



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

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CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

FIRST LADY CHIRLANE MCCRAY DELIVERS REMARKS AT THE STATEN ISLAND MENTAL HEALTH COUNCIL BREAKFAST 2015

First Lady Chirlane McCray today visited the Staten Island Mental Health Council's Annual Breakfast. The following are her remarks as prepared for delivery:

Thank you for inviting me here today! I've been looking forward to this breakfast for a while.

As Larry mentioned, I've been doing a lot of thinking about mental illness and drug abuse. Which means I've been doing a lot of thinking about Staten Island.

No place in the city has been hit harder by addiction than this borough. And no one has worked harder or more creatively to overcome this terrible disease than all of you.

It's not news—especially to all of you—that Staten Island has the highest rate of prescription painkiller overdose deaths in all of New York City.

It's also not news that Staten Island has the city's second-highest rate of heroin overdose deaths.

But you and I know those statistics don't even begin to tell the full story.

Every overdose has a ripple effect. It's not just the victim who suffers—it's also the friends, the family members, the co-workers, and the classmates.

The Staten Island Advance has done some amazing stories about families going through the hell of addiction.

I'm thinking in particular about Virginia Sherry's heartbreaking profile of the Maskinski family, who lost their beloved daughter to addiction—and almost lost their son.

So many good people, in neighborhoods throughout New York City, are succumbing to drug abuse.

This isn't an individual problem—it's a community problem. And Staten Island is developing community solutions.

I'm pleased to note that the City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has played a key role in the process.

In partnership with local leaders—including many of you—they are running a TV ad campaign.

They developed and promoted clinical guidelines on how to safely prescribe opioids.

They have continued the distribution of naloxone, an essential tool for helping people recover from overdoses.

And they are sending staff members out into the community to share their knowledge and data.

While we still have a long way to go, these efforts are working. The rate of prescription painkiller overdose deaths has gone down two years in a row.

That is so impressive—please give yourselves a hand.

And your story isn't just impressive—it's inspiring. Staten Island's success with opioids provides a blueprint for addressing the city's larger mental health crisis.

And make no mistake—it is a crisis.

One-in-four Americans deal with mental illness in a given year. And a remarkable 61 percent of New York State adults who need mental health services aren't getting them.

I recently made a personal commitment to do whatever I can to help the city develop a more inclusive and effective mental health system.

My passion for this work was inspired by personal experience.

I was born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1954, in a working-class neighborhood. My mom worked in an electronics factory, and my dad was a World War II veteran who worked at a military base.

Through a lot of hard work and perseverance, they built a stable and supportive home for me and my siblings.

Their achievements are even more impressive when you consider the fact that they both suffered periodically from depression.

Of course, they wouldn't have called it "depression" back then—people didn't talk about such things.

I often wonder how much happier their lives might have been if they lived in a world where people were encouraged to seek help when it was needed.

We've come a long way since my parents and so many others had to suffer in silence. But we still have a long, long way to go.

I saw that when my daughter, Chiara, came to Bill and me and told us that she was suffering from addiction, depression and anxiety.

I felt everything you'd expect a mom to feel: love, sadness, fear, and a great deal of uncertainty.

Our child was in terrible pain. But because it originated in her brain and not another part of her body, there wasn't an established series of steps to follow.

We had to trust the recommendations of people we didn't really know, and make some major decisions on our own.

Our family was lucky. We eventually found enough of what we were looking for. And I am so grateful for that.

But I wondered: What about the families who don't have the advantages that we have? How do they do it? How do they manage?

We need to come together as a city and make sure everyone is getting the help they need.

What we have now isn't really a system. What we have is a wide range of programs and resources, many of which are absolutely terrific.

Some of them are connected to each other, but most are not. And that means too many people are forced to play a guessing game when it comes to mental health treatment.

It also means that the system has some huge gaps. For example, I visited a senior center serving the Chinese community last week, and I was told there are only three psychiatrists in all of New York City who speak Cantonese. That's not right!

And did you know there are approximately 10 mental health centers that specialize solely in serving seniors in our entire city? I visited two of them earlier in the week, and they're doing great work.

But 10 isn't nearly enough! I don't know about you, but I'm not getting any younger—and neither are my fellow baby boomers.

We can do better—I know it. What we need is a true mental health system.

One that addresses the most pervasive and burdensome conditions. One with caregivers who understand the language and the culture of the people they serve.

Right now, a team of City agencies is working together to lay the groundwork for that system.

To support their work, I am visiting New Yorkers in all five boroughs. My goal is to hear the stories behind the troubling statistics.

I will meet with teenagers, mothers, people without a home, people in jail, senior citizens, and veterans.

I also want to hear from people like you—people who have devoted their lives to helping others regain their mental equilibrium. Because you're the ones who really know what's up.

In fact, I've already learned two important truths from my meetings and conversations.

First, we need to meet people where they are—which means locating services where people live, work, and play.

For example, I recently met with the team behind a program called SMART MH.

They are screening at-risk senior citizens and providing care and treatment in centers where they already go and feel comfortable.

Just as important, they are working hard to make sure all of their services are culturally competent.

And some of our schools have mental health clinics where students can go to get clinical treatment or just chill out.

These programs work not only because they are connecting New Yorkers to effective services. They work because they are taking the stigma out of seeking help.

The second thing I've learned is that we need to link mental health care with physical health care. They aren't separate. Part of having a healthy body is having a healthy mind.

That means we need to work towards a "one door" policy. We need to create more places where New Yorkers can walk through one door to receive both physical and mental healthcare.

It's common sense—people should feel just as comfortable seeking treatment for their brain as they do for their heart.

But sometimes "common sense" isn't so common. Sometimes getting people to recognize the obvious takes a lot of work.

I still remember when people were afraid to say "breast" and "cancer" out loud, like they were dirty words. I still remember when that disease was only discussed between sisters and girlfriends in stolen whispers.

Thankfully, that has changed. Today, breast cancer survivors are proud to tell their stories, because they know the community has their backs.

It's time to do the same for mental illness.

Getting there won't be easy, and it won't happen quickly. But we all believe that it's possible—that's why we're here today.

On behalf of the entire city, thanks for all that you have done—and for all that you will do—to help build a happier and healthier New York.

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