



*The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is the voice of the community on issues related to the quality and responsiveness of mental health and substance abuse disorder services.*

## **Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force**

### ***Testimony to Milwaukee County Board – November 4, 2019***

### ***Priorities for 2020 Milwaukee County Budget***

Chairman Lipscomb, Finance and Audit Chair Schmitt, and members of the Milwaukee County Board: thank you for the opportunity to share priorities from the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force for the 2020 Milwaukee County Budget.

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task works collaboratively to identify issues faced by people affected by mental illness and by substance abuse disorders, facilitate improvements in services, give consumers and families a strong voice, reduce stigma, and implement recovery principles. The MHTF is a coalition of over 40 community organizations and includes service providers, individuals who live with a mental illness or substance use disorder, advocates, family members, and other stakeholders.

Milwaukee County plays a vitally important role in providing a safety net for our most vulnerable community members including many people who live with a mental illness or substance use disorders, as well as other disabilities. Thank you for your past support for the important services that Milwaukee County provides. We know this is a difficult budget with tough choices.

On behalf of the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force and our members, we ask you to protect the services and supports that are vital to children and adults with disabilities and mental health needs, and advance recovery and independence. including the following vital services:

#### **Transportation**

Access to transportation, both transit and paratransit, is vital for people with mental illness and other disabilities, as so many do not drive due to their disability or because they cannot afford a car. Transit and paratransit are critical to their ability to live independently and to access disability related services, get to jobs, grocery shopping, participate in support groups, attend recovery programs, worship, etc.

- We ask policy makers to do everything possible to limit the route cuts, and to consider possible alternatives to fund these vital services, understanding that the options are limited. We are committed to continuing our advocacy to increase funding for transit in the state budget.
- We ask policy-makers for their continued support to maintain the current paratransit service area, and maintain current fares. Paratransit is vital to the ability of people with disabilities and frail elders to live in the community and is an essential service for a vulnerable population. We continue to hear many concerns from riders about the timeliness and quality of paratransit services and ask policymakers to increase oversight and accountability.

#### **Reform of the Justice System**

The Mental Health Task Force supports the intent of the proposal to increase use of electronic monitoring for Huber inmates. This proposal would increase opportunities for more inmates to obtain and maintain employment, because they will have access to mass transit resources not available from the House of Correction. In addition, this proposal has the potential to provide better supervision of inmates when they are in the community through direct monitoring of their activities and movement

between said activities. Implementation will require careful analysis and planning to ensure accountability.

### **Housing and Emergency Shelters**

The Mental Health Task Force strongly supports the work of the Housing Division and asks policy makers to prioritize it in the budget. Housing First is an evidence based practice which has had a tremendous positive impact for Milwaukee County residents with mental illness. Recovery is not possible without stable safe housing.

We ask policy makers to continue to prioritize support for the emergency shelter network. Even in a Housing First model of service, it is extremely important that Emergency Shelters remain a part of the continuum, giving literally homeless individuals a place to go as they are in the process of being housed. Emergency Shelters in Milwaukee served over 5,500 unduplicated people in Shelter in 2016. We support the amendment to allocate \$100,000 to assist homeless victims of domestic violence with emergency shelter options.

### **Decreasing Revenue: Fair Deal Proposal**

Milwaukee County's ability to generate revenue is limited by state laws. This restriction has limited funding for vital services, as well funding for urgently needed repairs to crumbling infrastructure and invest in the future. The Mental Health Task Force supports the Milwaukee County Fair Deal Proposal to address the need for additional revenue and equity.

Thank you for considering these recommendations and for all you do to maintain vital services in Milwaukee County. We thank you for your leadership in protecting safety net of essential services in the 2020 Milwaukee County budget.

*For questions about this testimony, please contact Mental Health Task Force Coordinator Barbara Beckert, [barbara.beckert@drwi.org](mailto:barbara.beckert@drwi.org) at 414-292-2724.*