

[Inaugural Kennedy Forum Builds Momentum to Realize JFK's Vision](#)

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Former Congressman Patrick Kennedy hosted the inaugural Kennedy Forum to launch a national effort to achieve the vision his uncle, President John F. Kennedy, had when he signed the Community Mental Health Act into law on October 31, 1963. This law called for federal funding of community mental health centers and research facilities devoted to the treatment of mental illness and the end of institutionalization, which was a long, abusive experience for many individuals with mental illnesses, substance use disorders and intellectual disabilities. "It is important to underscore that the Community Mental Health Act promised hope for the future, a future where people could recover and live in the community," said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, Chief Executive Officer of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA).

"Despite some real steps forward during the last half of the century – including development of new medications, psychotherapies, supportive housing peer support and other treatment methodologies – what stood in the way of realizing President Kennedy's dream were several steps backwards throughout the years." Two examples of what impeded progress are the elimination of substance use as a recognized disability for Social Security Disability Insurance in 1998 and the lack of insurance coverage for behavioral health care. "It is only fitting that today, we shine the light on President Kennedy's vision of a rich and full community life for those living with mental illness and substance use disorders as the provisions of the 2008 federal parity law will continue to be implemented through the Affordable Care Act," Dr. Wentz added. Today, more people with mental illnesses receive treatment than at any other time in history — mostly in community settings – and even more individuals will be able to receive mental health care, as well as addiction treatment services, as a result of the Affordable Care Act and the Medicaid expansion. "We haven't realized the full potential of community-based care," Dr. Wentz said. "Financing arrangements, clinical training, and systems of accountability are often misaligned, and mental illnesses continue to be the largest source of morbidity, just as they were in 1963." In fact, between 1990 and 2010, the worldwide incidence of mental illness increased by 38 percent, according to a 2010 Global Burden of Disease Study. "The potential of community-based behavioral health care is tremendous, as evidenced by numerous success stories that were made possible through mental healthcare, addiction treatment and other support services," Dr. Wentz stated. "NJAMHAA is grateful to Former Congressman Patrick Kennedy for taking the bold step by launching the Kennedy Forum. This is a true testament to JFK's ambitious goal to revolutionize mental health care," Dr. Wentz said. "We look forward to continuing our partnership with Former Rep. Kennedy and leaders in our state and federal governments, to achieve the transformational changes that can and must be made. These changes are imperative for individuals with behavioral health disorders and other disabilities, their families and entire communities throughout our state and nation." During the Kennedy Forum gala last evening, Former Rep. Kennedy stated, "This is the civil rights movement of our time. The tragedy is not in mental illness; it's in not treating mental illness. Through this forum and other forums, we

have to make the case to America for not just quality of treatment, but also equality of treatment." Three federal bills show promise for moving the nation closer to achieving the Kennedys' – the President's and the Former Congressman's – vision: * The Excellence in Mental Health Act creates Certified Community Behavioral Health Centers to better meet the needs of people currently being served, and those who will seek care as a result of coverage expansion and parity. * The Behavioral Health IT Act provides financial incentives for the adoption and "meaningful use" of health information technology (IT) — the bedrock of improved care and coordination among practitioners— for mental healthcare and addiction treatment providers and facilities. * The Mental Health First Aid Act offers education and training to teachers, health workers, firefighters, police officers, emergency services personnel and other community members, so that individuals experiencing mental health crises can be immediately helped and then connected to appropriate services in the community. "NJAMHAA applauds our Congressional representatives, Leonard Lance and Donald Payne, Jr. for co-sponsoring the Excellence in Mental Health Act; Rep. Rush Holt for sponsoring the Mental Health First Aid Act; and again Rep. Lance for also co-sponsoring the Behavioral Health IT Act," Dr. Wentz said. "Such leadership and compassion are greatly needed to address the ongoing and increasing need for life-saving behavioral healthcare services."