

The following guest commentary appeared in the Pantagraph on February 18, 2018:

## Mental illness being addressed in McLean County

Tom Barr

A recent Pantagraph editorial about expanding services for those who have a mental illness and become incarcerated is just one of many articles the newspaper has published to make our citizenry better informed about mental health issues, and the efforts made to address them.

I appreciate this opportunity to summarize that coverage, informing Pantagraph readers of the organizations and individuals working diligently to address the needs of the 1 in 20 McLean County citizens living and coping with severe mental illness.

At a time when partisanship dominates the headlines, this is a story of collaboration, concern and community cooperation. The challenges faced by people with mental illness in McLean County are being assessed and addressed by people united by a shared concern, including mental health professionals, government, law enforcement and other first responders, educators, health care providers, the courts, families of those struggling with mental illness, and others.

The current collaborative effort was launched in 2015, when the McLean County Board published a mental health action plan that reported on multiple areas of need, and identified action steps to improve behavioral health services for McLean County residents.

Under the leadership of McLean County Board Chairman John McIntyre and other leaders, the plan has focused on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. The McLean County Jail expansion is just one of the positive results of that work. Others include:

- Through a joint agreement by the City of Bloomington and the Town of Normal, revenue from sales tax has been designated to help fund critical mental health needs.
- A Behavioral Health Coordinating Council of both public and private community leaders is exploring needs and strategies.
- Specialty courts exist to decrease or prevent unnecessary incarceration of those needing mental health and substance use treatment.
- Crisis services have been expanded and alternatives to unnecessary hospitalization have been developed.
- Training first responders how to respond to those with mental illness.
- Mental Health First Aid training is helping the public recognize and assist friends and family who may need help.
- At a recent chairman's roundtable, McIntyre convened a committee to explore and expand housing opportunities for those in need.

Community-based services are vital, not only for those facing mental health challenges, but for the overall health of the community. For most seeking help, community treatment is the most clinically appropriate and cost effective of available alternatives. The Center for Human Services continues to provide treatment for the most vulnerable of our citizens and collaborates with other stakeholders to expand care to those in need.

There is still much to do and there are no easy answers. Greater access to psychiatric care and community-based services will help current initiatives succeed, decreasing unnecessary hospitalization or incarceration and ensuring that the people who need help actually have access to it.

Today, McLean County citizens with mental illnesses are living better lives —not just because of the plans in place, but also because caring people are serving those with the greatest needs and the fewest resources.

Tom Barr is executive director of the McLean County Center for Human Services.