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Living & Entertainment>Living>Health

Buchanan pushes fed mental health overhaul

BY RICHARD DYMOND rdymond@bradenton.com

SARASOTA -- Beginning in the late 1950s, America's state mental hospitals closed as taxpayers embraced the idea new drug treatments and safe houses to mainstream the ill had made them obsolete.

But as Reps. Vern Buchanan, R-Fla., and Tim Murphy, R-Pa., told a crowd of 150 at a Sarasota Town Hall meeting Tuesday, those decisions proved disastrous.

"I don't know if he is alive or dead," Carol Rosenbaum of Sarasota said of her mentally ill 39-year-old son, Mark, who is now in Sarasota's Bayside Center for Behavioral Health but is often homeless on the streets of Sarasota, unable to handle normal life situations and routines.

"I fantasize about being able to just scoop him up and put him in a place with 10 or 20 acres and a big fence," Rosenbaum said.

Rosenbaum cried as she told Murphy and Buchanan her bipolar son began exhibiting symptoms at age 19. People on the street steal his phone and bike, she said. It's hard to know where he belongs because he is not easy to handle.

"He is exploited," she said.

The hardest thing for her, she said, is her son sometimes won't let her participate in his mental health care and she has no choice but to comply.

Because of court rulings, patients are often not required to take their medications in safe houses and families are not always able to intervene on their behalf or even allowed information, Murphy said.

As a result, America's jails and homeless shelters, including those of Sarasota and Bradenton, have become home to many mentally ill patients, Murphy added.

"I think mental health is now a national crisis," Murphy told Rosenbaum, mentioning the 600,000 inpatient psychiatric beds for the mentally ill 70 years ago in state mental hospitals have dwindled to 40,000 today.

Murphy and Buchanan said they came to the Sainer Pavilion on the campus of New College to propose a new idea.

He and Buchanan are sponsoring, "The Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act," also known as House Resolution 3717, which the pair say is an overhaul of mental health care in America. Buchanan said the bill is not expected to carry any additional costs because it simply reorganizes how \$125 billion in federal mental health dollars are already being spent.

The pair said the bill will fix the shortage of inpatient beds for the most critical patients.

The bill would also provide "tele-psychiatry" to link primary care doctors with psychiatrists in rural areas and increase the number of psychiatrists who treat children, which now stands at one psychiatrist for every 7,000 children, Murphy said.

The bill also supports court-ordered assisted outpatient treatment, which would force states to follow up on mentally ill patients and not just forget them, a practice Murphy referred to as "dumping."

Mary Ruiz, president and chief executive officer of Manatee Glens, Manatee County's behavioral health hospital, said she supports the proposed bill.

"We are encouraged by so many key provisions in HR 3717, which we urge you to protect as the bill moves through the congressional approval process," Ruiz said. "These issues touch almost every extended family in America."

Manatee Glens serves one out of every 30 Manatee County families, Ruiz said, which shows how invasive mental illness is.

Ann Jerman, a Bradenton resident and a member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Manatee and Sarasota, attended a stakeholders meeting prior to the Town Hall and said it was eye-opening.

"On one side of the table sat 10 members of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Manatee and Sarasota Counties representing adult mentally ill family members, and on the other side of the table you saw 10 uniformed police officers from Manatee and Sarasota counties," Jerman said.

"So, the stakeholders are the family members and the police officers. This picture tells you that the adult mentally ill are being cared for by families or they are in jail. The police are being asked to serve a population that they are not trained to handle. The jails have become huge state psychiatric hospitals."