

OUR VISION

A future where all persons are treated with dignity and receive the person-centered mental and physical care and support they need to thrive and achieve their goals; with a health system that fully recognizes that the brain is part of the body.

OUR MISSION

End stigma and discrimination against people living with mental health and substance use disorders. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the system.

OUR GOALS

- Elevating and improving the quality of public discourse and mass media coverage of mental health and addiction.
- Ensuring equal access to mental health/substance use treatment.
- Advancing integration of mental health into primary care.
- Leveraging innovation and technology to improve mental health/substance use interventions and integration.
- Prioritizing brain fitness and emotional well-being in schools to empower youth.

“It is not enough to recognize and talk about stigma. People are dying because of it. We must eliminate it once and for all.”

*Former U.S. Congressman and founder of The Kennedy Forum
Patrick J. Kennedy*

WHAT IS PARITY?

The Federal Parity Law requires most insurers to cover treatment for mental health and substance use disorders no more restrictively than treatment for illnesses of the body, such as diabetes and cancer.

WHAT IS STIGMA?

Stigma is a complex social process involving many parts, all of which work together to marginalize and disenfranchise people with mental health and substance use disorders and their family members. Stigma is enacted at three levels: self-stigma, public stigma, and structural stigma.

Self-stigma occurs when people with mental health and addiction challenges accept and agree with negative cultural stereotypes. They feel ashamed, blameworthy, and often try to conceal their illness from others. This may include avoiding situations that could elicit stigmatizing responses. Stigma avoidance is thought to be one of the key reasons why the majority of people who meet the criteria for a mental illness do not seek care.

Public stigma encompasses the prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors expressed toward people with a mental health or substance use disorder by members of the public. Public stigma is based on deeply held prejudices that are, by definition, resistant to change. Cultural attributions that fuel public stigma include the ideas that people with mental health and substance use disorders can never recover; that they are violent and unpredictable; and that they could choose to control their illness.

Structural stigma occurs at the level of institutions, policies, and laws. It creates situations in which people with mental health and substance use disorders are treated inequitably and unfairly; denied basic human rights; or overlooked in policy agendas.

OUR IMPACT

Since our official launch in 2014, The Kennedy Forum Illinois has conducted extensive outreach via public forums, workgroup convenings, community conversations, and partnerships. Through a constituency of more than 3,000 key stakeholders in mental health and addiction, we are able to reach more than 2 million Illinoisans.

Key accomplishments include:

- **Led the effort to pass the strongest state parity law** in the country—a foundational step in ending structural stigma and discrimination against those living with mental health and substance use disorders.
- **Hosted five annual convenings**, successfully engaging over 4,500 people representing advocacy, government, philanthropy, and private sector.
- **Engaged more than 10,000 people in stigma-busting conversations** through On the Table—a program developed in collaboration with Chicago Community Trust.
- **Trained over 2,000 Chicagoans in mental health awareness** or Mental Health First Aid, and how to access community resources and Crisis Intervention Team-trained police.



- **Created the IL Parity Implementation Coalition**, a group of 25+ organizations working together to advance implementation of parity laws.
- **Published an Issue Brief documenting the challenges that mental health and addiction treatment providers face** in securing reimbursement, leading to hearings in the Illinois General Assembly to improve parity compliance.

JOIN US IN THE FIGHT FOR MENTAL HEALTH EQUITY

Now more than ever before, we must speak with one powerful voice. Key priorities of The Kennedy Forum Illinois over the next year include:

- Fighting stigma and discrimination through high-impact communications and community-based initiatives.
- Prioritizing mental health in the workplace through supportive programming and increased access to care.
- Advancing compliance with the Illinois state parity law through education, awareness, and strategic partnerships.

“I never anticipated how much a small organization could do to tear down the walls of stigma and shine a spotlight on mental health. By uniting policymakers, advocates, residents, celebrities, and others, The Kennedy Forum Illinois has made a tremendous impact in communities across the state.”

*Former U.S. Congressman and founder of The Kennedy Forum
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