

# Mental Health

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A Report of the Surgeon General

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
U.S. Public Health Service



The Center for Mental Health Services  
*Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration*



National Institute  
of Mental Health  
National Institutes of Health

**Suggested Citation**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, 1999.

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents,  
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## **Message from Donna E. Shalala**

*Secretary of Health and Human Services*

The United States leads the world in understanding the importance of overall health and well-being to the strength of a Nation and its people. What we are coming to realize is that mental health is absolutely essential to achieving prosperity. According to the landmark "Global Burden of Disease" study, commissioned by the World Health Organization and the World Bank, 4 of the 10 leading causes of disability for persons age 5 and older are mental disorders. Among developed nations, including the United States, major depression is the leading cause of disability. Also near the top of these rankings are manic-depressive illness, schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Mental disorders also are tragic contributors to mortality, with suicide perennially representing one of the leading preventable causes of death in the United States and worldwide.

The U.S. Congress declared the 1990s the Decade of the Brain. In this decade we have learned much through research—in basic neuroscience, behavioral science, and genetics—about the complex workings of the brain. Research can help us gain a further understanding of the fundamental mechanisms underlying thought, emotion, and behavior—and an understanding of what goes wrong in the brain in mental illness. It can also lead to better treatments and improved services for our diverse population.

Now, with the publication of this first Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health, we are poised to take what we know and to advance the state of mental health in the Nation. We can with great confidence encourage individuals to seek treatment when they find themselves experiencing the signs and symptoms of mental distress. Research has given us effective treatments and service delivery strategies for many mental disorders. An array of safe and potent medications and psychosocial interventions, typically used in combination, allow us to effectively treat most mental disorders.

This seminal report provides us with an opportunity to dispel the myths and stigma surrounding mental illness. For too long the fear of mental illness has been profoundly destructive to people's lives. In fact mental illnesses are just as real as other illnesses, and they are like other illnesses in most ways. Yet fear and stigma persist, resulting in lost opportunities for individuals to seek treatment and improve or recover.

In this Administration, a persistent, courageous advocate of affordable, quality mental health services for all Americans is Mrs. Tipper Gore, wife of the Vice President. We salute her for her historic leadership and for her enthusiastic support of the initiative by the Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher, to issue this groundbreaking Report on Mental Health.

The 1999 White House Conference on Mental Health called for a national antistigma campaign. The Surgeon General issued a Call to Action on Suicide Prevention in 1999 as well. This Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health takes the next step in advancing the important notion that mental health is fundamental health.

## Foreword

Since the turn of this century, thanks in large measure to research-based public health innovations, the lifespan of the average American has nearly doubled. Today, our Nation's physical health—as a whole—has never been better. Moreover, illnesses of the body, once shrouded in fear—such as cancer, epilepsy, and HIV/AIDS to name just a few—increasingly are seen as treatable, survivable, even curable ailments. Yet, despite unprecedented knowledge gained in just the past three decades about the brain and human behavior, mental health is often an afterthought and illnesses of the mind remain shrouded in fear and misunderstanding.

This Report of the Surgeon General on Mental Health is the product of an invigorating collaboration between two Federal agencies. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which provides national leadership and funding to the states and many professional and citizen organizations that are striving to improve the availability, accessibility, and quality of mental health services, was assigned lead responsibility for coordinating the development of the report. The National Institutes of Health (NIH), which supports and conducts research on mental illness and mental health through its National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), was pleased to be a partner in this effort. The agencies we respectively head were able to rely on the enthusiastic participation of hundreds of people who played a role in researching, writing, reviewing, and disseminating this report. We wish to express our appreciation and that of a mental health constituency, millions of Americans strong, to Surgeon General David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., for inviting us to participate in this landmark report.

The year 1999 witnessed the first White House Conference on Mental Health and the first Secretarial Initiative on Mental Health prepared under the aegis of the Department of Health and Human Services. These activities set an optimistic tone for progress that will be realized in the years ahead. Looking ahead, we take special pride in the remarkable record of accomplishment, in the spheres of both science and services, to which our agencies have contributed over past decades. With the impetus that the Surgeon General's report provides, we intend to expand that record of accomplishment. This report recognizes the inextricably intertwined relationship between our mental health and our physical health and well-being. The report emphasizes that mental health and mental illnesses are important concerns at all ages. Accordingly, we will continue to attend to needs that occur across the lifespan, from the youngest child to the oldest among us.

