

Economic Sense - Senator John Braun

Fulfilling a Moral Obligation (SB 5537):

A Bipartisan Proposal to Dramatically Increase Community Mental Health Capacity

Bottom line up front:

People suffering from the devastation of mental illness need and deserve humane care and treatment, but in Washington, that's not happening.

In fact, Washington ranks in the bottom of the country in community mental health capacity, resulting in persons suffering from mental illness too often being inappropriately housed in jails, hospital emergency rooms, or going untreated.

Put simply, as a state we are failing our most vulnerable residents. We have a moral imperative to end this crisis of care.

Senate Bill 5537 proposes a bond authorization of \$500 million to expand community mental health facility capacity throughout the state.

This measure would be referred to voters in November, providing an unprecedented investment to ensure quality care for people with mental illness.

A. Moral Failing: Bottom of Nation in Community Mental Health Capacity

In 2015, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy found that "Washington State ranked near the bottom of all states in per capita availability of psychiatric beds."¹

The report found that we ranked 49th in the country in psychiatric beds in community hospitals, with 8.3 per 100,000 residents. This was one-third of the national average. Our nearby neighbor, Montana had 32 beds per 100,000.

Expanding the bed analysis to include non-community hospital bed options, such as evaluation and treatment centers, the report found we ranked 46th in the country, at 9.1 beds per 100,000.

The same report also indicated that in addition to the low national rankings on facility availability, Washington ranked in the top three states for adults with mental illness and serious mental illness.

B. Community-Based Solutions: A Half a Billion Investment to Improve Capacity & Outcomes

SB 5537 authorizes a \$500 million bond measure to expand community mental health facilities throughout the state. Per Art. 8, Sec. 3 of the state constitution, the measure would be referred to voters and the debt would be outside the debt limit, providing a dedicated funding source for community mental health facilities while not adversely impacting other competing capital needs.²

This model was pioneered by Governor Dan Evans during his tenure when voters were repeatedly asked to make vital and long-lasting infrastructure improvements to our state.³ The benefits of those measures are still with us today.

The legislation would authorize "Washington Behavioral Health Bonds" with proceeds put into a dedicated account. Expenditures would be to expand community mental health facilities throughout the state including evaluation & treatment centers; crisis triage & stabilization centers; detoxification centers; community hospital psychiatric beds; and residential treatment centers.

The intent section provides, in part:

"The legislature finds there is a growing need for high quality community behavioral health services . . . The legislature intends to address the needs of people with mental disorders through a comprehensive set of evidence-based practices that are effective in serving individuals in their community and will reduce the need for placements in and facilitate timely

discharge from state mental hospitals. The legislature further finds that local facilities and services that keep Washington residents closer to their families and communities improve outcomes.”⁴

Meeting the known need -- addressing and treating mental illness before it reaches crisis -- and improving outcomes are the goals of SB 5537. That is why the measure has 15 bipartisan co-sponsors representing diverse parts of the state and includes Senate Republican and Democrat leaders on the capital budget, overall fiscal issues, mental health treatment and social services.

C. Greatly Surpasses Recent Investments

To put in context, the \$500 million is 10 times what the Legislature invested in community mental health capacity over the last four years.⁵ A historic and unprecedented investment is needed to address the severe shortfall of treatment beds and facilities.

Future Legislatures would have these proceeds available to make key investments around the state to ensure that people receive appropriate care and timely treatment. This would be a several-biennia funding stream and commitment to raise Washington up from its abysmal present ranking to a state that can provide world-class care for the most vulnerable among us.

FOOTNOTES

1. WSIPP, Inpatient Psychiatric Capacity and Utilization in Washington State, January 2015.
http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1585/Wsipp_Inpatient-Psychiatric-Capacity-and-Utilization-in-Washington-State_Report.pdf
2. Washington State Constitution, Article 8, Section 3, Special Indebtedness:
<http://leg.wa.gov/LawsAndAgencyRules/pages/constitution.aspx>
3. Washington Secretary of State, History of Referendum Bills, Referenda 26-31.
https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/initiatives/statistics_referendumbills.aspx and HistoryLink, Gov. Daniel J. Evans: <http://www.historylink.org/File/7167>
4. SB 5537, 2019, Sec. 101.
<http://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2019-20/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Bills/5537.pdf>
5. 2013-15 http://leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/Budget/Detail/2013/ccBillSSB5035_0629.pdf and 2015-17 <http://leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/budget/lbns/1517Cap1115-PL.pdf> Capital Budgets.