

SAMHSA Celebrates 20th Anniversary
By Pamela S. Hyde, J.D., Administrator
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

The 20th anniversary of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) founding provides an opportunity to reflect on two decades of progress as well as to chart a future path for SAMHSA and the field. While both looking back and moving forward, SAMHSA will continue to pursue its mission to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities by addressing issues such as suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, trauma, and mental illness, and by helping communities build emotional health for everyone.

Building on a platform of **20 years** of progress and accomplishments, SAMHSA is moving ahead with **10 facts** in mind.

- 1) Behavioral health is a public health issue, not a social issue.
- 2) Behavioral health problems lead to premature death and disability.
- 3) Behavioral health problems impose steep human and economic costs.
- 4) Behavioral health impacts physical health.
- 5) Government policies often inappropriately treat behavioral health as optional or extra.
- 6) Many mental and substance abuse conditions can be prevented.
- 7) Early intervention can reduce the impact of behavioral health problems.
- 8) Treatment works, but is inaccessible for many.
- 9) Behavioral health is community health.
- 10) Behavioral health affects everyone.

Nearly half of Americans will meet the criteria for a mental illness at some point in their lives, and more than half of Americans know someone in recovery from a substance use problem. Even with so many of us at risk or already touched by behavioral health problems, understanding that behavioral health is essential to overall health eludes many Americans. Too often, compassion, respect, and urgency sit idly by.

SAMHSA's resources help states, local governments, and individual communities better serve the young child with a severe emotional disorder; the addicted teen who started drinking and experimenting with drugs; and the college student who has made a plan to end her life by suicide this weekend. At the same time, SAMHSA is working to help the young mother who is using methamphetamines; the combat veteran struggling with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder; and the 42-year-old father of three and little league coach with bi-polar disorder.

People are at the center of SAMHSA's mission. Whether they are a trauma or suicide survivor, a person in recovery from or at risk of a mental health problem or addictive disorder, a behavioral health provider, a clinician or physician, a researcher, a student or academic, an agency lead, an advocate, or just interested, SAMHSA will continue to provide them all with a voice, along with guidance and support.

The past 20 years have witnessed dramatic developments and pivotal changes in behavioral healthcare. From 1992 to 2012, there has been remarkable growth in the research and understanding of behavioral health disorders and treatment needs. In 1992, the year the federal government created SAMHSA, community-based services that were peer and consumer driven were almost non-existent. Although the concept of self-help had emerged nearly six decades prior, the self-help movement was a new and growing concept. Stakeholders, consumers, and families struggled to define the needs of the behavioral health field and of consumers and families while the integration of services between mental health and substance abuse and behavioral health and primary health were fledgling concepts.

To meet the needs of the people it serves and guide decision-making through 2014, SAMHSA has identified eight Strategic Initiatives to focus its limited resources on areas of urgency and opportunity. Each Initiative has an overarching purpose, specific goals, action steps, and measures for determining success. In addition, three issues cut across all of the Initiatives: behavioral health disparities, health reform, and workforce development. The eight initiatives detailed in ***Leading Change: A Plan for SAMHSA's Roles and Actions 2011-2014*** are: 1) Prevention of Substance Abuse and Mental Illness, 2) Trauma and Justice, 3) Military Families, 4) Recovery Support, 5) Health Reform, 6) Health Information Technology, 7) Data, Outcomes, and Quality, and 8) Public Awareness and Support.

The Initiatives are data driven and grounded in a public health foundation. They map out a response to the toll substance abuse, poor emotional health, and mental illnesses continue to take on American lives. Just as was the case 20 years ago, behavioral health disorders impose heavy costs, and too often are left untreated, are not addressed by prevention efforts, or are poorly managed.

By learning to recognize the signs and symptoms of behavioral health problems, friends and family members can provide the much needed support and encouragement for their loved ones to seek help. Health professionals can also better engage the people they serve to identify problems early and help guide a path toward recovery. With these goals in mind, SAMHSA seeks to change attitudes, promote acceptance, and build hope.

Triumphs such as The Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act and the Affordable Care Act are reducing costs and diminishing insurance barriers while enhancing access to behavioral health prevention and treatment services. Today, excellent examples of prevention, treatment and recovery support services span the nation and together we are working to bring them to scale with systemic replication across the country. To that end, SAMHSA applies its *Theory of Change* process to its everyday work underscoring the recognition and full understanding of the need for a new approach. Through the *Theory of Change* approach, SAMHSA identifies emerging issues; fosters innovative solutions to real life problems; demonstrates and disseminates new research and promising practices; and moves evidence-based practices and policies into the nation's core behavioral health system through targeted investments.

The behavioral health field has made significant strides forward, but still has ground to cover. SAMHSA, as well as states, localities and providers must do more with available resources. This will require new approaches to improving care and support while maintaining fiscal responsibility. SAMHSA has many roles, including being the nation's voice on behavioral health issues; data and surveillance; practice improvement; public education; standard setting and regulation of critical prevention and treatment activities and services; and of course, funding key projects and providing technical assistance to move the field forward.

Both policy and funding decisions are being made in a changing environment where the behavioral health landscape continues to be redefined at an accelerated pace. Changes are occurring in health care financing with states playing an increasing role in policy and funding decisions. Simultaneously, America's health care system is experiencing rapid adoption of health information technology, scientific advances in prevention and treatment services, and a growing understanding of recovery along with the importance of personal responsibility and self-direction in the prevention and treatment of health and behavioral health conditions. We are clearly in an era of change—with every presenting challenge, an opportunity emerges.

While celebrating the progress to date, SAMHSA and the behavioral health field must confront the reality that over 60 percent of people who experience mental health problems and 90 percent who need substance abuse treatment do not receive care, often because they did not have insurance or cannot afford the cost of care. Nearly twice as many people in the United State die by suicide compared with homicide. Behavioral health conditions lead to more deaths than HIV, traffic accidents, and breast cancer. Therefore, while the successes of the last 20 years are noteworthy, they can easily shadow today's challenges. Unfortunately, time is not on our side. By 2020, behavioral health conditions will surpass all physical diseases as a major cause of disability worldwide and the demands on our health system continue to grow.

While the future remains undefined and the history of the next 20 years unwritten, one thing is certain—the behavioral health field can accomplish much more with commonality of purpose. Together, whether public sector or private; mental health or substance abuse provider (or both); behavioral health or primary care, mental health consumers or people in recovery from addiction, families or advocates, the field must continue to create a more common message, a common path forward and a more responsive system of care. Central to this success will be the widely adopted understanding that behavioral health is essential to health; prevention works; treatment is effective; and people recover.

SAMHSA must push ahead toward better prevention, increased access to care and recovery supports, and fully integrated systems that are constantly improving quality. The personal and social supports that sustain people with behavioral health problems in the very communities they call “home” are vital parts of a functioning society. As JFK once said, “Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies.” SAMHSA looks forward to continuing work with some of the most talented, creative, bright, and ambitious *neighbors, friends, partners, and allies* in the pursuit of better health for all of America's citizens.