The report lays down a challenge to the Nation—to our communities, our health and social service agencies, our policymakers, employers, and citizens—to take action. SAMHSA and NIH look forward to continuing our collaboration to generate needed knowledge about the brain and behavior and to translate that knowledge to the service systems, providers, and citizens.

Nelba Chavez, Ph.D.  
Administrator  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration

Steven E. Hyman, M.D.  
Director  
National Institute of Mental Health  
for The National Institutes of Health

Bernard S. Arons, M.D.  
Director  
Center for Mental Health Services

## **Preface**

*from the Surgeon General  
U.S. Public Health Service*

The past century has witnessed extraordinary progress in our improvement of the public health through medical science and ambitious, often innovative, approaches to health care services. Previous Surgeons General reports have saluted our gains while continuing to set ever higher benchmarks for the public health. Through much of this era of great challenge and greater achievement, however, concerns regarding mental illness and mental health too often were relegated to the rear of our national consciousness. Tragic and devastating disorders such as schizophrenia, depression and bipolar disorder, Alzheimer's disease, the mental and behavioral disorders suffered by children, and a range of other mental disorders affect nearly one in five Americans in any year, yet continue too frequently to be spoken of in whispers and shame. Fortunately, leaders in the mental health field—fiercely dedicated advocates, scientists, government officials, and consumers—have been insistent that mental health flow in the mainstream of health. I agree and issue this report in that spirit.

This report makes evident that the neuroscience of mental health—a term that encompasses studies extending from molecular events to psychological, behavioral, and societal phenomena—has emerged as one of the most exciting arenas of scientific activity and human inquiry. We recognize that the brain is the integrator of thought, emotion, behavior, and health. Indeed, one of the foremost contributions of contemporary mental health research is the extent to which it has mended the destructive split between “mental” and “physical” health.

We know more today about how to treat mental illness effectively and appropriately than we know with certainty about how to prevent mental illness and promote mental health. Common sense and respect for our fellow humans tells us that a focus on the positive aspects of mental health demands our immediate attention.

Even more than other areas of health and medicine, the mental health field is plagued by disparities in the availability of and access to its services. These disparities are viewed readily through the lenses of racial and cultural diversity, age, and gender. A key disparity often hinges on a person's financial status; formidable financial barriers block off needed mental health care from too many people regardless of whether one has health insurance with inadequate mental health benefits, or is one of the 44 million Americans who lack any insurance. We have allowed stigma and a now unwarranted sense of hopelessness about the opportunities for recovery from mental illness to erect these barriers. It is time to take them down.

Promoting mental health for all Americans will require scientific know-how but, even more importantly, a societal resolve that we will make the needed investment. The investment does not call for massive budgets; rather, it calls for the willingness of each of us to educate ourselves and others about mental health and mental illness, and thus to confront the attitudes, fear, and misunderstanding that remain as barriers before us. It is my intent that this report will usher in a healthy era of mind and body for the Nation.

David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D.  
Surgeon General

## Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services under the direction of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, in partnership with the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health.

Nelba Chavez, Ph.D., Administrator, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Harold E. Varmus, M.D., Director, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Bernard Arons, M.D., Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Steven Hyman, M.D., Director, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

RADM Thomas Bornemann, Ed.D., Deputy Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Richard Nakamura, Ph.D., Deputy Director, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

RADM Kenneth Moritsugu, M.D., M.P.H., Deputy Surgeon General, Office of the Surgeon General, Office of the Secretary, Rockville, Maryland.

RADM Susan Blumenthal, M.D., M.P.A., Assistant Surgeon General and Senior Science Advisor, Office of the Surgeon General, Office of the Secretary, Rockville, Maryland.

## Acknowledgments

Nicole Lurie, M.D., M.S.P.H., Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health, Office of Public Health and Science, Office of the Secretary, Washington, D.C.

