A greater effort needs to be made about how mental illness has a profound and disabling effect on family members and on the country.

Today, there are tools to do that. The job is to use those tools.

The message by Patrick Kennedy, a former U.S. representative and a pioneer in mental health policy, was given Wednesday at the Healthy Minds Conference, "Hidden in Plain View: The Human and Economic Cost of Mental Illness" at the Renaissance Montgomery. The conference was hosted by Healthy Minds Network, Envision2020 and SummaSource. The presenting sponsor of the conference was Baptist Health and Crossbridge.

"Mental illness need not to be an alien to our affection," he said. "Those with mental illness and addiction should not be precluded at any level of care based upon the severity of their illness. If their illness was cancer and was that severe, would they be garnering the same services? Or whether it was diabetes in need of that care, would they be expected to receive those services? That's a revolutionary concept. I guarantee you most people in this country do not know that there is a federal law that mandates that insurance companies not discriminate against people simply because their illness is on the brain as opposed to any other organ of the body.

"We need, essentially, an NAACP of mental health. We had the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but that didn't guarantee anything. Then you needed to get the Voting Rights Act. Then you needed to get the Fair Housing Act. Then the Fair Employment Act. My point is, the fight has to continue. What we need to do is make sure that the laws that are written are actually enforced."

Mental illness costs the U.S. $113 billion annually, and U.S. jails and prisons are the largest providers of mental health care in America. Compounding the River Region's challenges is the fact that there are no child or adolescent beds in the four counties of the Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority (Autauga, Elmore, Lowndes and Montgomery), forcing families to hospitalize their children many miles from home. In addition, while there are no mental health providers in Lowndes County, there is only one mental health provider in the River Region for every 1,305 mental health patients, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

"Whether we have a family member with a mental illness or not, every one of us is impacted; our community is," she said. "The long range goal is we are trying to create a coordinated, sustainable system of mental health care in the River Region, where people can receive the care they need in timely fashion and in an appropriate setting, rather than in a prison, jail or an emergency room."

Addressing that on Wednesday was Leon Evans, president and CEO of the Center for Health Care Services in San Antonio, Texas. He discussed "Changing the Face of Mental Health One Community at a Time."

Lynn Beshear, executive director of Envision 2020, hoped the conference would help begin a public and broad conversation among leaders, citizens, care providers and businesses about the impact of mental illness.
Evans has developed an innovative and highly integrated system of care for people in the San Antonio community who struggle with mental health disorders, according to the CHCS. Utilizing strong community partnerships and diverse funding sources, his programs have created an effective public safety net that keep people with mental illness out of emergency rooms, jails and prisons and link them to treatment programs that help them lead independent, productive lives.

The Restoration Center is something else Evans has developed. It is an integrated clinic providing psychiatric care, substance abuse services, transitional housing and general health care services for the homeless population. Each year, the programs save thousands of lives and results in millions of dollars of cost savings for the community.

"When law enforcement officers in the public are most at risk – aside from some kind of shoot out – is when an officer goes on a mental health call, a family disturbance call or ... (something) racially-motivated, something that heightens emotional tension. And if the officer's only tool that they have is their voice or presence, things escalate. The reason I'm so big on the crisis intervention training is because officers are given all of these skills to recognize behavioral health issues. They're also taught to use deescalation techniques.

"It's terrible. People are being criminalized for having a mental illness."

James Perdue, commissioner of Alabama Department of Mental Health, said "today" should be the best day for somebody with a mental illness in Alabama.

"The door is wide open for the things that we can do," he said. "Today is a good day. We need more awareness. People know everything about mental illness that they want to know. And that (isn't) very much. They really want to hide it. We have got to treat. This is a choice. We need to chose the right thing, and we need to choose it now. We need to treat mental illness before they need a bed."

After Kennedy left Congress in 2011, he made a promise to be a vocal advocate for the full and unequivocal implementation of the 2008 Parity law, and to push for a greater global investment in brain research. Since then, he formed two organizations: One Mind for Research and the Kennedy Forum on Community Mental Health. One Mind is pioneering an innovative approach to open science that ensures that scientific research, results and data are available and accessible to everyone.

The Forum is part of Kennedy's ongoing national dialogue about the state of mental health in America.

"We need integration with overall health care," he said on Wednesday. "When 70 percent of the antidepressants, antipsychotics ... are all written by the primary care physician. We need to educate primary care physicians to understand the field that they are treating, because many are treating it with a pill and not understanding that it takes a comprehensive approach to address mental illness and addiction.

"You can't just throw medications alone. You have to use medications in concert with cognitive behavioral therapy, the most evidence-based form of therapy. And we need to have that all paid for."

There needs to be early intervention, Kennedy said.

"We could be intervening for a whole other generation such that no one's illness progresses and pathologizes the way we allow people with mental illnesses to pathologize and progress today."

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