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State kicks off ‘Let’s Talk Mental Health’ Series

Warwick, R.I. – The Executive Office of Health and Human Services and its partners kicked off a series of public conversations to raise awareness about mental health, addiction and available treatment on Monday, Sept. 17.

The event was held at the Kent Center, a community-based provider of mental health, substance abuse, and trauma-specific services in Warwick.

“The first step toward breaking down mental health barriers in Rhode Island is simply by starting the conversation,” Secretary Eric J. Beane said. “We cannot change what we don’t first acknowledge – and own – as a community. From our homes to our social centers to our boardrooms and government buildings, talking about behavioral health – like physical health – should be encouraged. No one should suffer in silence.”

In May, Governor Gina M. Raimondo signed [Executive Order 18-03](#), which reaffirms and expands Rhode Island’s commitment to people with mental illness and substance use disorders. The Executive Order calls for a series of public discussions designed to help inspire public dialogue about Rhode Islanders’ mental health experiences and perspectives – and to promote understanding and awareness about treatment.

Part of the State’s behavioral health strategy includes addressing mental health parity. The Rhode Island Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner (OHIC) continues to work to improve the ways in which Rhode Islanders can access the help they need.

“The Rhode Island Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner is uniquely situated—through the Governor’s directives, legislative authority, and federal grant opportunities—to encourage and ensure mental health parity implementation in our state,” said RI Health Insurance Commissioner Marie Ganim, who participated in Monday’s kickoff event. “OHIC will continue to integrate behavioral health parity into its regulatory and policy efforts, employing multiple strategies to improve access, quality and coverage of behavioral health services.”

Behavioral health has long been a taboo topic – downplayed as a sign of weakness and not met with the same urgency or seriousness as physical health. Changing attitudes and perceptions around behavioral health is key to ensuring people seek treatment and have a chance to find success in recovery. Through this series, the State is encouraging members of the public to participate and share their personal thoughts, stories, experiences and ideas.

“One in five adults experience a mental illness in a given year, but less than half receive mental health services and the consequences can be significant,” said Rebecca Boss, Director of the RI Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals. “These Town Halls will allow us to hear from Rhode Islanders about what is working and what needs improvement in our system. Our goal is to

further educate the public about the treatment available and continue these important conversations so that we can break down barriers to care.”

“Mental health challenges and substance-use disorder have touched every single household in Rhode Island in one way or another,” said Nicole Alexander-Scott, MD, MPH, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health. “We need to be having honest discussions about these issues that are free of judgment and shame within our families and our communities. This series of open conversations over the next few months will give us an opportunity to share our experiences, and to share our ideas about how we can better support those who need help in every single ZIP code in Rhode Island. By coming together, we can make a difference.”

The panel touched on the importance of all members of the community – including veterans – having access to treatment and receiving education about the resources available in Rhode Island.

“We need to better educate our veterans about the mental, behavioral, and emotional consequences of combat on the human mind, body and soul,” said Kasim Yarn, Rhode Island’s Director of Veterans Affairs. “It’s important to know that these challenges are normal and expected. I’m proud to be a part of a continuing conversation on reducing the stigma and helping Rhode Islanders who answered the call of duty to access the best care and resources available.”

The panel also spoke of the addiction crisis that is devastating communities and families nationwide. Tom Coderre, senior advisor to the Office of the Governor and former Obama Administration advisor on substance abuse and mental health services, said:

“One of the most important ways we can change attitudes about mental health and addiction is to talk openly about our journey to recovery. I tell my story to family members, friends and wherever I go in the community to let people know there is hope and recovery is possible for everyone.”