

Editorial: Mental illnesses are just that -- illnesses

Lil Mirando | Posted: Sunday, October 25, 2015 12:17 am

For some people who suffer with mental illnesses, the reality is it can be easier to buy illegal drugs than it is to pick up a legal prescription. The reason is simple: the lack of transportation. All it takes is getting a phone number — which apparently is not that hard to get — and one can arrange a meeting with a trusted neighborhood illegal “pharmacist” in a public place within walking distance, such as a park, an aisle in the back of a nearby store, a parking lot, a back alley, a neighborhood bench.

Some people with ongoing mental illnesses would rather make that phone call and self-medicate on something that does not really help instead of prevailing yet again on a friend, a relative or a neighbor for a ride to the legitimate pharmacy. No matter how much that friend, neighbor or loved one might insist it’s no imposition, there’s a lingering doubt, a gnawing sense of guilt and a deep longing to be able to take care of oneself.

Among the general population nationwide, there’s still an unfortunate stigma associated with mental illness. Among the population of people who suffer with mental illnesses there is still a sense of shame that stops them from getting the help they need.

A medical psychologist recently told Hammond Kiwanis Club members how the lack of transportation and shelter affects Tangipahoa Parish residents who suffer from the wide range of mental illnesses. Dr. Craig Waggoner with Rosenblum Mental Health Center also provided us with a good understanding of the number of people among us who suffer from the wide ranges of mental illnesses.

Tangipahoa Parish’s 125,000 population includes an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 people with bipolar disorder, more than 1,000 with schizophrenia and thousands more with severe depression or anxiety, Dr. Waggoner said. What’s more, about 200 of those with schizophrenia are homeless. Many people in Tangipahoa Parish are living in the woods or in an RV with no electricity or running water, he said. Many mentally ill people in Tangipahoa Parish are “just hidden,” he said.

Also, of course, there are mentally ill people who have found shelter in jail.

At the national level, U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana recently announced he is pushing a Mental Health Reform Act that would create an undersecretary for mental health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services who would coordinate mental health services across the federal system.

Dr. Cassidy’s bipartisan bill may gain some steam as a result of the public concern sparked by recent mass shootings, but Congress and the public would do well to be aware of the big picture. “Maybe 10 percent of people responsible for murders in this country have a mental illness,” Dr. Waggoner said,

whereas most mentally ill people are not violent and are more likely to be victims of crimes.

An integral part of the big picture is the reality of life as a mentally ill person in a place such as Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana, or any other community or city across the country.

People become mentally ill partially due to genetics and partially due to their upbringing, Dr. Waggoner said. “How they’re brought up can make a huge difference. With this combination, it takes medication and teaching of coping and social skills.”

Thanks go to the Hammond Kiwanis Club for arranging this speaker and to Dr. Waggoner for being willing to speak and share his insights. Raising public awareness is key. As Sen. Cassidy points out, it’s time for the public and our leaders to start viewing mental illnesses as illnesses.