On Saturday, October 12, 2013, over 400 District residents, advocates, providers, and public officials from Washington, DC joined Mayor Vincent C. Gray at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center to take part in a local and national dialogue on mental health. At the event, participants worked together to envision a community action plan focused on addressing mental health needs and combating stigma that prevents people from getting the help they need.

Mayor Gray welcomed meeting participants, noting that mental illness touches our whole community and many of our families. He emphasized the importance of promoting healthy communities and addressing mental health issues and barriers to treatment through honest and open conversation. Developing a community-wide action plan to address mental health, he said, is an important step toward creating the kind of city in which we all want to live.

The discussion had three main objectives:

- Get Americans talking about mental health to break down misperceptions and promote recovery and healthy communities;
- Find innovative community-based solutions to mental health needs, with a focus on helping young people; and
- Develop clear action steps for communities to move forward in a way that complements existing local activities.

Throughout the full-day meeting, participants engaged in facilitated group discussions at their tables and used keypad polling to register their views about a range of mental health issues. The meeting utilized methodology from AmericaSpeaks, a nonprofit, non-partisan organization that engages citizens in the public decision-making that affects their lives.

This summary report provides an overview of the priorities and preferences expressed by community members at the October 12th meeting.
Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation
Participants responded to the following two questions with their polling keypads.

**What is your gender or gender identity?**
- Male: 29%
- Female: 68%
- Transgender man: 0%
- Transgender woman: 1%
- Other: 2%

**What is your sexual orientation?**
- Heterosexual/Straight: 86%
- Gay: 5%
- Lesbian: 3%
- Bisexual: 4%
- Queer: 1%
- Other: 1%

Perspectives on Mental Health

How important to you is the issue of mental health?

- Extremely important: 73%
- Very important: 21%
- Somewhat important: 4%
- Not at all important: 2%

It’s hard to know who needs mental health care.

- Strongly disagree: 15%
- Disagree: 16%
- Somewhat disagree: 14%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 8%
- Somewhat agree: 21%
- Agree: 14%
- Strongly agree: 12%

Society discriminates against people who have mental illness.

- Strongly disagree: 10%
- Disagree: 3%
- Somewhat disagree: 3%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 2%
- Somewhat agree: 16%
- Agree: 24%
- Strongly agree: 43%

People can’t always get the mental health services and treatment they need.

- Strongly disagree: 5%
- Disagree: 3%
- Somewhat disagree: 4%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 2%
- Somewhat agree: 9%
- Agree: 22%
- Strongly agree: 55%

If we don’t treat people with serious mental illnesses they could become a menace to our community.

- Strongly disagree: 7%
- Disagree: 6%
- Somewhat disagree: 4%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 14%
- Somewhat agree: 21%
- Agree: 18%
- Strongly agree: 30%

Why are you participating in this local and national dialogue?

Community members discussed why they participated in the discussion on mental health. The top themes were:

- Listen and learn more about mental health issues & available services
- Myself or someone in my family has experience with mental health issues and we want to share our stories
- I work in the mental health field
- Passionate about helping young people with mental health issues
- Want to combat the stigma associated with mental health
- Earn community service hours
- Encouraged by an adult or came with a group
- Mental health affects every aspect of life — “there is no health without mental health”
- Help create solutions & improve services
**Mental Health in the Community**

Participants discussed why it was important for the community to address mental health issues. These were the top themes:

- “Mental health challenges affect EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE”
- Stigma prevents people from seeking treatment – “mental health problems should not be taboo or secret”
- Lack of understanding & awareness about mental health prevents people from getting help
- If untreated, it can lead to larger issues that begin at an early age: “acting out,” dropping out, substance abuse, jail time, homelessness, etc.
- Not seeking help leads to loss of individual & community potential – “it costs the community when people are not able to function”

**Key Challenges for Mental Health**

Participants discussed which mental health challenges are most important in their communities and why. The top themes included:

