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## OUR VIEW: MENTAL HEALTH

# Collaboration helps meet increased need

Local mental health services have been stretched thin as the needs rise past capacity, but a silver lining comes with the resilient and stronger effort to meet those needs among agencies and professionals.

Today's in-depth report in our continuing series on the mental health crisis shows a significant rise in local demand for mental health services, an increase amplified by the pandemic. But local providers have learned to collaborate to expedite service to those who need it most and have come up with innovative programs.

### Why it matters:

Waiting lists for mental health services have grown as needs rise during the pandemic.

Collaborations like the South Central Community Based Initiative help define needs regionally and help bring resources to grow services.

High school programs, like Project for Teens, have stepped up with peer-to-peer support programs, in which high schoolers counsel young students on mental health coping strategies.

Still, most mental health service providers report a seven- to eight-week wait for therapy services, depending on what type of treatment is needed. Calls for service from the South Central Community Based Initiative, which provides mobile crisis services throughout south-central Minnesota, were on the rise even before the pandemic, going from about 283 contacts per month in 2018 to 566 in 2019.

Mental health screenings by Mental Health Minnesota have gone up by 400% during the pandemic, 600% for youth. Local mental health practitioners have seen a doubling of referrals.

But there remain alternatives for more immediate crises — for example, the South Central Crisis Center operated by Horizon Homes. Service providers encourage those seeking services to continue to make the effort and to get on as many waiting lists as possible.

Telemedicine, which grew sharply during the pandemic because of the need to isolate, also has become a surprisingly helpful support platform. While some patients find going in front of a video screen for treatment unnerving, others have found it more comfortable than going to an in-person meeting.

The Legislature and Gov. Tim Walz boosted telemedicine efforts by making reimbursement rates the same as in-person visits. That allowed more providers to use telemedicine, and that should be the first thing on the Legislature's list to make permanent.

We know services will grow when overall mental health reimbursement rates are on par with physical health reimbursement rates. "Mental health parity" has been the goal of Congress and many other public bodies, but many experts in the field say it hasn't happened.

Minnesota needs a public and political effort to encourage more students to go into the mental health field. An earlier Free Press in-depth report showed the shortage of mental health providers everywhere but severe shortages in rural areas.

Today's coverage shows that services have indeed grown with the needs. We must build on that with the aim of vastly reducing the waiting periods.

A collaboration of forces — businesses, government, nonprofits — must bring attention to the mental health crisis and treat it with the urgency of a broken bone or heart disease. Mental health may not seem like it is an emergency, but that is exactly what it turns into if not treated quickly and effectively.

## THEY SAID IT

**"People are stressed out, they're experiencing things that they've never experienced before, and there is a shortage of resources out there right now.**

**"There's waitlists for programs and it's just very difficult for people to access the things that they need, and some people haven't experienced any of this before. It's all new to them."**