RADM Arthur Lawrence, Ph.D., Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health, Office of Public Health and Science, Office of the Secretary, Washington, D.C.

Virginia Trotter Betts, M.S.N., J.D., R.N., F.A.A.N., Senior Advisor on Nursing and Policy, Office of Public Health and Science, Office of the Secretary, Washington, D.C.

## Editors

Howard H. Goldman, M.D., Ph.D., Senior Scientific Editor, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland.

CAPT Patricia Rye, J.D., M.S.W., Managing Editor, Office of the Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Paul Sirovatka, M.S., Coordinating Editor, Science Writer, Office of Science Policy and Program Planning, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

## Section Editors

Jeffrey A. Buck, Ph.D., Director, Office of Managed Care, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

CAPT Peter Jensen, M.D., Associate Director for Child and Adolescent Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

## **Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General**

Judith Katz-Leavy, M.Ed., Senior Policy Analyst, Office of Policy, Planning and Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Barry Lebowitz, Ph.D., Chief, Adult and Geriatric Treatment and Preventive Intervention Research Branch, Division of Services and Intervention Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Ronald W. Manderscheid, Ph.D., Chief, Survey and Analysis Branch, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

RADM Darrel Regier, M.D., M.P.H., Associate Director, Epidemiology and Health Policy Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Matthew V. Rudorfer, M.D., Associate Director for Treatment Research, Division of Services and Intervention Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

### **Senior Science Writer**

Miriam Davis, Ph.D., Medical Writer and Consultant, Silver Spring, Maryland.

### **Science Writers**

Birgit An der Lan, Ph.D., Science Writer, Bethesda, Maryland.

Anne H. Rosenfeld, Special Assistant to the Director, Division of Mental Disorders, Behavioral Research and AIDS, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

### **Planning Board**

Mary Lou Andersen, Deputy Director, Bureau of Primary Health Care, Health Resources and Services Administration, Bethesda, Maryland.

Andrea Baruchin, Ph.D., Chief, Science Policy Branch, Office of Science Policy and Communication, National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Michael Benjamin, M.P.H., Executive Director, National Council on Family Relations, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Robert Bernstein, Ph.D., Executive Director, Bazelon Center, Washington, D.C.

Gene Cohen, M.D., Ph.D., Director, George Washington University Center on Aging, Health and Humanities; Director, Washington D.C. Center on Aging, Washington, D.C.

Judith Cook, Ph.D., Director, National Research and Training Center on Psychiatric Disability; Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Margaret Coopey, R.N., Senior Health Policy Analyst, Director, Center for Practice and Technology Assessment, Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, Rockville, Maryland.

Gail Daniels, Board President, The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Washington, D.C.

Paolo Del Vecchio, M.S.W., Senior Policy Analyst, Office of Policy, Planning, and Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Michael Eckardt, Ph.D., Senior Science Advisor, Office of Scientific Affairs, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

## Acknowledgments

Mary Jane England, M.D., President, Washington Business Group on Health, Washington, D.C.

Michael English, J.D., Director, Division of Knowledge Development and Systems Change, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Michael M. Faenza, M.S.S.W., President and Chief Executive Officer, National Mental Health Association, Alexandria, Virginia.

Michael Fishman, M.D., Assistant Director, Division of Child, Adolescent and Family Health, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health, Health Resources and Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Laurie Flynn, Executive Director, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Arlington, Virginia.

Larry Fricks, Director, Office of Consumer Relations, Georgia Division of Mental Health, Atlanta, Georgia.

Robert Friedman, Ph.D., Director, Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health, Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.

Laurie Garduque, Ph.D., Senior Program Officer, Program and Community Development, MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, Illinois.

John J. Gates, Ph.D., Director of Programs, Collaborative Center for Child Well-being, Decatur, Georgia.

Rosa M. Gil, D.S.W., Special Advisor to the Mayor for Health Policy, New York City Mayor's Office of Health Services, New York, New York.

Barbara Gill, M.B.A., Executive Director, Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives, New York, New York.

