

December 15, 2008

Mr. Vincent Gray
Chairman
District of Columbia City Council
1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Room 504
Washington, DC 20004

Re: DC Community Services Agency of the Department of Mental Health

Dear Chairman Gray:

The Metropolitan Washington Public Health Association (MWPHA) has been concerned about the availability of mental health services in the District of Columbia and recently sponsored a conference on HIV, Substance Use and Mental Health. The need for integrated and expanded services is well recognized by providers and public health workers. We are concerned about the plans of the Department of Mental Health to privatize the services currently provided by the DC CSA which currently provides outpatient mental health services for DC residents. Based on our conversations with many health providers in the city we support the emergency legislation to be proposed on December 16 to halt the privatization for 90 days to further evaluate this plan.

The CSA is a safety net provider for the homeless and many chronic patients in the District. Disrupting these services by established and committed providers will leave many patients confused and without service. Loss of staff positions at CSA is also a concern. Tearing down programs is easier than building them back up and the loss of morale and service providers will not be good for patients or employees.

While we recognize that some of the private providers are well respected we doubt that the capacity for service exists at this time. Furthermore we are particularly concerned about private providers not accepting patients who are uninsured, under the Alliance or undocumented. Access to pharmaceuticals needs to include all necessary medications not limited formularies. The information on such issues needs to be presented at public hearings to learn about impending problems and to assure transparency.

The temptation to save money through privatization is always present but improved quality has remained elusive in schools, health care and especially in mental health areas. Texas and North Carolina are recent examples of failed privatization efforts. Stability in mental health services is especially important for patients and DC CSA has provided this. Building up the access to mental health services linked to other stabilizing forces such as jobs and housing is critical to the well being of the city. MWPHA looks forward to continued engagement in improving these social determinants of disease and mental illness in DC.

Sincerely,

Linda D. Green, MD
Vice President
Metropolitan Washington Public Health Association