

IOWA VIEW

Stop underfunding of mental health

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Jewish scripture tells the story of the people of Israel standing on the edge of the promised land. Before they enter and create a new nation, Moses gives them one final challenge: “I have set before you life and death. ... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19, NRSV).

Today, Iowa faces a choice. We can continue to underfund mental health care services, which for too many Iowans will mean death. Or we can have the courage to fix a broken system and give life.

Since 1996, our Legislature has frozen the amount of funds that can be raised through the mental health and disabilities tax levy, even as population grows, demand increases, and costs climb. People have died because of this decision.

In 2015, the member institutions of AMOS, a non-partisan, multi-faith organization in central Iowa, began a listening campaign. In congregations and neighborhoods throughout central Iowa, families have shared with us stories of loved ones unable to receive necessary mental health treatment and care because of long wait times for appointments and insufficient resources. This pain has touched us all.

As pastors, we see this pain firsthand and we are tired of the situation that causes our people’s suffering. Too often we’ve visited our church members in jail when they should be in the hospital. Too often we’ve watched those we care about develop addictions to cover the pain of untreated mental illnesses. Too often we’ve seen church members turned away because there are not enough of the right kinds of mental health beds. Too often we’ve seen veterans, who’ve already given so much, suffer quietly without care. Too often we’ve presided over funerals for men and women, young and old, who have taken their own lives.

Tax-policy issues in our state can be complex, but the fundamental choice here is not. Unfreezing the levy for mental health services will save lives. It’s that simple!

Senate study Bill 1187 is a step in the right direction, but it needs some work. The bill would allow counties in a state mental health region to share their levying authority, and allows for population increases and a modest growth rate over time. Yet it overcomplicates the issue by continuing to freeze total dollars collected in the state at the 1996 levels.

This does little for Polk County, which is a region unto itself and has some of the greatest needs. The current proposal suggests taking money from Broadlawns Hospital to help offset Polk County’s deficit, but this solves one problem by creating another. A more sensible option would

be to increase the base year funding to match 2016 levels. The best solution, however, is the simplest: restore local control so that counties that need to are able to properly adjust their own levy rate within reasonable limits.



The challenge is set before us: We can do nothing for fear of higher taxes while Iowans continue to suffer, or we can choose life. We implore our legislators to amend SSB 1187 to lift the mental health funding cap, and pass legislation so that our families and our neighbors who are impacted by mental illness may live and thrive in our state.

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