



About the "Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023"

The "Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023" (CMWRA) is urgently needed because the US is experiencing an epidemic of mental health issues. Almost 53 million American adults experienced a diagnosed mental illness in 2021. Millions more adults and youth are suffering from mounting persistent extreme (or toxic) stresses related to family, social, community, economic, and other forces.

Added to these problems are the widespread traumatic stressors generated by climate-change generated cascading disruptions to the ecological, social, and economic systems people rely on for food, water, shelter, incomes, healthcare, safety, and other basic needs.

These toxic stresses are mixed with the acute traumas generated by more frequent, severe, and prolonged climate-related disasters and emergencies. Between 2011 and 2021 more than 90 percent of Americans lived in a county that was impacted by a weather disaster. In 2018, 1.2 million residents were displaced by an extreme weather disaster and by 2020 the annual total had risen to 1.7 million people. These numbers are certain to increase as the climate emergency accelerates.

Disasters and emergencies can psychologically and emotionally traumatize 20-40% of the individuals who are directly impacted, as well as 10-20% of emergency responders, those who know someone who is impacted, or even watch the event from afar. The traumas can lead to mental health conditions such as severe anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, complicated grief, increased suicidality, and more.

These conditions can be poisonous. Many people who experience these symptoms try to self-medicate by using alcohol or drugs and become addicted. Others turn their distress outward and neglect or abuse their spouse and children. Still others blame other people for their suffering and create harmful 'we vs them' social and political divisions, or become aggressive or violent.

Although they will remain very important, individualized mental health and social services cannot address the scale or scope of today's mental health epidemic. They have no chance of preventing or healing future epidemics of mental health problems generated by accelerating climate change-generated toxic stresses, disasters, and emergencies.

One reason is there will never be enough trained mental health or social service providers to assist all of the people who are traumatized. In addition, many of the people that need mental

health services will not engage due to fear of being stigmatized if others find out, and other reasons.

Most important is that mental health services are reactive: they assist individuals mostly one-at-a-time only *after* they experience symptoms of pathology and do not proactively *prevent* the occurrence of widespread mental health conditions.

To reduce the nation's current epidemic of mental health problems, and prevent future ones generated by the climate emergency, the "Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023" will expand the US approach to mental health to include a public health approach to mental wellness and resilience.

Key Elements of a Public Health Approach to Mental Wellness and Resilience

- A public health approach to mental wellness and resilience focuses on the entire population, not just those deemed at-risk or who show symptoms of pathology—although they are given special attention as part of the population-level approach by using a combination of what are called “proportionate universalism” and “life-course” methods.
- A public health approach prioritizes preventing the occurrence of mental health conditions, not merely treating them after they appear, and integrates group and community-minded peer-led healing methods, such as healing circles, into the prevention strategies. Mental health services support the community approach and are not the primary or dominant focus.
- A public health approach to mental wellness and resilience is most effective when implemented at the community level which is accomplished by actively engaging residents in strengthening existing local “protective factors”— social connections, trauma-informed and resilience-focused information and skills, local resources etc.—and forming additional assets, that buffer them from toxic stresses and acute shocks, help heal them when they are traumatized, and remain mental well and resilient during adversities.
- Implementation of these principles and practices requires the formation of the “social infrastructure” in communities, often called a “Resilience Coordinating Network” (RCN), that are coalitions of neighborhood, civic, non-profit, private, and public sector leaders that come together to design, implement, continually improve developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies to strengthen the capacity of all adults, adolescents, and young children for mental wellness and resilience for all types of adversities.

Initiatives are underway in many small towns and large urban areas nationwide that use a public health approach to strengthen the capacity of residents for mental wellness and resilience for adversities. One of the issues almost all struggle with is sufficient funding to get organized and support their work through the 3-4 years most need to start up and mature to

the point that their strategies can become very effective and the RCN can become financially self-sufficient.

The "Community Mental Wellness and Resilience of 2023" will address this problem by directing CDC to fund and support community initiatives that seek to devise their own unique strategies to build and sustain mental wellness and resilience. Research shows that when the community initiatives become effective they significantly reduce mental health, behavioral health, and psychosocial problems--and the many personal, family, social, and other challenges these problems generate in communities.