Inaugural Federal Committee Meeting Confirms HHS’s Efforts to Address SMI
Mental Health Weekly September 11, 2017

Prevention and intervention and criminal justice were among the topics discussed during the inaugural meeting of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS’s) federal committee established by law to address the needs of adults with serious mental illness and children with serious emotional disturbance. The committee intends to deliver its first report to Congress Dec. 13.

The Interdepartmental Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee (ISMICC) held its inaugural meeting on Aug. 31. Members of the public were invited to attend the all-day meeting via telephone or webcast.

The committee was established to improve federal coordination of efforts that address the pressing needs of adults with serious mental illness and youth with serious emotional disturbance. The ISMICC was a mandate of the 21st Century Cures Act signed into law December 2016. The bipartisan legislation also created the position of assistant secretary for mental health and substance abuse in HHS. Elinore McCance-Katz, M.D., was sworn in last month as the first to hold this position.

HHS announced Aug. 16 the appointment of 14 public members to ISMICC with the current mental health serious mental illness.

The nonfederal committee members are serving a three-year term. The 10 federal agencies include such departments as the Department of Labor, the Department of Education and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

During the meeting’s onset, HHS Secretary Tom Price, M.D., charged the committee with three goals to address the challenge of serious mental illness:
• Expanding evidence-based prevention, detection and intervention, including more effective early treatment of psychosis, as well as aggressive work on suicide prevention.
• Improving the quality of care in all settings, both inpatient and community-based, by supporting the integration of mental and physical health and expanding the capacity to offer treatment.
• Improving outcomes for all Americans struggling with these diseases, by helping them find rewarding work and a stable place in their community.

Range of Concerns
During the meeting led by Mc-Cance-Katz, Kenneth Minkoff, M.D., of Zia Partners, noted the challenges of the current system.
“We acknowledge that the system of care for people with serious mental illness and [for children] with serious emotional disturbance is not acceptable the way it is,” he said.

“We believe that people in need with these issues should get the help that is available in every single community.”

Minkoff noted that it’s “inappropriate” that program officials would say they can only help someone with a mental health condition when they’ve hurt someone.

“I make sure that people who run a crisis center would never say that to people,” he said. “We can come to your home, we can follow up with you and we’re not going to let you drop.” Minkoff said he is excited about the committee’s commitment to work collaboratively with stakeholders.

One of the public comments focused on people who are languishing in jails. A psychiatric nurse addressing the panel said she didn’t feel a sense of urgency regarding individuals with serious mental illness. She said she worked with other psychiatric nurses in jails and in the ER. “The urgency there is just as terrible,” she said. “I would encourage everyone to make some changes.”

Committee member and author Pete Early discussed the barriers his son faced in seeking help for his serious mental illness.

“Not you going to need to identify the problem, you have to figure out who’s going to pay for it,” he noted. In Virginia, resources such as housing and assertive community treatment can be made available, he said, but who is going to foot the bill? “You’ve got to keep that in mind. The ideas sound great, but you’re hit with reality in the system,” he said.

Mary Giliberti, J.D., CEO of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, discussed the importance of prevention. “If you intervene early, you can get better outcomes,” she noted. “It’s important to be there for young people,” she said.

“Consumers are hearing such comments as ‘We can’t help you,’ rather than ‘How can I help?’”

Committee member Linda S. Beeber, Ph.D., PMHCNS-BC, FAAN, distinguished professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Nursing, noted that it is important to think beyond treatment to prevention as a means to cut across silos.

The issue of violence was also discussed. Maryann Davis, Ph.D., research associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, noted that while there may be an increase in violence among the population with serious mental illness, it is a small one.

“The vast majority are not engaged in violence with others,” she said. The presence of substance abuse may accelerate violence, she said.
“What we should talk about is ensuring people get the treatment they need so that violence isn’t an issue,” said John Snook of the Treatment Advocacy Center.

Optimism
The inaugural meeting and the committee’s call to address consumers with the most significant care needs, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, represented a “clear signal that mental health is a priority for the U.S. government and our health system,” ISMICC member David W. Covington, CEO and president of RI International, a crisis mental health service provider, told MHW. Covington said he was encouraged and optimistic about the government’s efforts to address serious mental illness.

HHS Secretary Price led with an inspirational charge to the group, said Covington. “I was very encouraged by the manner in which he approached the topic,” he said. Price spoke about the challenges confronting the 10 million people with serious mental illness, including the lifespan, homelessness and incarceration disparities, Covington said.

Price noted that “recovery is the expectation,” said Covington. Price also said that efforts to address serious mental illness require the same expertise that is brought to cancer and heart disease, Covington said.

Covington noted there was mention of two prior reports commissioned by previous administrations. On Feb. 17, 1977, President Jimmy Carter, through an executive order, established the Presidential Commission on Mental Health. In April 2002, President George W. Bush established the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health to conduct a comprehensive study of the U.S. mental health service delivery system and to make recommendations based on its findings.

The two prior efforts yielded reports within a year’s timeframe, said Covington. The current effort will include a report to Congress, which will become part of an ongoing effort over the next five years, he said. The creation of the new federal committee “demonstrates an ongoing and elevating commitment to serious mental illness — even stronger than Bush and Carter’s efforts,” Covington added.

A blog prepared by Covington about the meeting highlights the key dates for a planned first report to Congress by December 13 to evaluate the effect of federal programs and recommendations for action.

Gaining Input
McCance-Katz told the panel and attendees that “the goal of the federal effort is to do the best job we can to try to hear what the public wants and needs and make adjustments in the infrastructure to serve people. The goal is to get a lot of input and ensure that people feel heard.”

McCance-Katz discussed the upcoming report to Congress. The first draft of the report is expected in mid-October, she said. Committee members should break into work groups and take a couple of days to review it, she noted.
Although there is no specific date set yet for the second ISMICC meeting, it will likely be virtual, she said. The committee may also decide to go on site visits, such as to HUD or the Department of Labor, McCance-Katz noted.

Opportunities will also be available for the public to provide more commentary, she said. The committee will try to reconvene around the time the report is released, she noted. They would also like to conduct a few listening sessions, although they are not planned yet.

McCance-Katz thanked committee members and federal partners. “I think we will get a good product out of this that we can use as a blueprint going forward,” she said.