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Schweitzer Administration Continues to Support Mental Health Services

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Gov. Brian Schweitzer made mental health services a priority from the day he took office.

In 2010, this is still the case.

So it's surprising to read news reports that continue to incorrectly claim that funding for the Mental Health Services Plan (MHSP) has been cut.

This is simply not true.

The original funding allocated for the current fiscal year is still intact. Every dollar of the \$7.5 million appropriated for MHSP services for this fiscal year will go where it was intended: to help 5,000 Montanans receive mental health services.

However, last fall the Department of Public Health and Human Services realized the increased usage of MHSP. At this time, we faced a dilemma of continuing services as usual and running out of the appropriated funds, or making adjustments to keep the services flowing.

The choice was simple. The decision was made to ensure that the \$7.5 million supported services through the end of the fiscal year. This was the right choice to make.

To assume that mental health funding is included in the 5 percent cuts Gov. Schweitzer has asked state agencies to identify also is inaccurate. These two issues are not connected.

When Gov. Schweitzer took office in 2005, the Mental Health Services Plan had a \$3.7 million yearly budget. In 2007, the Governor supported adding more funds to the MHSP to increase access to services. Consumers also supported this effort. This additional funding expanded the provider list from the four regional mental-health centers to include physicians, psychiatrists, mid-level practitioners, federally qualified health centers, rural health centers and laboratories. This dramatically increased access and offered people more choices on who they could see for mental health services, a move that has been well-received all across Montana.

Today, the MHSP budget is \$10 million a year, with \$7.5 million allocated for services and the rest for medications. Today, that funding remains intact. It has not been cut or reduced.

Our goal is to prioritize services so that individuals with the highest needs are served. Drop-in centers are an important part of the community safety net. In addition, new discussions are addressing changes in adult day treatment with movement toward creating services that are based on community recovery centers.

On Gov. Schweitzer's watch, mental health services have not been cut – period.

Under the governor's vision, leadership and continued support, a huge impact has been made in providing mental health services in Montana. With his unyielding support, many recent accomplishments have come to fruition.

The list is long. Gov. Schweitzer supported and the 2007 Legislature funded 72-hour community crisis stabilization care for adults with severe disabling mental illness who are uninsured, the number of assertive treatment teams increased, and drop-in centers were developed in communities.

DPHHS and the Department of Corrections now provide assistance for mentally ill offenders, including training for community probation and parole officers and law enforcement about mental illness and chemical dependency. Montana is the second state in union to develop a home- and community-based waiver for people with serious mental illness that creates a community services instead of nursing home level of care. The state's suicide prevention coordinator has provided information and support services in more than 100 schools across the state and specialized training for rural medical clinics, and worked with staffs in higher education across the state to identify early signs of suicide and provide tools for effective intervention.

The Schweitzer administration also has supported expanding community-based crisis services so that individuals can remain in their home community to stabilize following a psychiatric crisis. It has endorsed an increase in community-based services for individuals who are severely ill, in need of treatment and requiring a safe alternative place for socialization. About 36 full time employees were added at the Montana State Hospital to assure patient safety and provide appropriate treatment and about \$850,000 was spent for facility upgrades.

By any measure, Gov. Schweitzer has not wavered in his commitment to people who need mental health services, and that promise continues today.

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