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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Where Have All the Patients Gone?
Examining the Psychiatric Bed Shortage”
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
March 26, 2014

Mr. Chairman, today’s hearing addresses an important issue affecting treatment and outcomes for patients with mental illnesses.

We’ll hear today that budget cuts and other factors have resulted in a lack of inpatient beds for intensive psychiatric treatment, meaning that patients with serious mental illness who show up to the emergency room at crisis points are forced to wait far too long - for days at a time - for an inpatient psychiatric bed.

This is a growing problem, but it is not a new one. A decade ago, as ranking member of the Oversight Committee, I released a report finding that all too often, jails and juvenile detention facilities have had to provide care for individuals with mental illnesses.

This report found that due to lack of available treatment, youth with serious mental disorders were placed in detention without any criminal charges pending against them.

In other cases, youth who had been charged with crimes but who had served their time or were otherwise able to be released remained incarcerated for extended periods because no inpatient bed, residential placement, or outpatient appointment was available.

That investigation found that two-thirds of juvenile detention facilities were holding youth waiting for mental health treatment, and that in one six-month period, nearly 15,000 incarcerated youth were waiting for mental health services.

Mr. Chairman, I share your desire to end these practices.

That’s why I supported the Affordable Care Act, which provides health insurance coverage – including coverage for mental illnesses – to millions of Americans. And that’s why I’ve opposed Republicans efforts to repeal this law and take this coverage away.

It's also why I hope that this hearing does not ignore the elephant in the room: the impact on millions of Americans with mental illnesses of the failure by 24 states to expand their Medicaid programs under the Affordable Care Act.

Last month the American Mental Health Counselors Association released a new study, titled, "Dashed Hopes, Broken Promises, More Despair." I'd like to ask that this report be made part of the hearing record. Dr. Edgerson is here today to testify on behalf of the organization, and I appreciate him joining us.

The report found that the failure by states to expand their Medicaid programs is causing nearly four million people who are in serious psychological distress or have a serious mental illness or substance disorder to go without health insurance.

That's four million Americans in need who are left without coverage, largely because of Republican governors' ideological obsession with rejecting everything associated with the Affordable Care Act.

Mr. Chairman, this includes over 200,000 people with mental illnesses in your home state of Pennsylvania.

The report described the impact of this lack of coverage, finding that:

"The lack of health insurance coverage keeps people with mental illness from obtaining needed services and treatments—and follow-up care—with the goal of achieving long-term recovery and quality of life."

This is a tragedy and a shame. If these four million Americans obtained coverage, they would receive better ongoing treatment and care, and they would be less likely to end up in a hospital emergency room – or worse, a prison – with a mental health crisis.

Mr. Chairman, I know you want to help individuals with mental illnesses. We've both introduced mental health legislation, and I hope that as we move forward, we can find common ground with these bills.

But the biggest and easiest step we can take to improve care for those with serious mental illnesses is to make sure they have health insurance.

The Medicaid expansion is a good deal for the states, and it is desperately needed by millions of Americans. This Committee should be working together to make sure that regardless of where they live, Americans in all 50 states can obtain this coverage.