

**NATIONAL LATINO
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION**

July 8, 2002

Michael F. Hogan, Ph.D.
Chair, President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health
Ohio Department of Mental Health
30 East Broad Street, 8th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0414

Dear Dr. Hogan:

On behalf of the National Latino Behavioral Health Association (NLBHA), Board of Directors and members, we applaud the President for acknowledging mental health as a priority for his administration and the creation of the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. This Commission is an important step forward in helping to close the gaps in our mental health system.

We are equally enthusiastic with the President's decision to appoint you as Chair - a proven leader with a commitment towards comprehensive reform of mental health delivery systems. While the challenges that await you and the Commission may be formidable, we join you in this challenge and offer our commitment and hard work to identify and implement solutions that address the inadequacies of the mental health system such as the elimination of access and service delivery disparities for minority populations.

Reducing behavioral health disparities requires multiple approaches. There are four major categories of planning and action:

- 1) Increasing the knowledge base by which disparities are documented and understood.
- 2) Improving outcomes of interventions and services for minorities through research,
- 3) Institutional infrastructure and research training/career development, and;
- 4) Enhancing Public Information/Outreach/Dissemination

These areas are priorities for both the Commission and for NLBHA. They tremendously impact accessibility, availability, affordability, and appropriateness of services for many Americans, particularly ethnic/minority groups. With this in mind, NLBHA respectfully submits the following recommendations for the Commission to consider as you move forward in your work.

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Recommendation #1

Establishment of a Subcommittee of experts in the area of cultural competency, chaired and co-chaired by appointed Commissioners of your choice and who have an interest, a passion and demonstrated commitment for addressing cultural competency. Cultural and linguistic competencies impact all aspects of behavioral health services, therefore, it is imperative that a set of Cultural and Linguistic Competency Standards is embedded throughout all the recommendations of this very important Commission. The institutionalization and promotion of such Standards by the Commission will elevate their importance and ensure that no mental health consumers are excluded. It will also address the need for quality of care for all populations. These experts would be a collection of administrators, academics, researchers, clinicians, advocate groups, consumers, and family members representing this nations culturally diverse communities. This group of experts would be asked to serve in an advisory capacity to the Commission.

Recommendation #2

The Subcommittee would be commissioned to author a paper outlining the issues facing all Americans regarding healthcare disparities in the public and private mental health system and proposed solutions. This paper would:

- Provide a comprehensive review of the literature
- Identify innovative culturally competent programs and strategies for providing culturally appropriate services to minority populations,
- Provide guidance on Title VI, Limited English Proficiency,
- Reference published works (e.g., Surgeon General's Reports; proceedings from the National Congress for Hispanic Mental Health; and SAMHSA/WICHE Cultural Competency Standards in Managed Mental Health Care for Four Underserved/Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Groups), and
- Formulate short, mid-range, and long term solutions to improve the public and private mental health system.

This paper would be the impetus for the creation of the President's New Freedom Commission for Mental Health National Agenda and Action Plan Toward The Elimination of Disparities in Mental Health.

In conclusion, NLBHA encourages the Commission to place major emphasis in its work on promotion of care and practice standards, utilizing a base of cost-effective measures. Similar work has already been published in 1999 by SAMHSA with the establishment of individual and combined standards of mental health services in a managed care environment. We urge the Commission to draw from the members of those respective panels as your Subcommittee and as the foundation to support the Commission in its pursuit of excellence and positive results for further implementation of care and practice standards.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations to the Commission.

Sincerely,

Josie T. Romero, MSW, LCSW
President of the Board of Directors

A Marie Sanchez
Executive Director

Cc: Charles Curie, SAMHSA
Freedom Commission on Mental Health Commissioners