RICKI PRYBIL, HORIZON HOMES CLINICAL DIRECTOR

FOUNDED IN 1887

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STEVE JAMESON, Publisher

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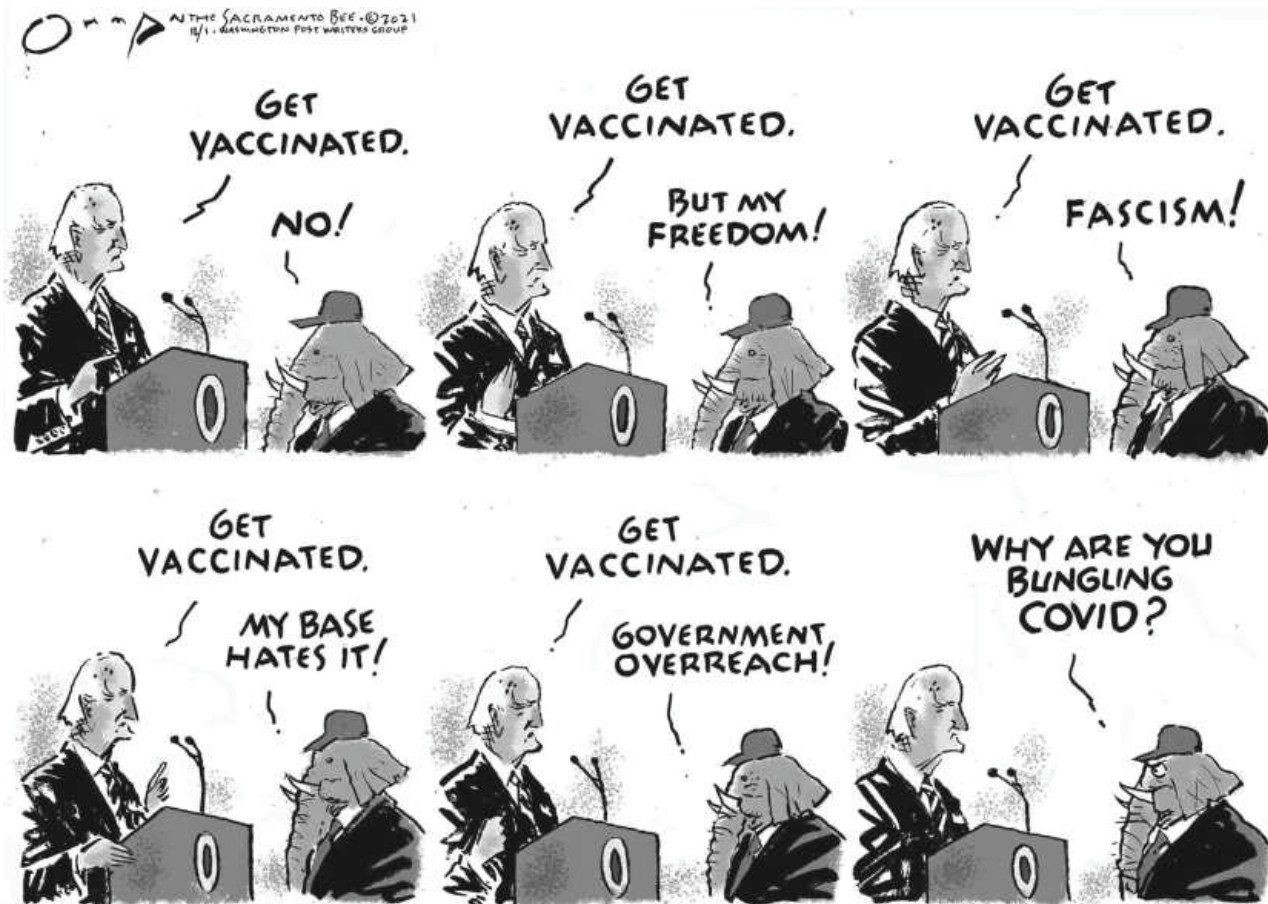
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## IN RESPONSE

# Region needs real infrastructure

By Rep. Jim Hagedorn

During my time in Congress, building true infrastructure in southern Minnesota has been one of my biggest priorities. I have worked to promote projects that build and repair our airports, roads, bridges, railroads, ports, locks and dams.

Just recently, local stakeholders came together to celebrate the completion of the Highway 14 expansion project from Dodge Center to Owatonna. The completion of the Highway 14 corridor from Rochester to New Ulm, a project dating back roughly 60 years, has been my top transportation priority. I'm pleased to report that my work with the Trump administration's U.S. Department of Transportation secured a \$25 million Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) discretionary grant.

This federal funding, combined with dedicated state dollars, have paved-the-way for completion of the last Highway 14 four-lane expansion from Nicollet to New Ulm. I'm proud of this bipartisan effort. Ground-breaking should commence in the near future and about two years from now we will celebrate enhanced transportation that will facilitate economic growth, transportation efficiencies, safer travel and improved quality of life for southern Minnesotans.

The Mankato Regional Airport also recently received funding to make changes to its airfield and update the airport's runways. I fought for this and am working closely with local leaders to gain authorization and funding for a new control tower at the Mankato Regional Airport, our state's busiest airport without a tower. Moving forward, this will provide additional safety as the successful airport and pilot education training programs continue to grow.

In addition, I worked to gain funding for the Rochester International

Airport's substantial runway and lighting upgrade project — critical improvements to facilitate transportation during inclement weather conditions of tens of thousands of daily time-sensitive lab tests, along with critical care patients and medical experts who travel to the Mayo Clinic from points around the world every day.

It is projects like these that will go a long way toward expanding commerce, enhancing safety and improving travel in our communities. It is critical that we focus on projects that will result in meaningful infrastructure investments.

Transportation and infrastructure have certainly been in the news a great deal recently as the House of Representatives passed two massive tax-and-spending packages. These two packages are inextricably linked, as the so-called "infrastructure" package was nothing more than a Trojan horse aimed at greasing the skids to pass President Joe Biden's "Build Back Better" reconciliation bill, the largest spending package in our nation's history.

