



THE PLAIN DEALER

Five fixes

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Taxpayers spend more than \$100 billion a year on jails, homeless shelters and other services for Americans who are mentally ill and can't get treatment. David Shern, president of Mental Health America, argues that five changes could turn the system around and, in the end, save money and lives.

1.

Develop universal prevention programs for elementary students that are as routine as childhood vaccinations.

Programs that teach basic coping skills decrease violence and alcohol and drug use and help kids get through life.

2.

Screen schoolchildren's mental health - and follow up with treatment - just as we test eyesight and hearing.

Early treatment, before mental illness becomes severe, could save millions of dollars and a lot of heartache.

3.

Expand health insurance plans to cover mental illness.

Lack of coverage is one big reason many people don't seek treatment or wait for a disaster before they do.

4.

Debunk the mental illness myth.

Depression, schizophrenia and other mental disorders aren't character flaws or the result of lousy upbringing. It's time to treat psychiatric disorders like cancer and diabetes. They're all caused by the body malfunctioning.

5.

Make sure patients get medication and treatment that has been proven to work

- not what happens to be available or what insurance will cover.

The impact?

"We would start to drive up rates of productivity, we would start to drive down the costs of health care in general, and I think we would just have a healthier environment in which to live," Shern says.

"What we need to do is garner the will to say 'Enough is enough.' "

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