



Gibbons Capitol Report
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Doing What is Best for Our Most Vulnerable Citizens

Earlier this summer a series of articles shone light on some alarming failures in the care for our state's most vulnerable citizens. Since then, the governor has created a task force to examine the Department of Mental Health from an administrative standpoint. The task force has also been traveling the state to hear public testimony from families and advocates.

Members of the Senate are following the task force with great interest and look forward to reviewing their findings. But we have also initiated several opportunities in the past few weeks to visit centers that care of our mentally ill and developmentally disabled citizens. The concerns shared by parents and the suggestions from those who run the daily operations are invaluable and will serve as our foundation to reform our state's mental health system.

Safety

The greatest priority is making sure that the people who are cared for by the state are safe. We also want to make sure these individuals have the best quality of life as possible. At all of the facilities we visited, both private and state-run, parents and family members shared this same goal. They want everyone, including their child or relative, to be safe and believe private and public centers should both be held to the same accountability standards.

No Longer Living in Fear

Of all the incredible information I was able to absorb at the psychiatric acute care center, habilitation centers and private centers we toured, the most important point was made by a man whose brother had recently transitioned from a state habilitation center to a private center. He said he was presented with several choices and they were very happy with the one they made. His brother even gave me a tour of his new home and shared with me what he liked about it there. But what he said that struck me the most was that the fear of the unknown was the most difficult for the families who have developmentally disabled relatives. With the Department of Mental Health working to close one of the state-run habilitation centers, parents there are faced with fear about the future and safety of their children. But it doesn't stop there. The parents we met at another habilitation center we visited shared the same fear although there were no plans to close that center.

Safety for the families includes knowing what the future may bring. We must stop the debate of whether state-run or private run facilities are better and recognize that each offers safety and a better quality of life dependent on the person they are serving. We should focus on improving both private and public centers, and well as having the two systems cooperate to provide what is best for the people they serve.

Public-Private Partnerships

This loaded term usually brings up all sorts of questions, but in our visit to Kansas City we saw a public-private partnership that worked to do what was best for those who needed psychiatric care in the region. Because of staffing cuts, Missouri Western Mental Health Center made the decision to close a 25 bed unit they run. Instead of letting the space remain vacant, they worked with neighboring Truman Medical Center to lease the unit to them to use for their psychiatric patient needs. The partnership has been a success, but they did share with us problems they faced with red tape that we in the Legislature can fix. While the number of available psychiatric beds has decreased by the thousands in the Kansas City region over the past decade, we were able to witness a private hospital and public mental health center come together to address those needs and help more patients. Their work should serve as a great example to build on.

The problems with our state's mental health system must be addressed. Reform must happen and in that process many questions will arise. But what must drive our reform effort is doing what is best for our most vulnerable citizens. Their safety and quality of life is what is most important. The senators who have taken part in our recent tours share that focus, which will be the key to real reform.