Mary Harper, R.N., Ph.D., Gerontologist, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Elliott Heiman, M.D., Chief of Staff of Psychiatry, St. Mary's Hospital, Tucson, Arizona.

Kevin Hennessy, M.P.P., Ph.D., Health Policy Analyst, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of the Secretary, Washington, D.C.

Pablo Hernandez, M.D., Administrator, Wyoming State Commission for Mental Health, Division of Behavioral Health, Evanston, Wyoming.

Thomas Horvath, M.D., Chief of Staff, Houston Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Houston, Texas.

J. Rock Johnson, J.D., Consultant, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Miriam Kelty, Ph.D., Associate Director for Extramural Affairs, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Lloyd Kolbe, Ph.D., Director, Division of Adolescent and School Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Jeffrey Lieberman, M.D., Vice Chairman of Research, University of North Carolina, Department of Psychiatry, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Spero Manson, Ph.D., Director, Division of American Indian and Alaska Native Programs, University of Colorado Health Science Center, Department of Psychiatry, Denver, Colorado.

RADM C. Beth Mazzella, R.N., Ph.D., Chief Nurse Officer, Office of the Administrator, Health Resources and Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Bruce McEwen, Ph.D., Professor and Head of the Lab for Neuroendocrinology, Rockefeller University, New York, New York.



## **Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General**

Herbert Pardes, M.D., Vice President for Health Sciences and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Columbia University Health Sciences Center, New York, New York.

Ruth Ralph, Ph.D., Research Associate, Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, Portland, Maine.

The Honorable Robert Ray, Former Governor, State of Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa.

Corinne Rieder, Ed.D., Executive Director, John A. Hartford Foundation, New York, New York.

Mona Rowe, M.C.P., Deputy Director, Office of Science Policy, Analysis, and Communication, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Steve Schreiber, M.D., Associate Professor of Neurology, Cell and Neurobiology, University of Southern California School of Medicine, Department of Neurology, Los Angeles, California.

Steven A. Schroeder, M.D., President, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, New Jersey.

Brent Stanfield, Ph.D., Director, Office of Science Policy and Program Planning, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Stanley Sue, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry, Director, Asian American Studies Program, Department of Psychology, University of California at Davis, Davis, California.

Jeanette Takamura, Ph.D., Assistant Secretary for Aging, Administration on Aging, Washington, D.C.

Roy C. Wilson, M.D., Director, Missouri Department of Mental Health, Jefferson City, Missouri.

## **Participants in Developing the Report**

Norman Abeles, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

Catherine Acuff, Ph.D., Senior Health Policy Analyst, Office of the Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Laurie Ahern, Director, National Empowerment Center, Inc., Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Marguerite Alegria, Ph.D., University of Puerto Rico, Medical Sciences Campus, School of Public Health, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Rene Andersen, M.Ed., Human Resource Association of the Northeast, Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Thomas E. Arthur, M.H.A., Coordinator of Consumer Affairs, Maryland Health Partners, Columbia, Maryland.

Rosina Becerra, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Social Welfare, Center for Child and Family Policy, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California.

Cornelia Beck, R.N., F.A.A.N., Ph.D., College of Nursing, University of Arkansas for Medical Services, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Peter G. Beeson, Ph.D., Administrator, Strategic Management Services, Nebraska Health and Human Services Finance and Support Agency, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Leonard Bickman, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Center for Mental Health Policy, Institute for Public Policy Studies, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Robert Boorstin, Senior Advisor to the Secretary of the Treasury, Department of the Treasury, Washington, D.C.

## Acknowledgments

David Brown, Consultant, Survey and Analysis Branch, Division of State and Community Systems Development, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Barbara J. Burns, Ph.D., Professor of Medical Psychology, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, North Carolina.

Jean Campbell, Ph.D., Research Assistant Professor, Missouri Institute of Mental Health, School of Medicine, University of Missouri-Columbia, St. Louis, Missouri.

Josefina Carbonell, President, Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers of Dade County, Inc., Miami, Florida.

Elaine Carmen, M.D., Medical Director, Brockton Multi Service Center, Brockton, Massachusetts.

