

## Written Testimony

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Attention: Senate Health and Public Welfare Committee

Senator Vicki Schmidt, Chair

Provided by: Susan Crain Lewis, President/CEO

Mental Health America of the Heartland

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Hearing Date: Monday, March 20, 2017

Good afternoon, my name is Susan Crain Lewis, and I am the President/CEO of Mental Health America of the Heartland, an advocacy organization based in Kansas City that serves the Eastern portion of the state of Kansas with advocacy, education and support services for persons with mental illness, and the persons who work with and care for and about them, whether in a professional or personal role.

As a longtime advocate dedicated to serving the needs of the mentally ill and their families, I can attest that early access to healthcare is critical for anyone who experiences onset of a severe mental illness. Expanding KanCare will fill critical gaps in access to health and mental health care, reduce uncompensated crisis care and pave the way to recovery and economic self-sufficiency for 150,000 Kansans.

### Faster, More Effective Recovery from Mental Illness

Services like counseling, crisis intervention, case management and supported housing help people to start the recovery process early and rebuild their lives. In Kansas, up to 40% of people who are admitted to the state mental hospitals have not had previous contact with the community mental health system. This is in a large part due to the fact that they just have not had healthcare coverage, do not have a doctor, and find themselves not knowing where to turn when their mental or physical health begins to suffer. In Wyandotte County, which has a population of over 160,000, up to 60% of people admitted to a mental health hospital are completely uninsured. Earlier access to insurance, through expansion of KanCare, could prevent many of these costly admissions.

### Employment

Medicaid is a primary funder of mental health services in the United States.

Traditionally, people with serious mental illness are qualified for Medicaid based on their disability—that is, their inability to work. This represents a significant flaw in how we support people with mental illness as it precludes access to services that will help those people stay in their jobs. Regular community based mental health services, covered by Medicaid, can prevent the mental health crises that result in job loss. By expanding coverage up to 138% of poverty, we can catch and help people before they hit rock bottom from preventable and recurrent psychiatric crisis, and before they before costs become exacerbated by chronic unemployment, homelessness and hospitalizations. More stability, longer job retention, and more job opportunities in general means less negative impact on the entire community from mental illness and is good for employers too. KanCare expansion will allow people with mental illness to enter and remain in the workforce, increase their earnings, and still maintain the medical and mental health coverage essential for them to do so.

## **Healthy Caregivers**

Expanding KanCare will benefit caregivers too. The stress, worry, and emotional roller-coaster felt while taking care of a loved one during a mental health crisis is difficult for most. Those who give care to others are more likely to become physically and mentally unwell. Approximately 1 out of 4 caregivers of a person with a mental illness has depression themselves. As many as 8.4 million Americans are providing care to an adult with an emotional or mental health issue. In Kansas, we believe those rates are even higher. We are noted for both strong family ties and frontier areas with limited access to services. These families too are at risk of job loss or instability due to the practical, physical and emotional demands of unsupported caregiving, both for themselves and their loved ones.

In today's community-based mental health system, it is very common for family and other community caregivers to work actively alongside mental health professionals to care for people with severe mental illness. The total value of the work they do cannot be overstated, but we know their contributions add up to real dollars and cents in terms of prevention and recovery. Ensuring healthcare coverage for caregivers through KanCare Expansion will keep families strong and help to maintain support networks that are so important to the mental health of persons with mental illness, and the strength of our communities.