

Western Massachusetts Substance Abuse Providers Association

Fourth Annual Legislative Luncheon

Keynote Address

By State Senator Gale D. Candaras

April 4, 2008

Good afternoon and welcome. Thank you to the Western Mass Substance Abuse Providers Association for having me here today, and thanks to all of you for taking time out of your busy schedules to focus on the healthcare crisis of substance abuse. I'm always happy to be here at the Providence Behavioral Health Hospital.

I know—and we all know—the value of this hospital, and its importance to the people of Western Massachusetts. Equally important is the fact that the state's leadership is heavily invested in helping the Prov. survive and prosper. This hospital is a leader in substance abuse treatment, from alcohol to heroin addiction, and it is a critical resource to nearly 1,000 individuals who rely upon methadone daily to help them remain clean and sober.

Keeping this hospital open, and making it the strong and vital resource it must be has been a focus for us for a number of years and I know our message is being heard loudly and clearly on Beacon Hill.

Twenty years ago we knew far less about the disease of addiction than we do today. And yet, despite our knowledge, despite the pervasiveness of the disease, despite how treatable it is, twenty-two million Americans still suffer every day. Many of them, especially here in Massachusetts, suffer in our prisons.

Early last year, my first year in the Senate, I was appointed as Senate Chair of the Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse. As a newly-appointed Chair, I met with many substance abuse treatment providers and advocates. I listened to their concerns and made them my own:

"We need to change the public's perception of addiction," I was told.

"We need insurance parity for substance abuse services."

"We need more treatment facilities and expanded outpatient care."

"We need to increase our focus on prevention."

"We need CORI reform."

"We need to change the model so that most treatment occurs in hospitals and not in jails."

I learned that we need all of these things and so much more. And we're moving the ship of state steadily in right

direction. I have worked with many of you over the past 14 months to raise public awareness of substance abuse issues and to advocate for important policy changes that advance our common goals. As I'm sure you will attest, this work is sometimes challenging, but always rewarding.

The Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse recently entered its fourth year of existence, and it is the only legislative committee of its kind in the country. Massachusetts is a state of "firsts," and it follows from this that we should sit on the forefront of national efforts to prevent and treat substance abuse and addictions, and to provide those suffering from the disease of addiction with a level of service on par with those afflicted with any other treatable disease.

This legislative session, Massachusetts legislators filed over eighty bills with the Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse. That signals to me that among public officials, there is a high level of interest in exploring solutions to the oftentimes co-occurring problems of mental health and substance abuse. Indeed, there is a yearning for solutions to these problems, which have plagued us as a society for too long and have, until recently, not been at the forefront of our public consciousness or healthcare reform efforts. I believe that in the coming years, that

interest and demand for solutions among my colleagues will grow.

During the Committee's public hearings on those eighty bills filed with us, we heard compelling personal testimony from hundreds of individuals, some of them sitting here today. We worked together to create legislation that would raise public awareness around issues of substance abuse, establish prevention programs in schools and in the workplace, require hospitals to inform parents if their child suffered a drug overdose, increase access to treatment on demand, and divert non-violent, low level drug offenders from correctional facilities into treatment.

Last fall, the Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse held a public hearing on "An Act Relative to Mental Health Parity," which was filed by my House co-chairwoman, Representative Ruth Balser, a psychologist by training. Representative Balser and I were colleagues in the House and we have a great collaboration. The passage of the Mental Health Parity bill is a high priority for our Committee, and among those who seek equitable treatment by insurers.

The parity bill will close a legal loophole by requiring insurers to cover treatment for any disease or disorder identified by the American Psychiatric

Association, including post traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and of course, substance abuse. Many insurance companies are already doing so voluntarily, and others need to be brought along faster. Passage of this legislation will send an important message to insurers, those who suffer from substance abuse disorders, and the public: The Governor, Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Judy Ann Bigby, our joint committee and our legislative colleagues are committed to increasing access to treatment, reducing the stigma of addiction, and saving taxpayer dollars. Insurers routinely cover costs associated with cancer and diabetes, and it is time they routinely cover costs associated with the disease of addiction, which is a chronic disease, and not a moral failing.

Let's start making positive changes that address the root causes of the problems we face instead of wasting time and money on band-aids that don't work. Let's focus on safe and sensible CORI reform, and remove unfair barriers to employment for nonviolent individuals who were incarcerated in large measure because a substance abuse problem led them down the wrong path.

Governor Patrick has introduced a piece of legislation that will not only increase employment opportunities for rehabilitated individuals with CORI's, but also reduce

rates of recidivism. The Governor knows just as well as we do—people who can't find employment are more likely to commit crimes. They are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. When we send these individuals the message that they are not worthy of employment, we perpetuate the stigma of addiction. We cannot combat this disease without taking a stand against its stigma.