H. Westley Clark, M.D., J.D., M.P.H., Director, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Donald J. Cohen, M.D., Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut.

Judith Cohen, Ph.D., Director, Association for Women's AIDS Risk Education, Corte Madera, California.

King Davis, Ph.D., William and Camille Cosby Scholar, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Laura A. DeRiggi, L.S.W., M.S.W., Clinical Director, Community Behavioral Health, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Lisa Dixon, M.D., Associate Professor, Center for Mental Health Services Research; Director of Education, Department of Psychiatry, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland.

Susan Dubuque, President, Market Strategies, Inc., Richmond, Virginia.

Mina K. Dulcan, M.D., Head, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago, Illinois.

Nellie Fox Edwards, American Association of Retired Persons, Beaverton, Oregon.

Lisa T. Eyler-Zorrilla, Ph.D., Post-Doctoral Fellow, Geriatric Psychiatry Clinical Research Center, Department of Psychiatry, University of California-San Diego, La Jolla, California.

Theodora Fine, M.A., Special Assistant to the Director, Office of the Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Dan Fisher, M.D., Ph.D., Executive Director, National Empowerment Center, Inc., Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Richard G. Frank, Ph.D., Professor of Health Economics, Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts.

Barbara Friesen, Ph.D., Director, Research and Training Center, Family Support and Children's Mental Health, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

Darrell Gaskin, Ph.D., Research Assistant Professor, Institute for Health Care Research and Policy, Georgetown University Medical Center, Washington, D.C.

Mary Jo Gibson, Ph.D., Associate Director of Public Policy Institute, AARP, Washington, D.C.

## **Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General**

Sherry Glied, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Head, Division of Health Policy and Management, Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Margo Goldman, M.D., Policy Director, National Coalition for Patients' Rights, Lexington, Massachusetts.

Junius Gonzales, M.D., Deputy Chairman, Psychiatry Department, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Jack Gorman, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, Columbia University; Deputy Director, New York State Psychiatric Institute, New York, New York.

Barbara Guthrie, Ph.D., R.N., University of Michigan School of Nursing, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Jennifer Gutstein, Research Assistant, Department of Child Psychiatry, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Laura Lee Hall, Ph.D., Deputy Director of Policy and Research, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Arlington, Virginia.

Richard K. Harding, M.D., Medical Director, Psychiatric Services, Richland Springs Hospital, Columbia, South Carolina.

Herbert W. Harris, M.D., Ph.D., Chief, Geriatric Pharmacology Programs, Adult and Geriatric Treatment and Preventive Intervention Research Branch, Division of Services and Intervention Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Seth Hassett, M.S.W., Public Health Advisor, Emergency Services and Disaster Relief Branch, Division of Program Development, Special Populations and Projects, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Mario Hernandez, Ph.D., Director, Division of Training, Research, Evaluation and Demonstrations, Department of Child and Family Studies, Florida Mental Health Institute, Tampa, Florida.

Kimberly Hoagwood, Ph.D., Associate Director, Child and Adolescent Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Ron Honberg, Director of Legal Affairs, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Arlington, Virginia.

Teh-wei Hu, Ph.D., Professor of Health Economics, School of Public Health, University of California-Berkeley, Berkeley, California.

Edwin C. Hustead, Senior Consultant, Hay Group, Inc., Washington, D.C.

Dilip V. Jeste, M.D., Director, Geriatric Psychiatry Clinical Research Center, University of California at San Diego, Veterans Affairs Medical Center Psychiatry Service, San Diego, California.

Ira Katz, M.D., Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry, Director, Section on Geriatric Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Kelly J. Kelleher, M.D., Staunton Professor of Pediatrics, Psychiatry and Health Services, Schools of Medicine and Public Health, Departments of Pediatrics and Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Chris Koyanagi, Director of Legislative Policy, Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, Washington, D.C.

Celinda Lake, M.P.S., President and Founder, Lake Snell Perry and Associates, Inc., Washington, D.C.

Christopher Langston, Ph.D., Program Officer, John A. Hartford Foundation, New York, New York.

