Report: One-third of mentally ill Oregonians die before 50

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Oregonians with serious mental illness are dying years earlier than their neighbors in the general population, and a grassroots health movement is under way to reverse this trend.

The Oregon Department of Human Services Addictions and Mental Health Division (AMH) has teamed with consumers of mental health services and their families, health care professionals and others to implement a statewide wellness initiative aimed at improving mental and physical health and longevity.

Death comes before age 50 for one third of those treated for mental health problems, according to results of a seven-year AMH mortality study. A staggering 89 percent of people treated for both mental illness and substance abuse die before age 50. The average lifespan of someone who is dually diagnosed is 45.1 years, which equates to an average 34.5 years of potential life lost.

The recent study, titled â€œMeasuring Premature Mortality among Oregonians,â€• compared the death records of persons who received public substance abuse and/or mental health treatment with the general population.

The early death toll among this segment of Oregonians falls in line with similar results from national and state studies. More importantly, it brings into focus what many individuals with mental illness already knew; by taking charge of their health, habits and lifestyle they can add years â€“ and quality â€“ to their lives, said Bob Nikkel, DHS assistant director for addictions and mental health.

â€œNational research and this study make it clear that persons being treated for substance abuse and mental health problems have many risks that may bring on early death,â€• said Nikkel. â€œOur most critical imperative is to help individuals with mental illness live better and longer lives.

â€œMental health and substance abuse is an important quality of life issue for Oregonians,â€• he continued. â€œDying prematurely not only destroys human potential, but it has an economic impact as well.â€•

The AMH study showed substance abuse and mental health clients have higher risks of death associated with suicide, homicide and unintended injuries. In addition, they are economically disadvantaged and vulnerable to many diseases that cause death. For example, antipsychotic medications used to treat someone with mental illness are known to elevate the chance of dying from cardiac arrest; others may lead to diabetes.

The mortality study is available on the DHS Web site at: www.oregon.gov/DHS/addiction/publications/msur_pre_mort_6_2008.pdf

Nikkel said a DHS/AMH wellness committee is working to improve the health and longevity of people with mental illness by drawing on scientific research, literature and successful practices by user groups. Here are some of the committeeâ€™s guiding principles:

â€¢ We must treat and support the whole person;

â€¢ Care coordination and wellness screening are essential;

â€¢ Access to a range of health care options and basic health care must be afforded to all Oregonians;

â€¢ Early intervention and prevention across the lifespan saves lives, makes a difference in years of productive life lost, and improves quality of life;

â€¢ Medication management and empowerment equips individuals with the tools and strength to ask questions and work with treatment providers to find healthier and effective ways to support recovery and wellness; and

â€¢ Disparities in health care coverage and access to service must be overcome, along with finding culturally appropriate treatment programs.

Committee members are seeking funding for grassroots-level programs that encourage education and lifestyle changes and for peer-to-peer support services.

For more information visit the DHS wellness Web site at: http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/mentalhealth/index.shtml

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