Severely Mentally Ill and Substance Abusing Populations
Face a Public Health Crisis
by Bob Sharpe

As we observe Mental Illness Awareness Week, Oct. 4 – 11, designated by Congress to promote public education about serious mental illnesses, we can't help but be reminded of the stigma surrounding mental illness and substance abuse and the alarming statistics that have resulted from discrimination against these populations.

Nearly 60 million Americans experience mental health problems each year. Clearly, mental illness does not discriminate and no one is immune.

The severely mentally ill and substance abusing populations face a public health crisis due to the inaccessibility of essential treatment programs and services. This blatant disregard and negligence has led to premature physical illnesses and, ultimately, third-world-like death rates. These individuals die 20 to 25 years prematurely and have an average life span of 50 years – 20 percent shorter than the general population.

Because of behavioral disorders, these populations often adopt lifestyle habits that begin a vicious cycle. Modifiable risk factors such as smoking, drug use, poor nutrition, inactive lifestyle and unsafe sexual behavior lead to physical illnesses. Sadly, about 60 percent of premature deaths among these populations are attributed to preventable causes such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory diseases and infectious diseases.

The shocking statistics speak for themselves:

- 44 percent of all cigarettes consumed in the U.S. are consumed by individuals with mental illnesses.
- Nearly half of the annual deaths from smoking occur among patients with chronic mental illness and/or substance abuse.
- 22 percent of individuals with severe mental illnesses are overweight and 59 percent are obese.
- Death rates for the mentally ill and substance abusing populations compared to the general population are 2.3 times higher for cardiovascular disease; 3 times higher for cancers; 3.2 times higher for respiratory diseases; 2.7 times higher for diabetes; and 3.4 times higher for infectious diseases.

Individuals with mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders have difficulty accessing primary and preventive care and use fewer routine services. As a result, they overuse emergency and specialty care. They are more vulnerable to homelessness, victimization, trauma, unemployment, poverty, incarceration and social isolation.

Untreated mental illnesses affect all aspects of society by increasing the strain on already overburdened emergency rooms, creating turmoil in our work places and classrooms, adding to the workload of law enforcement officers, overcrowding our jails and prisons and severely limiting Florida's ability to help individuals in crisis.

We must embrace an integrated, collaborative approach to physical and behavioral health care. Physical health care is a crucial aspect of effective treatment for the severely mentally ill and

substance abusing populations. Community health systems have a responsibility to ensure access to preventive, primary and specialty care for these individuals.

We must respond to this public health crisis and protect our most vulnerable citizens. Florida already ranks 49th in per capita spending for mental health care, and our state's abysmal performance cannot be ignored any longer. We must improve accessibility to essential programs and services; create tailored, comprehensive prevention and wellness treatment programs; and conduct frequent consumer health assessments in order to meet the needs of the mentally ill and substance abusing populations.

Mental Illness Awareness Week is an opportunity to educate our neighbors, our community leaders and our elected officials about the horrifying inequalities that face individuals with mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders. We cannot continue to treat behavioral disorders and ignore associated physical conditions. We must put a stop to the discrimination and stigma and focus our attention on improving the quality of life of people suffering from mental illnesses and substance abuse.

Bob Sharpe is the CEO and president of the Florida Council for Community Mental Health, based in Tallahassee. He may be contacted at (850) 224-6048 or BobSharpe@fccmh.org.