

MEMO TO: Board of Trustees Center for Behavioral Change and Public Enlightenment

FROM: Emmanuel D Opde, President/Policy Director

SUBJECT: Mental Health Advocacy to the National Assembly in Nigeria.

Mental health has emerged as a critical public health issue in Nigeria, affecting numerous facets of life, including productivity, relationships, and overall well-being. This memo outlines pressing policy issues related to mental health in Nigeria, assesses the current advocacy landscape, identifies key stakeholders, and provides recommendations for policy action by Center for Behavioral Change and Public Enlightenment to the National Assembly.

Background of Issues:

Access to Mental Health Services/Lack of National Mental Health Policy

The lack of a comprehensive national policy on mental health in Nigeria severely obstructs access to essential services for individuals coping with mental health disorders. Barriers such as a shortage of trained mental health professionals, insufficient funding, lack of insurance coverage, and deep-rooted societal stigma exacerbate this public health crisis. Without a collective national strategy to tackle these challenges, millions of Nigerians will continue to go without the critical support and treatment they need.

Reports indicate that mental health disorders affect an estimated 1 in 4 Nigerians at some point in their lives. However, a significant portion of these individuals do not receive appropriate care. This situation is intensified for vulnerable groups, including those from low-income backgrounds, residents of rural areas, and marginalized communities. These populations face greater difficulties in accessing timely and effective mental health services. The repercussions of untreated mental health issues not only perpetuate cycles of suffering but also place an enormous burden on our healthcare system and society, leading to greater healthcare costs, lost productivity, and increased rates of suicide and homelessness.

Mental Health Stigma

Stigmatization of mental health challenges remains high, hindering individuals from seeking help.

Misconceptions, religious beliefs and negative perceptions lead to isolation and severe consequences for mental health conditions, preventing open discussion about mental health.

Integration of Mental Health into Primary HealthCare

Insufficient integration of mental health services with primary healthcare leads to inadequate treatment and poor health outcomes.

Patients frequently receive fragmented care, complicating recovery and leading to higher healthcare costs.

Funding and Resource Allocation

Mental health services often face funding cuts and resource allocation challenges at both state and federal levels.

Restrictions in funding result in reduced service availability, affecting community programs, emergency services, and long-term care.

Advocacy Landscape

The mental health advocacy landscape is diverse, comprising various interest groups, advocacy organizations, healthcare providers, and individuals with lived experiences.

Key stakeholders include:

- **Advocacy Groups:** National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Mental Health Nonprofit Organizations (MHNO), and local community organizations.
- **Healthcare Providers:** Psychiatrists, social workers, and primary care physicians who play an essential role in patient treatment.
- **Legislators:** State and federal officials who propose and vote on health, mental health-related policies affect funding, access, and services.
- **Opinion Leaders:** Influential figures in mental health policy, such as researchers, activists, and public figures (celebrities, athletes) who discuss mental health openly can shape public perception and policy decisions.

Legal and Policy Context

Current laws such as section 327 of the Nigerian Criminal Code Act 1990 criminalizes suicide attempt which is a mental concern. Whereas other countries have successfully passed legislation decriminalizing mental health issues such suicide attempt, enhancing funding and integrating mental health services into primary care, setting a precedent for policy reform in Nigeria.

Media Treatment: Mental health issues are covered extensively but often sensationalized. Recent media campaigns have highlighted the need for empathy and understanding, helping to diminish stigma and religious beliefs surrounding mental health in Nigeria but a lot need to be done by the media.

Solutions and Alternatives: Innovations such as telehealth services and community-based care have gained traction due to their accessibility other countries. Additionally, collaborative care models integrating mental health professionals into primary healthcare settings can have significant promise and better health outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I hereby recommend that Center for Behavioral Change and Public Enlightenment should advocate for the following through the National Assembly:

- **Development of a Comprehensive National Strategy:** Engage with policymakers, mental health organizations, and stakeholders to formulate a national mental health policy that prioritizes accessibility, affordability, decriminalization, and the destigmatization, of mental health services across all regions of Nigeria. The National Policy on Mental Health would ensure:
- **Increased Funding for Mental Health Services:** Advocate for enhanced public and private funding to grow the workforce of mental health professionals and expand service delivery in underserved regions, ensuring that all Nigerians have access to necessary care.
- **Promotion of Mental Health Awareness:** Launch national campaigns aimed at reducing stigma, educating the public about mental health, and emphasizing the importance of seeking help, thereby encouraging more individuals to access the mental health support available to them.
- **Integration of Mental Health and Primary Care**

Integration of mental health services with primary healthcare will lead to adequate treatment and decrease poor health outcomes.

By taking decisive action to advocate for a national mental health policy, we can significantly improve the landscape of mental health care in Nigeria and ensure that more individuals receive the treatment and support they need to thrive.

Conclusion

Addressing mental health as a policy issue is critical for the wellbeing of our communities. By focusing on these recommendations, the Center for Behavioral Change and Public Enlightenment can proactively engage in shaping policies that enhance mental health support, ultimately leading to a healthier society.

Thank you for your attention to these important matters. I look forward to discussing these recommendations further.