

Horizon Healthcare Partners Emphasizes Need for New State Mental Health Plan

November 6, 2014 – For Rhode Islanders coping with mental illness, oftentimes health services alone are not a long-term solution. But when those services are placed in a small, community-focused setting, and are supported by coordinated access to housing, employment services and peer support, many individuals are able to live healthier and more fulfilling lives. This coordination of community based care, provided by Rhode Island’s community mental health organizations, are a popular topic of discussion in Rhode Island as a result of a recent public mental health discussion.

On Thursday, November 6, the Providence Journal, in partnership with Rhode Island College and College Leadership Rhode Island, sponsored a Public Occurrences forum, *“Rhode Island’s Mental Health System: Condition Critical?”*

Chris Stephens, President and CEO of Horizon Healthcare Partners, was one of 10 panelists that lead the forum’s discussion around the status of the state’s current mental health system. Following his panel discussion, **news articles** and **online discussions** have continued that highlight many of the important issues presented.

Stephens provided listeners with insight into the history of state’s mental health system. From the 1970s when those with mental illness were institutionalized and Rhode Island had one of the weakest mental health systems, to a full-system re-engineering over the next decade that introduced community mental health organizations and moved R.I. to the forefront, Stephens noted the drastic changes the system has experienced. He discussed the success that community mental health centers found when they began implementing nationally recognized best practices, like supportive housing, supportive employment and peer-assistance programs, to their specific “catchment areas” around the state. Years following, the largest community mental health centers began moving to serve clients statewide and integrate with the larger hospital systems.

Today, as Stephens highlighted, the result of this movement has provided Rhode Islanders with choice over the smaller community-based mental health organizations and larger hospital-centric systems that now exist. Community-based providers, like the Kent Center, Community Care Alliance, Riverwood Mental Health Services and Newport County Community Mental Health Center, work to provide care for some of Rhode Island’s neediest residents, including the uninsured and under-insured. By providing and coordinating care, addressing housing and employment needs and providing peer-support, these organizations address the critical influences that impact the wellbeing of an individual.

Over the last 18 months, advocating for these community mental health services has become increasingly more important. The recent elimination of state support for community mental health services has put an incredible amount of pressure on community-based organizations. Stephen’s noted the importance of maintaining a small number of regional, community-governed and consumer-shaped “safety net” mental health organizations to serve any Rhode

Island resident in need, regardless of their insurance status. It's these very organizations that are relied on every day by state departments, like DCYF and the Department of Corrections, as well as local schools, police departments, non-profits, health centers and hospital emergency departments. Without funds for these community mental health services, including 24/7 emergency services, too many men and women are put at risk.

Stephens expressed hope that moving forward, under new state leadership, we must address the growing need for a new state mental health plan – one that incorporates new models of care, integrated with the services and processes that have proven to be successful.

Without doubt, the needs of Rhode Islanders and the state's communities vary greatly. By recognizing the important and unique roles of the organizations that exist, both in size and in services, we can properly address the different needs of individuals. Rhode Island must work together – with consumers, providers, advocates and state leadership – to diverge from the downward path of the state's mental health system, and ensure that all Rhode Islanders can access and receive the care and support they need.