

Advocates warn of ‘broken’ state mental health system

By SARA BURNETT The Associated Press | January 27, 2013 | 11:23PM

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SPRINGFIELD — As lawmakers debate ways to prevent another mass shooting, Illinois mental health advocates say more attention — and money — must be directed to a system they describe as overwhelmed and ill-equipped to identify or care for the mentally ill, including someone intent on carrying out a violent act.

Between 2009 and 2012, Illinois slashed funding for community mental health programs by more than 30 percent — more than all but three other states, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Even before those cuts, Illinois’ per capita spending on mental health was about \$85 — well below the national average of about \$123 per person, the group found.

The funding situation has made it difficult, if not impossible, for people who aren’t in crisis or eligible for Medicaid to enter the system, says Lora Thomas, director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Illinois.

And while there’s no way to predict when a tragedy like the recent shootings in Connecticut and Colorado might occur — or even if the perpetrator will be someone with a mental illness — the lack of resources in Illinois makes it less likely a mental health provider could intervene.

“We absolutely know the system in Illinois is so broken there is no community-based system that could catch or prevent it,” Thomas said.

Dr. Lorrie Jones, director of the state Division of Mental Health, doesn’t consider the system broken. But she said the state’s budget crisis means mental health — like a lot of other programs — is “challenged.”

“We’ve had to make some unfortunate changes,” Jones said.

Gov. Pat Quinn emerged from a recent school safety summit saying the state must “do everything possible” to prevent violence, including looking at mental health in schools and the community. Many of the offenders in mass shootings have had behavioral issues or mental illness.

“We have to, I think, take a look at our resources in Illinois at the local and state level, and redouble our efforts to make sure we have proper mental health for all those who need it,” Quinn said.

Providing those services has been difficult amid Illinois’ severe budget crisis, said Abdon Pallasch, Quinn’s assistant budget director. As lawmakers have failed to resolve the state’s multibillion-dollar unfunded pension liability, less and less money has been available for other programs. That’s made pension reform even more urgent, Pallasch said.

Quinn's administration also has focused on transitioning people with mental illness and disabilities from institutional settings into community care — transfers they say are both better for individuals and less costly. They are looking to components of President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, including a health insurance exchange and expansion of Medicaid eligibility, to expand access to mental health care. But those measures first require action by the Legislature.

Mental health advocates are hopeful Quinn's recent comments are an indication he won't seek further reductions when he proposes his next budget in March. They say they've had to fight in the General Assembly to avert cuts Quinn proposed the past two years.

Lawmakers currently are seeking legislative approval for \$12 million they say was supposed to be appropriated this year but wasn't because of a budgeting error. Without the funds, more than 1,000 people with mental illness will lose housing. Providers — many of which already are waiting months to be paid for their work — will have to rely even more on private fundraising.

State Rep. David Leitch (R-Peoria) is a co-sponsor of the bill seeking additional funds. A mental-health advocate and supporter of gun rights, he's also sponsoring a bill to legalize the concealed carry of weapons in Illinois.

Leitch said he's frustrated that after any tragedy, there's "a big human cry" for more gun control and not as much for better mental and behavioral health care.

"Everybody wants the quick fix, but they don't mention the real cause, and that's mental health," he said. "Until we address these causes and spend money on the community system, we're going to continue to have these problems."

Leitch describes the current system as "sad" and "pathetic." What's needed, he said, isn't just more money but a total overhaul to a less bureaucratic system.

"We need community-based locations where people can address behavioral health," he said. "That sadly does not begin to exist in Illinois."

Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago) has fought for more mental health funding and is pushing for the Medicaid expansion, which she said will help many childless adults get the care they need. She said it's always been a struggle to get more money for mental health care.

Feigenholtz said last year's mass shootings are a reminder that "we need to be cognizant that this could happen anywhere."

"We would be remiss not to connect the dots," she said.