No Stigma Nevada

A mental health column

By Kim Palchikoff

Dear Governor Sisolak:

I accept the invitation in your inaugural State of the State address for Nevadans to weigh in with their ideas.  I have a vital one: that you establish a mental health task force to focus greater attention on Nevada’s pressing mental health issues, including suicides.

According to the national advocacy group Mental Health America, Nevada ranks last in the nation for having the most residents with a mental illness and the least access to medical help.

That has got to get your attention!

 I’m distressed because you are ignoring, or don’t realize, our state’s suicide epidemic. You promised to love and fight for Nevadans. Health-wise you talked about lowering prescription medication costs and protecting patients with pre-existing conditions, which are important to people with mental health issues. But while you signed executive orders to create a marijuana oversight board and a task force on sexual harassment, there was no attention paid to mental health and suicides.

Former Gov. Brian Sandoval had such a mental health advisory council from 2013-2015, advising on how to fix some very specific aspects of our state’s very complex, broken system. Most notably, it proposed increasing Nevada’s Medicaid daily rate for psychiatric care in general hospitals from $460 to $944. This meant that hospitals were financially motivated to increase their number of psychiatric patients.  I wish that task force had continued even after it accomplished itsshort-term goals, because more issues needed attention.

Nevada’s roughly 200, 000 residents living with a mental illness need you, sir, to follow suit. In 2017 – the last year for which there is data -  77 young Nevadans aged 15-24 killed themselves, according to the Centers for Disease Control. For Nevadans 63 and older, that number was 158. That’s 235 youth and seniors - our state’s most vulnerable populations -  who decided that life was so bad they needed to die.

Nevada’s elder suicide rate is alarmingly the highest in the nation, twice that as most other states. And that doesn’t include those who tried or just thought about committing suicide.

 This hits home.  I am the third generation in my family to live with a severe mental illness. I have bipolar disorder, as did my father. Relatives on both sides of my family have battled severe depression including my grandmother, who suffered behind closed doors for most of her life, back in the day when women with mental illness were told to throw more dinner parties or have more children to deal with it.

For many years, until Obamacare materialized in 2012, I could not get health insurance because my mental illness was deemed a pre-existing condition. I had to pay cash for  my medical care and avoided doctors of any kind, even when I badly needed a simple prescription for antibiotics or x-rays to rule out broken bones.

I was a client of Nevada’s free government mental health clinics, a fact that I kept secret from most everyone because of stigma. But as the saying goes, the only thing free in life is cheese in a mousetrap. Patients were granted a single 30-minute pre-scheduled appointment with a psychiatrist every three months. Because of our state’s shortage of mental health providers, I often waited an entire day before getting treatment as a walk-in patient.

During my darkest hours, I’ve slept on park benches, awakened throughout the night by police. Fortunately, I’ve got a supportive family, but mental illness is always stressful on families and I hate that.  My last memory of my dying step-dad was of him sobbing, worrying that my illness would one day get the best of me and he wouldn’t be there to help.

There are tens of thousands of people like me in our state, many who voted for you despite the stereotype that people with mental illness don’t vote. We are professionals and blue-collar workers, mining engineers and Tesla factory workers, poker dealers and waitresses, mothers, fathers, children and someone’s best friend. Mental illness, like cancer, doesn’t discriminate. Yes, some of us are lost in life but too many of us quietly suffer from our illness and from stigma which often prevents us from seeking help.

I met a Reno man, Mark, who told me how he needed a place to sleep one night and found it in the back seat of an unlocked empty car. He lives with a mental illness. A passing police officer arrested him and took him to jail, where he stayed for four months, instead of to a hospital, where he should have gone for a few weeks.

Then there’s Lynette Vega, a lifelong middle school reading teacher in rural Elko. She told me how one of her three daughters, Rachelle,joined the air force after graduating from Elko High School in 2002. She loved her job and was awarded Airman of the Year in 2006.  But after returning from a tour of duty in Iraq, she struggled with mental health issues and, at 23, took her own, very young, life.

Lynette is one of those Nevadans you as governor should be proud of.  After her daughter died, she took action, establishing the non-profit Zero Suicide Elko County, talking to other parents and to students about the issue, and together with Elko Assemblyman John Ellison,drafted a bill for the upcoming legislative session designed to bring mandatory suicide prevention education to Nevada’s schools. They're not alone. Others in Elko, including the county coroner, a funeral director and a 911 dispatcher, fret chronically about suicides in their community.

In fact, Nevadans up and down the state want to talk about this problem.   The Nevada chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), boasts a quiet and small standing army of more than 500 members and volunteers from Winnemucca to Clark County.  They are begging for public discussion on mental health and suicide prevention.

I guarantee that our state is ready for this conversation, and there are plenty of people who want to join your task force, eager to brainstorm collectively as to how to save Nevadans’ lives. We’ve got everything from educators ready to create suicide prevention curriculum to politicians ready to pass laws for you to sign.

Governor Sisolak, you said in your speech that you were all ears. Please take swift action in by creating a mental health task force to make recommendations about both the short and long term problems Nevada faces.

This is precisely what a governor does for his state.  And thank you for listening.

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