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Mental health conference seeks ways to help those in need locally

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By Hannah Lane, Reporter / Anchor CONNECT

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - Former U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy was in the capital city Wednesday to talk about mental illness. He spoke at the Mental Health Conference held at the Renaissance.

Kennedy has a passion for helping the mentally ill. It hits close to home for him. He openly admits to struggling with drug addiction and mental illness.

"We have 42,000 people taking their life every year as suicides. We also have more people dying of overdose than are killed in car accidents every year. This is a public health epidemic. Untreated mental illness and addiction is something that we can no longer ignore," Kennedy said.

He believes changing policies, education and fighting discrimination are some of the steps that could ultimately make a difference.

"The answer is treat mental health. Treat the brain like any other organ in the body, which means get in and prevent these illnesses just like you would cancer, just like you would diabetes. In fact with diabetes you treat it as a chronic illness. Addiction is a chronic illness. Mental illness is a chronic illness," Kennedy said. "Treat them the same, no longer allow insurance companies, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, to discriminate against these illnesses in a way they would never discriminate if they were some other illness."

Here in Alabama funding has been cut to services and forced mental hospitals to shut down.

State leaders say they are working to find innovative ways to address problems, believing by investing in mental health care it will save money and cut down on crime.

"If you treat people with an intellectual disability early then it may prevent them from being in a rehab situation for the rest of their life," said Jim Perdue, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

"We deal with the mental health community on a daily basis," said Sheriff Derrick Cunningham of the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office.

Envision 2020 in Montgomery has created the "Healthy Minds Network," which brings together hospitals, law enforcement, social service providers and other groups to find solutions. The group is even looking to create a one stop place to provide services for mental illness.

"A crisis center, a detox to get them re-stabilized," Cunningham said.

"We want to establish this as a coordinated permanent sustainable way to look at care for people who have mental illness, diseases of the brain. This is something that will always be with us and it's not our job to look for a cure but to create this coordinated system of care," said Lynn Beshear, executive director for Envision 2020.

Montgomery is looking at a restoration center that provides psychiatric and substance abuse services created by San Antonio. That city has seen the recidivism rate drop from 56 percent to 6.6 percent. Officials say that's a difference between several thousands of dollars to a couple hundred dollars per day.

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