Attention editors: If you want me to localize this story, ie, add some data that reflects your circulation area, I’m happy to make a few phone calls.

832 Words

No Stigma Nevada

By Kim Palchikoff

For all the approaches in treating mental illness, I’m intrigued by how simple one of them is — but that not everyone is willing to offer: kindness.  Not all caregivers are kind, and not everyone in government who deals with programs for the mentally ill is kind — even when they’re paid to be.

And so I wonder:  Can people in government service — starting with our elected politicians — exhibit compassion? In some areas of public service — such as food programs for impoverished children and seniors — government shows compassion. How about when it comes to serving our state’s mentally ill? Judging by how little funding is allocated to mental health programs, you have to wonder.

But consider this: In three places outside Nevada, residents have taken mental health funding matters into their own hands and voted for small sales and property tax~~es~~ increases that generated millions of dollars for mental health programs. I’ve dubbed them “compassion taxes.”

In Denver, Colo. last November, voters overwhelmingly passed the “Caring 4 Denver” ballot measure that created a .25% sales tax (or 25 cents on a $100 purchase) designed to raise $45 million annually to support mental health and addiction treatment centers. In Denver, heroin-related deaths are up nearly 1,000 percent since 2002, a fact not lost on the city’s residents.

 In Washington State, King County adopted 0.1% sales tax that has generated about $134 million over two years for mental health and drug dependency programs.

And in December, mental health advocates in Baton Rouge, LA, persuaded 68% of the voters to pass a property tax that would cost about $15 per $100,000 value of a home to fund a psychiatric crisis center.

A compassion tax would be a great thing for the Silver State, which continues to rank 51stin the nation in the delivery of mental health services. We have the nation’s highest suicide rate among senior citizens, and suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth. I wonder if anyone in our state government is paying attention to this incredibly shocking situation that has existed for decades.

In search of answers,  I asked Frankie Sue Del Papa, Nevada’s former longtime attorney general and one of the most compassionate politicians I’ve met, whether Nevada can have a heart.

  In her 12 years as the state’s chief attorney, Del Papa took on difficult and complex issues such as reducing domestic violence. Thanks to her, Nevada law enforcement was one of the first in the nation to be trained in responding to domestic violence. School counselors now teach students about violence prevention. And she created a domestic violence prevention advisory council that’s still in existence, more than two decades later.

Del Papa reminded me that state dollars spent on mental health competes for money spent on education, public safety and Medicaid, big ticket items in Nevada’s budget. I get it. That’s where a compassion tax would come in hand.

 I wish more Nevada politicians were like Del Papa. As we say in the mental health world, she “gets it.” She really cares about the people who elected her. She’s not the only one. Before he recently retired, former Nevada Supreme Court Justice Michael Douglas spent years quietly making endless phone calls to Nevada attorneys in private practice, asking them to take on pro bono clients. This was not part of his job description as a judge.

I call him once in a while just to hear the gentle, concerned voice of someone who believes in a better Nevada. He understands the mentally ill who wind up incarcerated, the homeless in need of shelter, and  the thousands of low income Nevadans trying to survive on minimum wage. Talking to him  improves my day.

Then-Gov. Brian Sandoval was the first Republican governor to expand Medicaid, coming to the rescue of  nearly 700,000 Nevadans who previously had no health insurance. That was compassionate. His later attempt to cut Nevada’s mental health budget by $20 million in 2017 was far less so. His argument – that Medicaid was now available to Nevadans with mental health issues — was rejected by state legislators who denied his budget-cutting request.

If more politicians were like Del Papa and Justice Douglas maybe our state would move up from 51st in the nation, to at least 50th. That would be a big improvement.

Gov. Steve Sisolak told Nevadans in his January State of the State address that he would not raise taxes. I get it. What newly elected governor  is going to start off their term announcing a tax increase?

But there’s no reason that Nevada’s cities or counties can’t come up with a compassion tax of their own to help fund programs to aid our state’s mentally ill. It would be money well spent.

We’ve got a couple years until our next election cycle. I’d like to think that compassionate Nevadans, including our politicians, would vote for it. It’s a tangible solution for raising badly needed funds for our state’s ailing mental health delivery system.

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