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Pennsylvania Launches ‘Reach Out PA: Your Mental Health Matters’

Harrisburg, PA – Governor Tom Wolf today announced a focused all-agency effort and anti-stigma campaign, ‘Reach Out PA: Your Mental Health Matters,’ aimed at expanding resources and the state’s comprehensive support of mental health and related health care priorities in Pennsylvania. The governor announced several initiatives and reviews the administration will undertake for commonwealth agencies to bolster the effort. Further, over the coming weeks, agencies will announce additional initiatives. The governor was joined by mental health advocates, social workers, educators, military veterans, and cabinet secretaries in making the announcement.

“For those struggling with their mental health, we have one message: your mental health matters and it’s okay to reach out for help,” Gov. Wolf said. “We are stepping up our efforts to ensure every Pennsylvanian can access mental health care and more agencies can respond to the challenges facing Pennsylvanians struggling with their mental health. The act of reaching out for help – or to help – can make a huge difference for someone struggling.”

According to a [2017 study](#) from the University of Southern California, approximately 1 million adult Pennsylvanians struggled with serious psychological distress at least once in 2015. Of those adults, more than 27 percent had an unmet need for mental health care. That population includes 42 percent who did not receive mental health care because they could not afford it.

Strengthening Mental Health Care Access

The Pennsylvania Insurance Department (PID) will pursue Mental Health Parity regulations to ensure Pennsylvanians’ health insurance coverage provides access to affordable mental health care. Recent market conduct reviews by the PID found that insurance companies are not adequately meeting federal and state requirements for mental health parity, necessitating stronger state regulations. PID also will release educational tools to help patients better understand their mental health benefits and access services.

The Department of Human Services will take steps to incentivize the integration of physical and behavioral health services to remove barriers to coordinating care and treatment. DHS will create financial incentives to encourage managed care organizations that provide Medical Assistance benefits to create, maintain, and continuously improve collaboration between the

entities and providers that coordinate and deliver physical health benefits and mental health benefits.

The Department of Health will conduct a review of the current network adequacy process to ensure that consumers enrolled in the Medicaid program and commercial insurance products are able to access mental health care providers when services are necessary and without prohibitive costs.

The departments of Labor & Industry and State will study solutions that address the inadequacy of the mental health workforce across Pennsylvania, including evaluating mental health practitioners across the commonwealth by level of care they provide, the competitiveness of salaries and benefits, and barriers of entry to the workforce.

Combatting Mental Health Stigma

Many Pennsylvanians do not access the mental health care they need or do not reach out for help because they fear having a label or stigma attached to them by their family, friends, and community. By raising awareness of the normalcy and importance of mental health care, others will be less fearful of the stigma.

Pennsylvania's nationally recognized response to the opioid and substance use disorder crisis included public engagement and open conversations to combat stigma. The Wolf administration will deploy the practices used by the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs to lead a similar effort around mental health and mental illness.

Reach Out PA will include roundtable discussions to hear directly from those battling the stigma of mental illness, collaboration with community-based organizations to help increase public attention on mental illness and mental health care, and outreach to elevate success stories and best practices. Gov. Wolf will host the first roundtable on Friday, Jan. 3 at Muhlenberg College in Allentown.

Increasing Support and Proactive Resources for Children and Young Adults

The Department of Education will create pathways to increase the number of highly qualified social workers trained to work in our schools. School social workers play a unique role in addressing mental health by providing holistic services and supports in the school setting, such as crisis management, mental health treatment, and engaging the school, family and community in enhancing existing student support structures that ensure the success of all students. Pathways will include new certification, among other options, to enhance who can provide social work services in Pennsylvania's schools.

The Department of Education and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency will evaluate how to ensure every school district can provide a full-time counselor, social worker and nurse, along with increasing more counseling and mental health services at post-secondary institutions.

The Office of Advocacy and Reform will coordinate and expand upon ongoing efforts in the commonwealth to address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and implement more trauma-informed approaches in education, health care, the criminal justice system and other government institutions.

Preparing State Agencies and Workers to Help and Reach Out

The administration will expand training of constituent affairs personnel on suicide prevention and mental health intervention. To date, more than 420 workers at the Department of Labor & Industry have received suicide prevention training. With this training, workers have already been able to recognize people who need help with their mental health, to intervene and connect them with services or support.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs will review the adequacy of federal and state programs in educating members of the military and veterans on resources available to them, especially those struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and at risk for harming themselves or others.

The Department of Aging will expand its efforts to create a dementia-friendly Pennsylvania by collaborating with national and statewide partners to support training, build awareness and promote action among community stakeholders.

“The steps I’m outlining today are just the beginning of what I plan to grow into a large-scale effort to combat mental health issues in Pennsylvania,” Gov. Wolf said. “We’ve seen success with a multi-pronged attack against the opioid crisis. Reach Out PA will do the same with mental health.”

Note: Photos and video from this event will be available at www.pacast.com.

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