## Acknowledgments

John B. Lavigne, Ph.D., Chief Psychologist, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago, Illinois.

Anthony Lehman, M.D., Director, Center for Mental Health Services Research, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland.

Keh-Ming Lin, M.D., M.P.H., Director of Research Center on the Psychobiology of Ethnicity, Professor of Psychiatry, University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine, Harbor–University of California at Los Angeles Medical Center, Torrance, California.

Steven Lopez, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychology, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California.

Ira Lourie, M.D., Partner, Human Service Collaborative, Rockville, Maryland.

Francis Lu, M.D., Director of Cultural Competence and Diversity Program, Department of Psychiatry, San Francisco General Hospital, San Francisco, California.

Alicia Lucksted, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate, Department of Psychiatry, University of Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland.

Bryce Miller, Consultant, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Topeka, Kansas.

Jeanne Miranda, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Psychiatry Department, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Joseph P. Morrissey, Ph.D., Deputy Director, Senior Fellow, Sheps Center for Health Services Research, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Patricia J. Mrazek, Ph.D., President, Scientific Director, Prevention Technologies, LLC, Bethesda, Maryland.

Denise Nagel, M.D., Executive Director, National Coalition for Patients' Rights, Lexington, Massachusetts.

William Narrow, M.D., M.P.H., Senior Advisor for Epidemiology, Office of the Associate Director for Epidemiology and Health Policy Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Cassandra F. Newkirk, M.D., Forensic Psychiatrist and Consultant, Caldwell, New Jersey.

Silvia W. Orlate, M.D., Clinical Professor of Psychology, New York Medical College–Vahalla, New York, New York.

Trina Osher, M.S.W., Coordinator of Policy and Research, Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Alexandria, Virginia.

John Petrila, J.D., L.L.M., Chairman and Professor, Department of Mental Health Law and Policy, University of South Florida, Florida Mental Health Institute, Tampa, Florida.

RADM Retired William Prescott, M.D., Psychiatrist, Brook Lane Health Service, Hagerstown, Maryland.

Juan Ramos, Ph.D., Associate Director for Prevention, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Burton Reifler, M.D., Professor and Chairman, Department of Psychiatry, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Donald J. Richardson, Ph.D., The Carter Center National Advisory Council; Co-founder and Vice President, National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression, Los Angeles, California.

Jean Risman, Consumer Researcher, North Berwick, Maine.

## **Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General**

Ariela C. Rodriguez, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., A.C.S.W., Director, Health and Social Services, Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers of Dade County, Inc., Miami, Florida.

Gloria Rodriguez, Ph.D., President and Chief Executive Officer, Avance Corporation, San Antonio, Texas.

Abram Rosenblatt, Ph.D., Research Director, University of California at San Francisco Child Services Research Group, San Francisco, California

Agnes E. Rupp, Ph.D., Senior Economist and Chief, Financing and Managed Care Research Program, Services Research and Clinical Epidemiology Branch, Division of Services and Intervention Research, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

A. John Rush, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, University of Texas Southwest Medical Center, Department of Psychiatry, Dallas, Texas.

David Shaffer, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics, Director, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Columbia University, New York, New York.

David Shore, M.D., Associate Director for Clinical Research, Office of the Director, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Lonnie Snowden, Ph.D., Professor, School of Social Welfare, University of California-Berkeley; Director, Center for Mental Health Services Research, Berkeley, California.

George Stricker, Ph.D., Distinguished Research Professor of Psychology, Derner Institute, Adelphi University, Garden City, New York.

Michael E. Thase, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Jurgen Unutzer, M.D., M.P.H., M.A., Assistant Professor in Residence, Department of Psychiatry, University of California at Los Angeles Neuropsychiatric Institute, Center for Health Services Research, Los Angeles, California.

Laura Van Tosh, Consultant, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Joan Ellen Zweben, Ph.D., Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, University of California-San Francisco, Berkeley, California.

