

Michigan should not neglect mentally ill

Mental illness has been in the news lately, with negative connotations.

Anthony LaCalamita, accused of an office shooting in Troy, was reported to have a major mental illness.

We've been repeatedly informed that the gunman in the Virginia Tech massacre had a mental health history.

Three Michigan newspaper headlines since mid-April have read: "Accused killer called insane," "Mental patient charged with murder in beating" and "Stabbing suspect treated for mental illness."

What in heaven's name is transpiring, and what is the public to make of it? The following observations may be helpful:

Mental illness is highly prevalent in America. At any time, it affects one in five people, with about 7 percent of the population displaying symptoms of severe conditions.

National studies have shown that 33 percent to 50 percent of adults experience one or more mental disorders in their lifetime. In any list we concoct — charity activists, pet owners, jaywalkers and felons — people with mental illness will be included.

The onset of a major mental illness means someone's brain chemistry has been physically altered. It's not a matter of having less willpower, discipline or toughness than others.

Studies have reinforced that the overwhelming majority of people with mental illness (including me) pose no threat to anyone. If an individual is in psychiatric crisis, or among the small proportion with a chronically uncontrolled serious condition, there is increased risk of someone being harmed. That harm is more likely to fall on the individual with mental illness than another person.

Across the nation, there aren't enough resources accorded public mental health programs to meet service demands. In Michigan, the situation is exacerbated because we're one of only eight states not requiring private insurers to cover mental illness in a manner equal to other medical coverage.

You get what you pay for, and we've traded hospitalization for justice system incarceration as the repository for some of our most troubled citizens. Such incarceration often

involves minor offenses, as was the case when Timothy Souders first entered the justice system. Souders died last year in a Michigan prison under brutal circumstances.

For many with mental illness, psychotropic medication advances have been a godsend in recovery. Yet, some policy-makers continually explore ways to limit access to those medications under the naive assumption that less mental health drug spending translates into societal savings.

In 2004, Gov. Jennifer Granholm, citing a "broken" mental health system, appointed a Mental Health Commission. It gave her 71 recommendations, some of which could help in preventing future tragedies. The governor's administration has shown little enthusiasm for those recommendations, and mental health interests have had to seek meaningful follow-up from the Legislature.

To paraphrase the famous "Pogo" comic strip line, "We have met persons with mental illness, and they are us." We're talking about ourselves — our families, friends, neighbors and co-workers. I pray we can all keep that in mind.

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GUEST OPINION



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