

# **ELECTIONS AND THE MEDIA**

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For decades, millions of state allocated mental health dollars has bypassed Bucks County. Bucks County gets the least amount per person in state funding for mental health programs out of the five suburban Philadelphia counties. It is in the bottom quarter of funding when compared to all other counties in the state.

**STATE MENTAL HEATH FUNDING**

2001-2002, most recent figures available

County	# of clients	State Allocation	Average Expenditure
Bucks	5,823	\$12,137,053	\$2,084
Chester	1,933	\$11,318,830	\$5,856
Montgomery	3,753	\$22,396,203	\$5,968
Delaware	6,397	\$34,817,284	\$5,443
Philadelphia	25,250	\$143,631,685	\$5,688

This problem began in the 1960’s when psychiatric treatment moved from an institutional setting to community based. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson signed legislation to provide funding for counties to create local mental health centers. However, when Bucks County’s mental health program began in 1968 they did not create a federal funded treatment center. Due to inconsistent county mental health administration from 1968 to 1980, the county never went after federal funds and kept receiving the state allocation of funds. In addition, the Department of Public Welfare has not increased its state allocation to the counties in years. The current funding guidelines have been in place since the 1980’s.

When the current Bucks County administrator, Phil Fenster, took office in 1985 he realized the inequities in the funding streams. He went to the state to remedy the situation. However, budgets shrunk and priorities changed. Several state representatives have taken their concerns to Harrisburg, but are not well received. The state has the

perception that Bucks County is a rich county and does not need the money. That perception in turn leads to not getting the fair share of mental health dollars.

The results of these inequities are that the clients and their families have not had access to the same type of programs as in other counties. The county needs better housing, accessible transportation, continued quality treatment options, increase in case management and continuing education and training to mental health providers to ensure keeping the best people working in this field.

### **Conclusion**

There was an article written in the Intelligencer, a local newspaper in Bucks County, on Sunday August 1, 2004. The title of the article was “Mental Health Millions Bypass Bucks”. The article discussed the state allocation of funds and why Bucks County gets the lowest in the region. This article incited some angry feelings and resentment in many people working in the mental health field in Bucks County. NAMI did have people sign a petition stating that the formula the Department of Public Welfare utilizes is unfair. However, nothing has come out of that petition so far. One legislator, Senator Tomlinson wrote a letter to Estelle Richman with his concerns regarding the funding streams. DPW sent him a response. Nothing else came out of it. However, the majority of legislators, County Administrators, people working in this field and the community have not banded together to try to enact change. One would not be able to speculate the reason for this inaction. However, it is indicative of how this county ended up in this terrible situation.

This particular article did a good job stating the facts of how the funding problem occurred and how it affected the consumers, but that is where it stopped. It did not

influence people to take action. After many discussions with Thomasina Bouknight, Southeast Regional Director for the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Programs at DPW, she reported that the funding streams will not change. She said the department will not take money away from one county to fund another county. She said that there are no new monies coming into this field. Actually, there will be many cuts in existing revenue. DPW has been cutting staffing positions, decreasing paid time off and making employees pay more into their benefits.

Ms Bouknight reported that when she was a mental health administrator for Chester County, she hired a grant writer to go after money to create new programs. She constantly was trying to think out of the box to obtain funding and not rely on state money. That was able to keep Chester County afloat. When I met with Phil Fenster, MH/MR Administrator for Bucks County, he reported that they are trying to be creative in bring in new money into the county. However, he has been running into resistance from the surrounding counties.

I do not believe this issue will have any effect on the next election. Most people in the community do not want to deal with mental illness. They do not want the residential programs next door to them. For the administrators and legislators to make changes, more people need to band together. Besides increasing various programs, the inability for people working in the field to make a decent living needs to be addressed. There needs to be an increase in community education regarding mental illness. Possibly a run/walk could be developed sponsoring mental health programs. Mental illness is a community's issue not just affecting a select few. Until more people view mental illness as other illnesses I believe nothing will change.

## **Afterward**

This project has enabled me to learn the inter workings of our state and local government. When I met with Senator Conti to discuss this issue, he took the time to explain to me how the state legislators work together and how bills are introduced. He also discussed how DPW develops the budget, but how the state legislators approve the budget. Senator Conti reported that he was not aware of this situation of mental health funding in Bucks County and was wondering why I was the first person in 11 years to approach him. He kept telling me there was probably nothing he could do about the situation until I had the County Supervisors write to all of the Bucks County Legislators informing them that there is a problem. Then the legislators can get together to discuss it. He also stated that I should not go to the County Supervisors that the County Mental Health Administrator should.

After that meeting I felt less empowered to make a change. As a constituent, I felt I should carry just as much weight as an elected official in saying there is a problem. Also I was discouraged when people were telling me that this problem was not going to change in my lifetime. This will not discourage me. I realize that things take time in our government to change. This project and course has taught me how to lobby effectively for causes I believe in. I will keep advocating for change. I would want nothing but the best for my family, so I will continue to make sure that individuals suffering from a mental illness receive the best possible care. Also there are good people working hard in this field that deserve to be properly compensated.

## **REFERENCES**

Larson,S. (2005). *Mental health millions bypass Bucks*. The Intelligencer, B1-2.

Senator Joe Conti, Pennsylvania State Senator

Thomasina Bouknight, Southeastern Regional Director for OMASAS with DPW

Philip Fenster, Administrator of the Office of Mental Health in Bucks County