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My View: Eliminate stigmas by having face-to-face conversations

By Kathryn Zenoff

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May is Mental Health Awareness Month. In Illinois and in all corners of our own community, the public sector, private sector, as well as non-profits have been working tirelessly to fend off the negative impacts of untreated mental illness and substance use disorders.

Innovative pilot programs — such as the Rockford Fire Department’s collaboration with Rosecrance’s Mulberry Center, allowing paramedics to transport persons in mental health crises directly to the center instead of a local hospital emergency room — are important steps to address the problem. More is needed from all of us, though.

According to the National Institute for Mental Health, one in five U.S. adults — over 40 million — have a mental health condition. Nearly half of these people have a co-occurring substance use disorder. And of those 40 million, over half do not receive treatment. Young adults (18-25) have the highest prevalence of serious mental illness. Deaths from opioids remain at epidemic levels. The most recent numbers put overdose deaths nationally at over 70,000. In Illinois, we saw over 2,200. In Winnebago County, 159 overdose deaths were reported in 2018, an increase of 28% over the 128 lives lost due to overdoses in 2017.

I know from first-hand experience in our trial and appellate courts that our criminal justice system is no stranger to these alarming statistics. The American Psychiatric Association reports that there are 2 million incarcerations of persons

with mental illnesses annually. Over 17% of adults booked into our jails have a serious mental illness, and 75% of those persons have co-occurring substance use disorders.

Our jails and prisons have become our de facto mental hospitals, yet they are ill-equipped to provide the necessary treatment for these illnesses. Committees, such as the 24-judge Illinois Supreme Court Special Advisory Committee for Justice and Mental Health Planning, which I chair, have been working since 2010 to educate judges and to effectuate evidence-based therapeutic alternatives to traditional criminal case processing for persons with mental illnesses in our justice system.

Stigma and discrimination are strong barriers to treatment for persons with mental illnesses and substance use challenges. The Kennedy Forum works to decrease that stigma. It was instrumental in the passage of SB 1707, our state's new mental health parity law, which became effective on Jan. 1. That law increases access to treatment and assures insurance coverage for mental illnesses and substance use addictions on a par with other illnesses. Thanks to the Forum's efforts, Illinois now has the strongest parity law in the nation.

Each May, the Kennedy Forum in Illinois shines a spotlight on stigma through its On The Table initiative, and encourages people from all walks of life to put mental health and addiction on the table by holding conversations with families, friends, or co-workers on these subjects. This year the initiative will take place on May 14, but any day is the right day to discuss these important subjects. Studies show that the most effective way to eliminate stigma is through face-to-face conversation. One conversation not only can change somebody's mind but can change — and save — somebody's life.

In the past four years, thousands of people have been touched by this initiative, and a majority of participants report that their perspectives changed following their conversations. These conversations are important first steps toward reducing stigma and opening the door to someone being willing to seek medical attention.

Countless celebrities, athletes, and everyday people have shared their stories of triumph over their own mental health challenges, but there is still work to do. We

must continue to change the way people view our own and others' mental health and well-being. We must embrace the simple fact that the brain is part of the body.

I encourage you to join the fight against stigma. Put the important issues of mental health and substance use disorders on the table. Discuss with loved ones, friends and co-workers your personal stories, or those of a family member or acquaintance. You just might save a life.

Go online to <https://thekennedyforumillinois.org/on-the-table-2019/> to learn more about the On The Table initiative and how to host a conversation.

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