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Forcing the conversation on mental health



By **Kevin Cullen** | GLOBE COLUMNIST JANUARY 25, 2016

Joe Kennedy walked into Zaftigs in Brookline the other day and ordered the one thing that has kept him upright the last three weeks: coffee.

He and his wife, Lauren, just had their first child, Eleanor, and Ellie Kennedy is already running the show, deciding who sleeps and who doesn't.

Having watched his wife in action, Kennedy now knows women are the superior gender, that if men could get pregnant, paternity leave would begin at the moment of conception and last for years.

Halfway through his second term in Congress, he is learning to be a father, even as he is still learning how to be a congressman. There's a shared skill set.

When he's not in Washington, he lives not far from where his great-uncle, the assassinated president, was born. His family's legacy is his legacy, and it's entirely appropriate that one of the issues he has taken to heart is that messy intersection where mental health and addiction collide and become entangled.

His great-uncle Ted, the late senator, and Ted's son Patrick, the former congressman, were instrumental in the 2008 passage of the mental health parity and addiction equity act, which requires insurers to cover mental health and substance abuse treatment the same way they would other medical issues. That law is routinely flouted.

So there's a certain symmetry in Joe Kennedy being the one who would put teeth in that law. Last month, he filed a bill that would require insurers to disclose how often they deny mental health and substance abuse claims and to explain why.

Five years ago, when Joe Kennedy was a prosecutor on the Cape, a woman approached him at the courthouse and said, "I want you to hold my son without bail."

Her son was a combat veteran who came home and developed a raging opiate addiction. He stole every piece of jewelry in the house. His father found him a treatment bed, but it wouldn't open until the following Monday, so they filed charges and begged a judge to hold their son.

The kid looked up at the judge and said, "I'm an addict. I don't know what I would do if you release me."

During his first run for Congress, Joe Kennedy told that story at campaign stops.

"Everywhere I went, people came up to me and said, 'That's my son's story. Except he didn't make it,'" he said. "It's gotten worse since then. We have a system that doesn't work. The system is completely broken."

Reimbursement for mental health therapists has shrunk to the point that few will take insurance. It's all out of pocket. He knows a psychologist who was getting \$8 an hour from Medicaid to treat poor people. That didn't even cover the paperwork.

The bill he filed is just one piece aimed at reforming a dysfunctional system in which we have tried to lock up rather than treat those with mental illnesses and addictions. Over the next seven months, he plans to roll out a series of reforms.

As daunting a task as it seems, he is encouraged by changes both social and political. Socially, the stigma of acknowledging mental illness and addiction is receding; more families are speaking up.

Politically, Kennedy says bipartisanship really exists on this, because mental illness and addiction know no boundaries. Kennedy teamed up with Representative Susan Brooks, a Republican from Indiana, to sponsor a bill on opioid abuse education and prevention.

Presidential rivals are talking about mental health and addiction on the stump.

Closer to home, at different levels of government, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, a Democrat, and Governor Charlie Baker, a Republican, take the issue as serious as any they face.

Changing a dysfunctional system requires action at every level: local, state and federal.

"It's about forcing a conversation," a sleep-deprived Joe Kennedy said.

"We need to continue to force it."

Moments later, he was bounding down Harvard Street. Ellie was awake, and waiting.

Comments

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