

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Like many of the non-federal members of the ISMCC, I am an advocate and therefore will try to reflect in my comments what I hear every day from individuals of all ages who have mental illness and their families and what we hope for in the work of this Committee.

The introduction of this report reminds us that 15 years ago, the federal New Freedom Commission concluded that the mental health system was in shambles. I wish I could stand here and say that this has changed but unfortunately it has not. In many ways, things have gotten worse for people with mental illness and their families. As the report indicates, by every measure that we use in public health to judge the well-being of a population, people with serious mental illness – both youth and adults - are not doing well – whether it is education, employment, deaths, disability, incarceration, homelessness, access to affordable treatment – and the list goes on.

As someone who takes helpline calls from desperate individuals and families, I can tell you that there is tremendous pain behind the statistics. The inability of people with mental illness to access needed care shatters lives and devastates families. Yet the health and mental health systems continue to ignore these conditions until crises occur – and then we only provide treatment and supportive services – if at all – for as long as necessary to alleviate the immediate crises. If we treated other chronic conditions this way, far more people would die from diabetes, epilepsy, hypertension, and heart disease.

We are also failing at early intervention for these very serious conditions that begin early in life. Research consistently shows that the best outcomes occur when treatment is provided within weeks after symptoms first emerge. We must do better – far better! As a society, we should not continue to stand by and allow young lives to be derailed by conditions that are very treatable.

All of us in this room, myself included, have responsibility for these failures and for finding solutions to this public health crisis. We must do everything we can to ensure that the impactful recommendations in this report are implemented effectively and in a timely way.

Congress created this Committee because it recognized the important leadership role of the federal government which administers some of the largest health and mental health programs in the country along with research, housing, prisons and other programs affecting people with mental illness. The federal government also enforces the law, and provides guidance and resources to states and local communities to improve care. In addition, federal policy and rates often serve as guideposts for the private sector and provision of services at local levels. Change must start with the federal agencies gathered here with the programs under their control and then expand to all stakeholders.

A quick word about funding. I do not believe that simply throwing money at problems will solve them. Yet, finding meaningful solutions will require sustained funding, tied to quality and achieving good outcomes. As Americans, we have the right to expect that public resources will be spent wisely, on services that work. And, we also have the right to expect that the federal government will exert leadership in responding to public health crises.

To achieve success, we must go beyond issuing a report. There have been other federal commissions, committees and reports on mental health care over the years. Most have been forgotten over time and have gathered dust on shelves rather than served as catalysts for change. True success will require

sustained attention, eliminating policies that serve as barriers to progress, and supporting effective practices through policies and funding. In short, it will require action.

The stakes are high and we cannot afford to fail. I appreciate and believe in the leadership of Dr. McCance-Katz and in the commitment of all my colleagues on this Committee in working together to find solutions. These recommendations are the result of countless hours of discussion and when implemented will make a tremendous difference. To succeed, leaders of all federal agencies that administer programs touching the lives of people with serious mental illness must make specific changes to implement the recommendations of this report. There is no other way if we are truly serious about finding ways to reduce disability associated with mental illness and to help people stay in school, work, live lives of dignity and meaning, and avoid the horrific consequences associated with lack of mental health treatment.

I sincerely hope that a year from today, five years from today, and ten years from today, we will be able to look back and say that this Committee played a key role in changing the paradigm of neglect to one of care and compassion for the millions of children, youth, and adults of all ages who live with serious mental illness in America. Today's report is an important first step forward and next year, we will be looking forward to the progress the federal government will report with respect to its own programs and in leading the nation forward.

Thank you.