



EASA Center for Excellence

Hello, my name is Tamara Sale and I'm the Director of the EASA Center for Excellence at Portland State University in Oregon. I want to thank Congressional leaders, the National Council for Behavioral Health, the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their wonderful leadership in helping to bring the issue of early psychosis into the national consciousness.

As I speak, in almost every neighborhood in this country, there are families whose teenagers and young adults are hallucinating, delusional, have lost touch with reality and are getting no help. These families have been told, "There's nothing we can do until your child is an imminent threat to himself or others," and they are living a nightmare waiting for the day the symptoms become so severe that someone's life is threatened.

Every week of the year in this country over a thousand people develop psychosis for the first time, most often as teenagers or young adults. Typically it will take over a year for them to receive care. During this time they often lose everything- their relationships, their roles, their ability to function, even their sense of identity. When young people do get care, the care available to them is rarely consistent with the evidence about what works. As a result, we routinely see preventable trauma and even death, people ending up in jail, and young people launched into a lifetime of poverty and disability. This neglect and the visibility of negative events perpetuate the myth that psychosis is a life sentence to tragedy.

In Oregon we decided that this dismal state of affairs could change, and needed to change. With leadership and support from the Oregon Health Authority, state legislators, local decision makers and foundations such as Meyer Memorial Trust and Kaiser Permanente Community Fund, we created the Early Assessment and Support Alliance, or EASA, a statewide network focused on identifying young people at the early stages of illness and providing easily accessible care based on what we know works. We grew from a five-county initiative in 2001 to a statewide network starting in 2007. As a result, 94 percent of Oregonians have access to an early psychosis team and last year 550 young people and their families received early intervention for psychosis in Oregon.

The Oregon Early Assessment and Support Alliance, or EASA, recognizes that when you first experience psychosis you're not likely to make it to a mental health center. EASA educates the community about the early signs of psychosis, and reaches out in a flexible and persistent way to engage with the young person when symptoms first occur. EASA focuses on supporting and partnering with the family, and provides a range of intensive services including medical,



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counseling, occupational therapy and school and work supports. If the person has to go the hospital, EASA will come onto the unit and work with the young person and the hospital staff.

EASA works with schools and employers, and helps young people gain the understanding, resources and support they need to successfully carry on with their lives.

Our results so far are promising. We see a dramatic drop in hospitalizations for people entering the program. The majority of young people continue with school and work, and these young people are entering every known profession and are becoming leaders in their own right. Healthcare reform has reduced the percentage of people in our program who are uninsured from thirty percent to less than ten percent. We are working to build longer term supports to help make sure people don't lose their momentum with time.

Perhaps the most exciting thing is to see the emergence of a movement of empowered young adults who have graduated from our program. They have formed a statewide young adult leadership council, the vision of which is to unify the voices and strengths of young adults who have experienced psychosis and their allies to create a thriving community of support and a revolution of hope. After working with the young people EASA serves for the last fourteen years, I am in awe of their intelligence, hard work, sincerity and generosity. I am convinced that the main thing standing in the way of people in similar situations throughout the country is that we've made it extraordinarily difficult to access care, and until now, we have not made a commitment to making the right care available.

In 2014 Congress set a new direction when you directed states to begin moving toward early intervention for serious mental illness. Now states throughout the country are just beginning to consider what this means. The new federal block grant dollars are a small sum but have huge potential leverage. With shared leadership at all levels we can live up to that potential. Although Congress passed a parity law few private insurers cover the type of intensive team-based care people with psychosis need. We can speed up the process by pushing forward with meaningful implementation of insurance parity, and also aligning the funding and expectations in our federal health, workforce, rehabilitation and educational programs to make sure that effective early identification and intervention are readily available to teens and young adults in the early stages of psychosis.

Thank you for believing in the ability and potential of our young people. Please help us spread the word about the importance and real potential impact if we can be there for them when psychosis first begins.