MEET BURGEONING DEMAND**

Depression could be one of the leading forms of disability in the world by 2020, notes the 2003 "State of the State's Health" interim report recently released by the Oklahoma State Board of Health, and the Oklahoma State Board of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

In Oklahoma, an estimated 230,000 people suffer from clinical depression each year, but most go untreated, said Rand Baker, ODMHSAS deputy commissioner for mental health programs.

"Our current mental health services are not enough to meet the burgeoning demand for these services," said Baker. "Appropriate treatment for mental health issues is generally successful, but our agency is able to assist only one in five people with serious mental illness who need help."

Baker made the comments in conjunction with National Mental Illness Awareness Week, observed Oct. 5-11.

"Every state, not just Oklahoma, is grappling with a mental health system that is beyond simple repair," Baker said. "We are bursting at the seams with more people in need than we can successfully handle."

Baker said ODMHSAS places priority on those with the most severe need, but some people still "fall through the cracks" due to a lack of alternative community resources.

"In many cases, their situation will worsen and their entry point will become the

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local emergency room or a crisis center,” he said. “The entire social service system, be it public or non-profit, is stretched to capacity right now.”

Numerous factors are contributing to this situation, Baker said, ranging from cutbacks in Medicaid and state funding to increasing numbers of people who have lost jobs and health insurance, who now are “having to rely upon whatever public services are available.”

A report released in July by President Bush’s “New Freedom Commission on Mental Health” also confirms the crisis in mental health services.

“The report states that, nationwide, the mental health services and supports people need are disconnected and often inadequate,” Baker said. “In Oklahoma, we have made it a priority to ensure services are available for those most in need. However, organizations that serve people with a mental illness are feeling the strain of not being able to meet the needs within their communities.”

For most people, core mental health services such as medication, case management and rehabilitative services are effective in promoting recovery from mental illness. In addition to basic services, ODMHSAS also has implemented a number of specialty programs, such as the Oklahoma County mental health court and police Crisis Intervention Team, the family oriented “Systems of Care” program, and the Program of Assertive Community Treatment (PACT).

Operational in only a handful of locations nationwide, mental health courts are an alternative to incarceration for people with a diagnosed mental illness – schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression – charged with a misdemeanor or non-violent felony. Mental health courts provide a treatment plan for the person, restoring dignity to their lives and helping them to

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become productive citizens, said Baker.

The “Systems of Care” program, funded primarily with a six-year, \$9.4 million federal grant, helps children with serious emotional disorders and their families.

PACT, another successful program, was implemented in Tulsa and Oklahoma City in May of 2001 with \$2 million provided by the state legislature and expanded to four additional communities in 2002. Further expansion in Oklahoma City and Tulsa will occur this fall.

PACT offers intensive, outreach-oriented mental health services to people with schizophrenia, bi-polar disease and other serious mental illnesses. It is intended to assist clients with basic needs, increase compliance with medication regimens, address any co-occurring substance abuse, help clients train for and find employment, and improve their ability to live with independence and dignity, Baker said.

“All of these programs are making an impact and improving services to our most vulnerable populations, but much more needs to be done,” Baker said. “Current resources are not sufficient to meet the needs of the community. In the past year, state-funded mental health centers provided more than \$3.5 million in services that went unreimbursed due to insufficient funds. In addition, pharmaceutical companies donated \$20 million worth of needed newer-generation medications – critically needed medications the state was unable to purchase with existing resources.

“While we want to provide the best-quality care to people with mental illness, we know there are a great many people who, right now, are not able to access the services they need.”

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