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Working Together to Make Progress on Mental Health

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*Article Submitted to
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Missouri - On a recent visit to St. Joseph, I had the opportunity to witness first-hand the positive impact that our bipartisan efforts on mental health are making on communities in Missouri, as well as the clear path ahead toward making even greater strides in this area.

Twenty months ago, after a deeply disturbed young man shocked the nation by taking the lives of 20 innocent children at a school in Newtown Connecticut, my administration set out to identify fiscally responsible measures we could take to improve the way we care for Missourians whose mental illness is so severe that it makes them a threat to themselves or others.

We saw that Missourians struggling with mental illnesses like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression were often ending up in squad cars, jails and emergency rooms. It was a vicious cycle that put a significant strain on law enforcement officers, courts and hospitals and left families feeling like they had nowhere to turn.

I knew we could do better with effective interventions that would help break this dangerous cycle. That's why in my State of the State Address in 2013 I called for a series of targeted investments to improve public safety and strengthen the mental health system

in our state. The legislature agreed, and over the past year and a half we have strategically invested more than \$10 million in a targeted effort to identify and care for Missourians with severe mental illnesses before they reach a crisis point, and help communities respond to those who do.

We made a historic investment in Mental Health First Aid Training, and taught more than a thousand educators, professors, law enforcement officers, clergy and coworkers how to identify and respond to the signs of mental illness. Missouri is now a national leader in implementing these proven, life-saving techniques.

We launched seven emergency room rapid-response teams, from Springfield to Hannibal, to ease the burden on our doctors and nurses and avoid unnecessary and costly hospitalizations. And finally, we have recruited 30 new Community Mental Health Liaisons who now work daily with law enforcement, courts, and families to connect Missourians with mental illness with the care they need.

Last week in St. Joseph, I received an update on how that community's new liaison is working in northwest Missouri, and it was truly remarkable to see the difference this program has already made. Jen Gentry, the community mental health liaison for the region, has created a hub for unprecedented collaboration between health providers, law enforcement officers and courts in the region. St. Joseph Police Chief Chris Connally told me the effort had helped the department re-energize its Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) program, so that officers are better-prepared to respond to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. For the Atchison County Sheriff, having a single point-of-contact for mental health issues has brought long-overdue certainty to a confusing process that had drained time and resources from other public safety priorities.

But what I also heard from folks in St. Joseph is that our work is far from done. Despite the great strides we have made, mental health services in many communities are limited and expensive. For too many Missourians, especially those without insurance coverage, the mental health treatments and medications they need remain out of reach. Fortunately, we have an opportunity to build on the progress we have made, and give even more Missourians access to quality mental health care, by strengthening and reforming Medicaid this coming year.

Bringing Missourians' tax dollars home to expand and improve Medicaid would provide quality, affordable health care to 300,000 uninsured Missourians, including 50,000 who are – right now– in need of mental health services. Working in a bipartisan way, we've accomplished a great deal to make our communities safer and healthier. Now let's keep

going.

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