Likewise, we will make little headway without focusing on, and adequately funding, prevention, early intervention, and quality rehabilitation services. Rates of substance abuse in Massachusetts are extraordinarily high—that won't come as a shock to anyone here. We are sixth in the nation in the abuse of illegal and controlled substances. Massachusetts has the dubious distinctions of having the second highest in the nation rate of children 12 years of age and older using alcohol on a regular basis and we have the fifth highest binge drinking rate among teenagers in the entire country.

It is uncontroverted that the earlier a child is exposed to alcohol and drugs, the more likely that child is to develop an addiction later in life. It makes perfect sense that the sooner we can intervene, the less likely that child will be to waste years of his or her life struggling and suffering with addiction. We need to prevent

childhood addiction. We need all our young people to be productive. We need the labor force and strong next generation to lead our country.

When prevention efforts fail, as they sometimes do, we are fortunate to have providers and advocates like all of you on hand, and we acknowledge and thank you for all your hard work and personal sacrifice. These are hard jobs and we know it! As the Mass Coalition for Addiction Services will tell you, the greatest predictor for recovery is length of stay in treatment and community based outpatient support. You understand the critical importance of community support during the recovery process, and the difference your work and advocacy have made in providing and expanding recovery services cannot be overstated. Thank you again!

As the legislature works to craft the FY 2009 state budget in an environment of daily declining revenues, we are aware and we know you are aware, too, of both the Commonwealth's projected \$1.36 billion structural deficit—the difference between how much it would cost to simply continue and level fund existing state programs and projected tax revenues—and the nation's overall economic climate.

In the coming months, important decisions will be made relative to what Massachusetts can and cannot afford. Since fiscal year 2003, the legislature has approved over \$50 million in increased funding for substance abuse prevention and treatment services. We have remained committed to these services despite projected deficits, because as you know, for every dollar spent on prevention and treatment, we save untold sums down the road. This is simply sound fiscal policy. It is also good economic policy.

You want economic development? Imagine if we could build hospitals instead of jails and if we could hire more doctors, nurses, therapists, social workers, instead of prison guards. That would be real economic development. Not only would we be the knowledge corridor but we could become the healthcare corridor.

We could easily afford to build the new facilities we need and provide services on demand if we could shift the paradigm from incarceration to treatment and prevention. By doing so, we could free up hundreds of millions of dollars. That's right. Like every other state, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts spends billions each year on the criminal justice system, including police, courts, public counsel, and houses of correction. Experts tell us that, just here locally, roughly 60 per cent of the men incarcerated in

Ludlow and 78% of the women have a substance abuse problem—oftentimes they are self medicating with street drugs for a mental health problem—and no matter how progressive the Sheriff, and Sheriff Ashe is among the best in the country—and he would be the first to tell you—that a jail house is no place to treat a substance abuse or a substance abuse and mental health problem. We have done some good work with diversionary programs but we could do more if we had more to offer people who are struggling and suffering to be clean and sober.

Over the last several years, the Massachusetts Bureau of Substance Abuse Services has seen larger funding increases than most agencies housed in the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. Your hard work and advocacy made this possible, and I am hopeful that, if not this year, then, in the not too distant future, we will be able to do more. I am hopeful, however, that we will be able to maintain the funding levels we have fought for but we need your voices and the voices of people we all serve to be heard.

As we negotiate next year's budget, I am happy to tell you that we have been able to get the Prov a small rate increase for the services we provide and I am also hopeful that it will receive its fair share of state funding. I can

assure you that we have the attention and concern of our Senate President, Terry Murray, and Governor Patrick's administration, specifically Dr. Judy Ann Bigby, the Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, whom many of you may remember visited here last year and brought a check in the amount of \$5 million. I met with Secretary Bigby yesterday and told her we'd love another visit and another check.

This hospital serves as Western Massachusetts' largest provider of acute integrated mental health and substance abuse services for children, adolescents, adults and the elderly. Providence is the only provider of inpatient mental health services for children and adolescents outside of Route 128. Its patients come from 142 towns and cities, and more than 6,000 individuals seek treatment here each year. Please also join me in being an advocate for this scarce and precious resource.

I ask this of you because you have proven time and again that when this community of professionals comes together, there is no limit to what it can accomplish. The services you provide are of the utmost importance to Western Mass, and the individuals that benefit from your expertise are many. We need not only your time and your

talent, but your voices raised with ours to move us in the right direction.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today, and for your service to the Commonwealth.