### **Other Participants**

Joan G. Abell, Chief, Information Resources and Inquiries Branch, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Curtis Austin, Director, Office of External Liaison, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Elaine Baldwin, M.Ed., Chief, Public Affairs and Science Reports Branch, Office of Scientific Information, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Leslie Bassett, Program Assistant, Office of the Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Bonni Bennett, Desktopting Specialist, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Margaret Blasinsky, M.A., Vice President, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Anne B. Carr (formerly Program Assistant, Office of the Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), Silver Spring, Maryland.

## Acknowledgments

Lemuel B. Clark, M.D., Chief, Community Mental Health Centers Construction Monitoring Branch, Division of Program Development, Special Populations and Projects, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Olavo Da Rocha, Graphic Designer, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Daria Donaldson, Editor, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Betsy Furin, Program Assistant, Community Mental Health Centers Construction Monitoring Branch, Division of Program Development, Special Populations and Projects, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

David Fry, Consultant Writer, Cabin John, Maryland.

Charlotte Gordon, Public Affairs Specialist, Office of the Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Beatriz Gramley, Public Health Analyst, Primary Care Services Branch, Division of Community Based Programs, HIV/AIDS Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

CAPT G. Bryan Jones, Ph.D., Emergency Coordinator, Public Health Service Region Three-Philadelphia, Office of Emergency Preparedness, Office of Public Health and Science, Office of the Secretary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Walter Leginski, Ph.D., Branch Chief, Homeless Programs Branch, Division of Knowledge Development and Systems Change, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Ken Lostoski, Senior Graphic Designer, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Michael Malden, Public Affairs Specialist, Knowledge Exchange Network, Office of External Liaison, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Anne Matthews-Younes, Ed.D., Chief, Special Programs Development Branch, Division of Program Development, Special Populations and Projects, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Kevin McGowan, Contract Specialist, General Acquisitions Branch, Division of Acquisition Management, Administrative Operations Service, Program Support Center, Rockville, Maryland.

Niyati Pandya, M.S., M.Phil., M.L.S., Reference Librarian, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Theodora Radcliffe, Technical Writer/Editor, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Sanjeev Rana, M.S., Research Assistant, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Lisa Robbins, Wordprocessing & Desktopting Coordinator, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Doreen Major Ryan, M.A., Writer/Editor, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Sally Sieracki, M.A., Editor, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

Damon Thompson, Director of Communications, Office of Public Health and Science, Office of the Assistant Secretary, Washington, D.C.

Robin Toliver, Senior Conference Planner, BL Seamon and Associates, Inc., Lanham, Maryland.

Joanna Tyler, Ph.D., Project Director, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc., Rockville, Maryland.

## Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General

Mark Weber, Associate Administrator, Office of Communications, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland.

Clarissa Wittenberg, Director, Office of Scientific Information, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Baldwin Wong, Program Analyst, Office of Science Policy, Analysis, and Communication, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

### Special Thanks To

#### Organizations

The Carter Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, Illinois.

#### Individuals

Virginia Shankle Bales, M.P.H., Deputy Director for Program Management, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Byron Breedlove, M.A., Senior Writer/Editor, Technical Information and Editorial Services Branch, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Thomas Bryant, M.D., J.D., Chairman, Non-Profit Management Associates, Inc., Washington, DC.

Rosalynn Carter, Vice Chair, The Carter Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

RADM J. Jarrett Clinton, M.D., Regional Health Administrator, Office of the Secretary, Atlanta, Georgia.

Michael P. Eriksen, Sc.D., Director, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Christine S. Fralish, M.L.I.S., Chief, Technical Information and Editorial Services Branch, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Adele Franks, M.D., Prudential Center for Health Services Research (formerly Assistant Director for Science, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Atlanta, Georgia.

RADM Retired Peter Frommer, M.D., Deputy Director Emeritus, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Gayle Lloyd, M.A., Managing Editor, Surgeon General Reports, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Sandra P. Perlmutter, Executive Director, President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, Washington, D.C.

### NOTICE

The editor, the contributors, and the publisher are grateful to the American Psychiatric Association for permission to quote directly from *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, 4th ed. in this work. Descriptive matter is enclosed in quotation marks in the text exactly as it appears in *DSM-IV*. Tabular matter is modified slightly as to form only in accordance with the publisher's editorial usage.

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