The "infrastructure" package comes with an expensive price tag — \$1.2 trillion, with \$600 billion in new spending — and only a fraction of the new money goes toward what the American people would consider true infrastructure. Moreover, most of the new spending is not paid for, adding hundreds of billions of dollars in new debt that will ultimately lead to higher taxes, spur additional inflation and make America less competitive.

In addition to piling on mountains of new debt, nothing was done to systematically reform our transportation and infrastructure system. The package contains no meaningful improvements to the often misused and lengthy regulatory and permitting processes. Projects that take years to complete will continue to do so.

Even worse, we've now interjected

new radical policies and ideas like the Green New Deal which will only compound our nation's infrastructure challenges, drive up the cost of energy, and make us dependent upon foreign countries like communist China. Centralizing transportation decisions in this way takes us further away from putting these decisions into the hands of elected local and state officials, where they should reside.

Without a doubt, there is a need for more transportation dollars, but we must fund projects in a responsible manner. That means being paid for, instituting meaningful reforms, and empowering state legislators, not Washington, D.C. politicians, bureaucrats and Green New Deal lobbyists, with project decision-making.

House Republicans put forth a vision along these lines. The STARTER Act increases funding for transportation and infrastructure but does so without mortgaging our children's future. It streamlines the regulatory and permitting process in order to reduce burdens on states and localities. And it makes permanent the BUILD grant program, which was so successful for the Highway 14 expansion, while creating direct set-asides for rural transportation projects.

For these and other reasons I strongly supported the STARTER Act, which invests \$400 billion over 5 years.

This is very much the sort of vision that should have been put in place, and it's the type of true infrastructure reforms I fight for in Congress every day. Doing so would vastly increase funding for true infrastructure like roads and bridges, as well as improve the quality of life for the hardworking men and women of Minnesota's 1st District and reinforce the common-sense conservative sensibilities that have made our country great.

Rep. Jim Hagedorn represents the 1st Congressional District.

## YOUR VIEWS

# City's homeless need real options

As I drove my spouse to work this morning on the first single digit temperature day of the end of the year, I witnessed an old man briskly walking down the street pushing a baby stroller full of camping gear.

I am sad to say I live in a town that allows a single church to dole out donations and let me sleep on cots for less than six months a year as its sustainable plan for managing a growing homeless population.

It is time for the city to come together and create a plan to provide modest, sustainable housing for individuals needing support for whatever reason with their housing situation. Sweden, Norway and every other civilized country with serious winters does not allow their homeless to go unsheltered, and, in fact, some of these countries set up small shelters in parks for emergency weather situations.

It is a shame that we let people be homeless in winter because of some weird, Midwestern ethics about handouts, not getting things for free, a sense of personal responsibility grounded in fear of hellfire for not working hard enough to take care oneself, and the belief that being

homeless is a choice.

I propose the city build a tiny house park somewhere and house people, because the alternative is having anti-fascist activists flood the streets handing out saws and twine to help them build shelters themselves, and no one wants that, especially the trees.

I strongly urge the city to field suggestions for a sustainable, long-term solution that offers people real options and incentivizes businesses to help.

Anne Sweeney  
Mankato

## Let's continue to ask representatives questions

Events of the past year or two have not only produced increased stress and anxiety for many, but also an increasing number of questions.

Whether the questions deal with "two weeks to flatten the curve" or supply chain issues, increased energy costs, "mostly" peaceful protests, or everything from fairness in school sports to social emotional learning or whatever moniker we are using this month, it is evident that there are

more questions being fostered than are being answered.

Part of the problem may stem from the possibility that we have strayed too far from the original intent of our representative form of government, from the lowest to the highest levels. We do not exist under a pseudo-monarchy of experts.

Our representatives should not be there for themselves. They are to represent us. Within our form of government (a representative republic) that is precisely what the word means and where the focus should return.

It is especially concerning to observe what seems to be a nationwide misappropriation of the rights of parents in many specific aspects of our current society. As a quote from Eric Lindros states: "I had great representatives looking out for my best interests. They just happened to be my parents."

Admittedly, this is not always the case, but more often than not, it is. Continue to ask questions. Continue to seek answers. If your voices had no power, no one would be trying to silence you.

Robert Heller  
Mankato