- **Stigma**
  - Reluctance to seek mental health assistance
  - The perceived need to “be strong” keeps folks from asking for help
  - Stigma is a social issue that belongs to the community
- **Cultural biases**
  - Cultural norms may prevent individuals from seeking help
  - Celebrities portray mental disorders negatively and this affects how youth feel about mental health
- **Bullying**
  - Causes kids to want to be alone, causes low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts
  - Cyber-bullying is particularly harmful because it is so public
- **Sexual orientation bias**
  - Individuals of different sexual orientations are often outcast from their own families and lack a safety net or support system
- **Low income**
  - Poverty stressors can cause and/or increase already existing mental health symptoms
  - Difficult for low-income people with untreated mental health issues to find & keep employment
- **Homelessness**
  - There is not enough affordable housing, shelter space and services
  - “Homelessness complicates the ability of an individual to have stability and ability to get services consistently”
- **Crime**
  - Too many people with mental health issues are arrested / jailed rather than referred to services for treatment
- **Trauma**
  - Affects a wide range of people and the community at large (i.e. veterans, survivors of domestic violence, those affected by other types of violence, etc.)
  - Has a long-term and potentially lifelong impact
- **Suicide**
  - It is real to someone suffering – we need to increase awareness to give this issue more attention

**Prioritizing Key Challenges**

Community members voted on which challenges are most important in their community. The results were:

- **Stigma** 56%
- **Poverty** 43%
- **Trauma** 30%
- **Cultural Biases** 29%
- **Homelessness** 29%
- **Substance Abuse** 28%
- **Bullying** 23%
- **Crime** 23%
- **Suicide** 10%
- **Sexual Orientation Bias** 9%
Supporting Youth
Participants discussed the best ways to help our youth ages 12-17 and 18-24.

The top themes for the best ways to help our youth aged 12-17 who are living with mental health issues were:
- Educate, youth and adults (parents, school staff, caregivers) to identify signs, symptoms and how to respond – 61%
- Encourage them to talk about their problems- “talk to youth, listen to youth, provide opportunities for them to express themselves” – 41%
- Teach kids about their own mental health in a variety of places where youth already are - schools, rec centers, etc. – 41%
- Provide services & support sooner - “Start early, 12-17 years is too late” – 40%
- Conduct outreach to youth to connect them with programs – a caring adult, peer mentors, peer groups – 33%
- Help overcome stigma – bring it out of the darkness for adults so they can support their kids, and kids to seek help – 33%
- Provide services in different ways – social media, pop culture, etc. – 31%

The top themes for the best ways to help our youth aged 18-24 who are living with mental health issues were:
- Encourage economic independence through job training, vocational skills, financial education, preparation for higher education, etc. – 59%
- Make more peer support and mentoring programs available – 44%
- Make it easier to apply for and access affordable health insurance – 35%
- Teach responsible behavior - sex education, parenting skills – 27%
- Provide housing support - 24%

Meeting participants also discussed additional challenges that should be considered. The most prominent themes were:
- Lack of funding and access to services in neighborhoods
- Difficulty in getting the “full” community educated and involved in mental health
- Age bias against older members of the community
- Lack of self-esteem

Community Action
Community members discussed what advice they had for the action planning team. The themes were:
- Put more youth on the Action Planning Team “follow the youth voice”
- Create community education programs targeted to different age groups and parents
- “Build in on-going evaluation and assessment” of mental health services
- Give youth choices rather then telling them what to do.
- Be transparent about the plan - get information out to the community, youth and families quickly
  – Utilize internet – websites, blogs, apps to disseminate information and conduct outreach

Participants were then asked how to measure the success of this plan. The top themes were:
- By how often the services are used
- Change in behavior before & after treatment
- Participation of youth, advocates, and grassroots organizations
- Regular sharing of results of the plan with the community
- Real long-term changes for the community lower rates of: crime, suicide, homelessness, dropouts
- Increased media attention

Substance abuse
- Too many people are self-medicating with the use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Directly connected to an increase in crime, mental health challenges, homelessness and other social problems

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THANK YOU TO THE FUNDING PARTNERS FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT

Foundation for Excellence in Mental Health Care
Providence Service Corporation
Centene Charitable Foundation
Children’s National Medical Center
Carolyn J Koesten
Pat Stern & Scott Satterwhite
Virgil & Elisabeth Stucker
Donald R. & Lisbeth Riis Cooper

All meeting materials, including the presentations, participant packages, and reports will be posted on the Creating Community Solutions website:

www.creatingcommunitysolutions.org