

 URL: <http://tbo.com/list/news-opinion-letterday/letter-of-the-day-address-mental-health-issues-before-stage-four-20150513/>

Letter of the Day: Address mental health issues before stage four

May is Mental Health Month, and on behalf of our community's children, parents, families and friends, we hope that advocates, leaders and policy makers will take this opportunity to invest in our community's behavioral health. Mental Health America started the May is Mental Health Month campaign (www.mentalhealthamerica.net/may) over 60 years ago to build a national focus on our country's crucial mental health needs. Although progress has been made in creating effective services and supports, there is still a long way to go to meet our current needs.

Addressing mental, emotional and behavioral health before stage four — this year's theme — calls attention to the importance of addressing challenges early, identifying potential underlying causes and planning an appropriate course of action on a path toward overall well-being. When we think about cancer, heart disease or diabetes, we know that the earlier we treat them, the better. Like with cancer, it's better to start treatment before it reaches a more critical level such as stage four. So why is it that we don't do the same thing for individuals who are dealing with potentially serious mental and behavioral health issues?

Approximately one in five young people in the U.S. has a mental, emotional or behavioral disorder. According to the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, a review of three longitudinal studies concluded that close to 40 percent of young people have had at least one mental, emotional or behavioral episode by the time they are 16. Sadly, 75 percent to 80 percent of those in need of mental health services do not receive them.

Mental and behavioral health disorders impose an estimated \$247 billion annual cost to society, without consideration of the emotional cost to youths and their families. A major portion of these costs does not take place in mental health care settings, but instead in education, juvenile justice and physical health care systems. During former Florida state senator and Tampa native Louis de la Parte's tenure in Tallahassee, he had a favorite poster hanging in his office that said, "It costs more to keep a man in prison than to keep a boy in college."

Prevention has the potential for saving our community many resources. The National Research Council notes that cost-benefit ratios for early treatment and prevention programs for addictions and mental illness programs range from 1:2 to 1:10. This means a \$1 investment yields \$2 to \$10 savings in costs for health care, criminal and juvenile justice, education and lost productivity.

By the time our youths finish middle school and enter high school, most mental illnesses will have already developed, affecting their schoolwork and friendships, and shaping the future course of their lives. Investing in effective prevention programs for children will help them to build the skills and resilience they deserve. Fewer will struggle with depression, substance abuse, criminal justice involvement and suicide as they mature.

Our children can't wait — they only have one childhood. Invest in prevention programs that support the social and emotional growth of our children. For information, visit <http://cfs.cbcs.usf.edu/> or <http://home.fmhi.usf.edu/>.

Mario Hernandez, Ph.D

Tampa

The writer is a professor and chair of the Department of Child and Family Studies, College of Behavioral and Community Sciences, at the University of South Florida.