

Are you listening, America? The White House is talking!

Who would have thought that over 150 people from across our country who are working in the trenches for better mental health would be invited to a whole day in the White House? But it happened! The White House brought together mental health advocates, educators, faith leaders, veterans and local officials for The White House Conference on Mental Health.

President Obama was the first one to speak to us at the conference, and he empathetically stated that we must “do a better job recognizing mental health issues in our children, and making it easier for Americans of all ages to seek help.” The President was not only speaking to those of us gathered, but to the whole country, where the overwhelming stigma on mental illness blocks people from even acknowledging there *is* mental illness and keeps them from seeking help. In this climate of embarrassment and fear, the President acknowledged there needs to be education to overcome the misunderstanding of mental illness and support to come out of the closet to speak with authentic stories of one’s own mental health challenges.

The stirring words of President Obama concluded with his clarion call that we can do something. To all who are living with a mental health challenge and their families, he said, “You are not alone. There is hope. There is possibility. We are here for you.” The President’s words affirmed all of us who are focusing energy and resources to find the very best ways to offer mental health services. Too often the persons who need these resources are isolated and caught in a murky cloud of helplessness.

The President said, “The main goal of this conference is not to start a conversation – so many of you have spent decades

waging long and lonely battles to be heard. Instead it's about elevating that conversation to a national level and bringing mental illness out of the shadows." The White House is gently yet fervently encouraging the nation to put mental health front and center. By hosting the Conference, the White House has begun a national network of mental health advocates. Hopefully the network will create solidarity among these varied groups so that we can learn from each other and share resources, strategies and support, so that people living with mental illness may be better served.

During the day, we heard from Health and Human Services Secretary, Kathleen Sebelius; Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan; and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, as well as from several others, each one adding their own perspective and commitment. Vice President Biden also spoke, closing the conference with words of encouragement. "There is nothing, nothing to be ashamed of," he said. "If you are struggling with mental issues, or if your child is, or your spouse, or your friend, it's okay. It's okay to talk about it; it's okay to ask for help."

Personally, I was privileged to be present at the Conference as a representative of the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network. I appreciated that our work was acknowledged even by being invited to attend the Conference, and it was uplifting to see and meet some of those who are in those trenches energetically pursuing recovery and wellness. We don't often see each other across the country since our trenches are a bit deep, but when we come together we can see that there is much that is being done that is healing and hopeful.

I was disappointed that there was no one on a panel who was representing a faith community, since we know that 40%-90%

of those who have a mental health challenge turn to their faith leaders before seeking out anyone else. As someone who offers spiritual support to those with mental health challenges, I can attest to the truth that faith and spiritual practice can be resources for hope. They are not the only tools, but they are important ones in the toolbox of recovery. As a member of a faith community, I invite my colleagues across the country to turn your attention to this national dialogue and at least begin with the new website, <http://www.mentalhealth.gov>, and then explore what your faith community can do to be a participant in this dialogue.

My second disappointment in the Conference was that there was absolutely no mention of the enormity of the number of persons who are in our country's jails and prisons who are receiving little or no mental health services. As Pete Earley has brought to our attention in his book *Crazy: A Father's Search America's Mental Health Madness*, "The Los Angeles jail is the largest mental hospital in our country." It was disappointing that the Conference could not address these two concerns and many other issues as well. However, at least the conversation has been launched on a national level. I appreciate that the White House is speaking, and while we are listening as we continue to work, I hope that the White House can listen to us, too, and then it can be a true dialogue.

This is the link to commitments that have been made by the organizations that were invited to the conference. [conference fact sheet](#)

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