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Health experts push depression network

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In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared war on cancer, setting aside \$1.5 billion for research and designating 15 centers around the country to lead the charge against the deadly disease.

Now Steven Strakowski and other mental health experts across the nation are asking Congress to take the same stand against depression and other mood disorders that affect millions.

"Depression, bipolar disorder and other mood disorders are more common than most cancers combined," said Strakowski, chairman of the department of psychiatry at the University of Cincinnati and director of the brain imaging center at the Lindner Center of HOPE in Mason.

"They get little attention nationally. They're under-treated. They're stigmatized. And from a strictly economic standpoint, they cost us a lot of money."

Depression's economic impact is at least \$81 billion annually in medical costs and lost productivity.

Strakowski and his colleagues at UC and 15 other institutions around the United States are urging lawmakers to support legislation that would create federally supported "centers of excellence" specializing in treating depression and other mood disorders.

In addition to research to learn more about why mood disorders occur and to find better treatments, the centers could educate medical professionals, especially primary care physicians, on how to better recognize and treat mood disorders, Strakowski said.

He also hopes the federal recognition would give mental health providers enough clout to increase reimbursement by health insurers and improve coverage of mental health treatments.

Most insurance plans now cover mental health treatments at lower rates than other "physical" health treatments, and many limit the number of therapy visits for which they'll pay.

The ENHANCED Act, sponsored by U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), would authorize Congress to appropriate \$1.25 billion over 10 years to fund up to 30 centers of excellence that will conduct research to find more effective treatments for the disorders. The bill requires participating research institutions to contribute \$1 for every \$5 of federal money.

The \$1.25 billion investment by the federal government would result in estimated annual savings of \$250 million a year, according to a white paper from the University of Michigan, including \$102 million annually in health-care costs and increased contributions to the economy of \$148 million.

Ohio senators George Voinovich and Sherrod Brown are among the bill's co-sponsors.

A parallel bill has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-Rhode Island.

In the decades since Nixon's declaration, billions of dollars have been allocated for research, leading to dozens of new treatments and a dramatic drop in cancer deaths in the U.S. and around the world.

The action made the National Cancer Institute, founded in 1937, into one of the world's leading

medical research entities, and created a network of specialized cancer treatment centers.

There's no reason the same transformation can't occur with depression and other mood disorders, say Strakowski and other experts affiliated with the National Network of Depression Centers.

The network, established in 2008, is made up of 16 centers that offer specialized treatment and research in mood disorders.
