



TREATMENT
ADVOCACY
CENTER

STATEMENT

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We Deserve Better: NIMH Denies Hope to Those Most in Need

When the Treatment Advocacy Center (TAC) discovered that nearly three-quarters of NIMH research grants had nothing to do with severe mental illnesses, TAC was compelled to join with Public Citizen to expose this humanitarian and fiscal debacle by releasing *A Federal Failure in Psychiatric Research: Continuing NIMH Negligence in Funding Significant Research on Serious Mental Illnesses*. It is nothing less that a national tragedy to misallocate public research dollars that should be used to offer hope of better treatment and possibly a cure for severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (manic depression).

The costs of not focusing research dollars on the most severe mental illnesses are astronomical. Total federal spending on treating and supporting people with mental illnesses is now estimated to be \$45 billion, and rapidly growing, as it is the federal government that shoulders the lion's share of the costs through Medicaid, Medicare, Supplemental Security Income, and Social Security Disability Income. As noted in a report recently released by the President's Commission on Mental Health, "Medicaid is now the largest payer of mental health services in the country."

Although it is clear that the effect of these severe brain diseases are a tremendous financial drain on the nation's already struggling budget, NIMH continues to devote only 28.5 percent of its budget to researching severe mental illnesses. As a family member and taxpayer, I am outraged that NIMH funding is so grossly misused.

The humanitarian costs of these illnesses are shocking. At least 130,000 people with severe mental illnesses are homeless and living on the nation's streets. At any given time, there are more people with untreated severe psychiatric illnesses living on America's streets than are receiving care in hospitals. A quarter of them regularly eat from garbage cans. They are victimized more often than those who are homeless and do not have a brain disease, and are significantly more likely to have been robbed, beaten, threatened with a weapon, or injured. The risk of rape is so high among homeless women with severe mental illnesses that the authors of one study found that "rape and physical battery are normative experiences."

Faced with this disgrace, NIMH chose to fund research on "Preschool Children's Understanding of Love" instead of a study of support for individuals recently released from the psychiatric hospital that might reduce the risk of re-hospitalization.

Suicide is the number one cause of premature death among people with schizophrenia, with an estimated 10 percent to 13 percent killing themselves, and it is even more pervasive in people with bipolar disorder, as 15 percent to 17 percent (about one out of seven) take their own lives. The rate in the general population is

approximately 1 percent. Yet for six years, NIMH has been funding a study of families coping with change in the Czech Republic.

Just as horrible are the statistics on those with severe mental illnesses who end up incarcerated in our nation's jails and prisons. The Los Angeles County jail is now the largest psychiatric facility in the United States today, and studies indicate that there are approximately 120,000 seriously mentally ill individuals in the nation's jails and prisons. Yet NIMH awarded \$350,000 to researchers studying courtship behavior among *Drosophila* fruit flies.

Through the experiences of my two siblings who have schizophrenia and the thousands of families who have contacted TAC in desperation, I have witnessed the devastating consequences of severe mental illnesses. As a family member and advocate I am all too aware of the limitations in our current understanding of and ability to provide timely and effective treatment of these illnesses. Our hope for the future lies in the research. NIMH cannot be allowed to continue squandering the resources that can make our hopes a reality.

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The Treatment Advocacy Center (www.psychlaws.org) is a national nonprofit dedicated to eliminating barriers to timely and humane treatment for millions of Americans with severe mental illnesses. TAC is working on the national, state, and local levels to educate civic, legal, criminal justice, and legislative communities on the benefits of assisted treatment in an effort to decrease homelessness, jailings, suicide, violence and other devastating consequences caused by lack of treatment.