NY Daily News Op Ed

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PUBLISHED: January 1, 2025 at 5:00 AM EST

During the holiday season, as we shop and dine with family and friends, we often turn our gaze away from individuals in the throes of mental illness on our streets and subways. But we can no longer ignore the obvious. It’s time we recognize that our mental health system is broken and take a hard look at our approach to care and mental hygiene laws in New York State.

The numbers are stark. Three million New Yorkers live with mental illness, yet one-third do not get the treatment they need. Anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders have skyrocketed since the pandemic, leaving individuals, families, and entire communities to grapple with an immense mental health burden. Too many people continue to suffer in silence, unable to access the care they need.

These challenges are particularly dire for the New Yorkers living on our streets, in subways, and in correctional facilities. Individuals in these situations need intervention, treatment, and support. Far too often, they face stigmatization and incarceration instead.

This systematic failure underscores the urgency of a reimagined approach to mental health care. Despite progress in breaking the stigma surrounding mental health, resources remain limited, and help is often out of reach.

This is a crisis we can no longer ignore.

The solution requires more than awareness — it requires bold action: more funding, stronger legislation, and a commitment to accessible, equitable mental health resources. Mental health care is as vital as physical health care, yet it has not received the same level of investment, policy attention, or societal priority. It’s time to change that.

First, we need to invest in mental health care. New York State has taken steps toward improving access to treatment, but we must go further. We must ensure that mental health services are not just available but easily accessible and affordable for every New Yorker, regardless of income or zip code.

We need to raise salaries for mental health professionals to address workforce shortages and expand funding for programs that serve vulnerable populations. Critically, we must further expand psychiatric hospital beds by increasing reimbursement rates, with a focus on pediatric and geriatric care.

Second, we need to strengthen our community-based system of care. Community-based care is essential to addressing the interconnected challenges of mental illness and homelessness. We must support holistic approaches to care like [Venture](https://www.venturehouse.org/) and [Fountain House](https://www.fountainhouse.org/) — resident clubs that provide housing, medical, and supportive services to members under one roof. This can transform the lives of those struggling with mental illness and housing instability.

To support New Yorkers living on our streets and subways, Congress must also pass the [Strengthening Medicaid for Serious Mental Illness Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/4331/all-info), allowing states to use Medicaid dollars for intensive, community-based mental health services.

Third, we need to reimagine our response to mental health crises. Too many New Yorkers in crisis end up in jails, emergency rooms, or worse, rather than receiving the care they need.

Our criminal justice system is not designed to address the nuanced needs of individuals with mental illness, often compounding their struggles instead of offering meaningful care. Diverting people experiencing mental health crises into specialized courts offers a path forward, addressing root causes rather than punishing actions.

It is time to start treating mental health crises as a public health issue rather than a public safety threat. We must pass [Daniel’s Law](https://www.danielslawny.org/) and the [Treatment Not Jail Act](https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2023/S1976/amendment/B) to create the infrastructure necessary to separate mental health response from the carceral system.

Lastly, we need to keep pushing for true mental health parity and universality under the law. Psychiatric issues are physical issues, and mental health care must be treated the same as a broken bone or torn ligament. We need to do more to ensure parity in service, coverage, and compensation so that everyone can get the help they need. Additionally, insurance companies must be held accountable, ending ghost networks of non-existent providers.

It’s time for lawmakers to commit to expanding mental health funding, supporting comprehensive care, and addressing the systemic barriers that prevent people from receiving the care they need.

As New Yorkers, we pride ourselves on resilience and compassion. Now, we must act boldly to make mental health care a cornerstone of our commitment to equity and justice. Together, we can create a world where mental health care is not a privilege — it is a right. Let us act now to break the cycle of criminalization and build a more compassionate society for all.

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