

The Women's Coalition of St. Croix is a 501 c 3 tax exempt organization that was founded in 1981. We operate 24/7/365 days of the year. We provide crisis intervention, counseling advocacy, food, clothing and shelter to all crime victims. We do not provide shelter for people with mental disabilities. All our services are provided free of charge. We are not a Behavioral Health Facility.

During 2023, we served 1,445 victims/survivors of crime, out of that number 25% suffered from some form of mental disability and we provided them with the following services: Food, clothing, advocacy counseling, family support, toiletries and referrals to other agencies. Most of the people who seek our services are victim/survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and survivors of homicide.

Our agency is not staffed with psychiatric or psychologists because we cannot afford this expense as a non-profit organization. We do make referrals to other agencies that provide behavioral services as well as the Department of Health Behavioral Health Services Department.

The WCSC Staff are trained in Crisis Intervention Counseling, Psychology, and Criminal Justice. We have BS, BA, MA's Specialist Degreed Staff, licensed counselor and an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters. Our experience is derived from 5 to 41 years in crisis intervention mostly here on St. Croix providing services to all crime victims.

Please note, some of the people who present themselves with mental disabilities are also experiencing substance abuse.

We have had to call the VIPD on numerous occasions for people with mental illness at our facility. Our complaints ranged from destruction of property, graffiti defacing a wall, urinating and defecating around our buildings, sleeping in the stairways, leaving trash and threatening our staff with bodily harm. When we call the police on these individuals, we were told that the VIPD's hands were tied because they cannot do anything, because they are mentally ill. VIPD recommended calling our senators for help.

**Below we have listed some narratives of cases we have handled at WCSC.**

### **Clients with Mental Disabilities who seek services at the WCSC**

1. A middle-aged woman comes into the office, and she suffers from Multiple Personality Disorder. The Women's Coalition facilities has become a safe place for



June 3, 2024

**Mental Health** is a state of well-being that includes emotional, psychological and social well-being.

Good morning, Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, Chairman of the Committee on Health, Hospital and Human Services, and other Senators on the Committee or in the Senate Chambers, other testifiers, and people who are listening and watching on the Senate Channels.

I am Dr. Clema Lewis, Executive Director of the Women's Coalition of St. Croix. I have brought with me Ms. Sheelene Gumbs, Supervisor of our counseling staff.

Thank you for inviting us to attend this hearing on the status of "Mental Health" from the WCSC perspective.

**Opening Remarks:**

**The state of Mental Health in the Territory is devastating, and it continues to decline. There is a stigma involved with reaching out for help for behavioral health services. No one wants to be labeled as mentally ill or crazy. So, they do not seek the services they really need, and this includes the families who are ashamed to see what is happening to their loved ones and refuse to seek services as well, or not familiar with available services on the island.**

**People with mental disabilities are being raped, abused, and are dying on the streets falling victims to criminals taking advantage of their vulnerable condition.**

**If we do not do something soon about the state of the mental health in our community the overall State of Mental Health in our Territory will continue to deteriorate and directly affect the quality of life for our people.**

**We have also seen a rise in people with mental disabilities flying into the Territory from the mainland with NO resources, seeking assistance from our already strained local resources. It will take the entire community pulling together to make a change in the system.**

her to be any of the Personalities that she displays. She has been diagnosed through Behavioral Health, but she is not on any medications.

2. A young man comes to the office who suffers with schizophrenia. He has anger issues. He comes to the office trying to get assistance with applying for jobs and making connections with his family members who no longer talk to him.
3. There is a young man that calls the Coalition because he has no options to speak to anyone else. He is no longer on medication and his conversation is disjointed. He calls the number throughout the night sometimes 10 - 15 times, which then ties up the line for other victims.
4. There is a young woman that suffers with a bio-polar disorder and when she is manic, she comes to the office because she does not have another option for services needed.
5. A young woman who is Schizophrenic came to the office because she was pregnant and wanted to keep her baby but was not her own guardian. She later did have her baby but still calls when she starts shifting into a paranoid state.
6. A young woman who suffers from Schizophrenic Paranoia comes to the office because when she has an episode she tends to take off her clothes in public. She comes in because she doesn't feel like she is being heard so we try to encourage her to get back on her meds while we do Talk Therapy.
7. A mother who was sexually assaulted by her mentally ill son did not have him charged after his arrest. When he was released because he is mentally ill and not competent, he went directly to her house. She now must lock herself in her house when he is having an episode.
8. A mother whose mentally ill son, burned her house cannot compensation for it even though it was arson because he was mentally ill and no charges were brought against him as he was deemed not competent. She is on a fixed income and cannot afford insurance for the home.
9. A mother is trying to get services for her daughter who displays manic behavior and chooses to sleep on the street because her psychosis doesn't allow her to stay indoors.

### **The lack of access to services:**

There is a misunderstanding that the mentally disabled will go to the clinic or be able to keep appointments. They are not able to do this, and some are hostile so family members will be unable to make them go. The police and EMS are not equipped to assist these families.

There should be or continue to be "outreach" where Behavioral Health can go to them to administer medication or do intake.

1. **Lack of Housing**

A lot of mentally disabled persons have compounded problems because they cannot live with family members, due to the depressive or manic episodes they experience.

There is an existing housing crisis on St. Croix, so even if they wanted to find housing it is impossible.

Some people may not be mentally disabled, but they are unhoused because we lost more housing units than have been rebuilt. This can then lead to mental instability.

The waiting list for a 1-bedroom is approximately 1.5 -5 years.

Mentally disabled women with children, even if they receive medical help still do not have a place to live, and this then magnifies their mental health issues.

There are no assisted living facilities on St. Croix, only independent living. Which means there is no one checking doing wellness checks. This type of program would be beneficial to the mentally disabled who are trying to be compliant and become functioning member of the community.

2. **Limited Services**

a. Behavioral Services at the Department of Health are short-staffed. There is only one Psychiatrist on board, and she services most of the government agencies.

b. There are a lot of private agencies doing therapy, but they do not accept MAP for most of the clients to utilize their services.

c. Most mentally disabled person in crisis is unable to fill out the application and would need assistance.

3. **Stigma**

a. The community still doesn't recognize that mental illness can be the result people walking on the street, but that starts before. Education on the early signs of mental health needs to be taught to teachers, medical personnel etc. Also, the difference between mental illness and homelessness.

4. **MAP Formulary**

a. Most medications prescribed for mental illness is not on the MAP formulary. So, when they are prescribed, they are not readily available as they must go through the approval process which takes time. (I have had quite a few clients who went through withdrawals waiting for the meds.)

b. The medications once out of the system put them back in crisis.

5. **Lack of Facilities on St. Croix**

a. We have no Psychiatric ward.

b. We have out-patient care where they can do group (club house is no longer in use).

c. We have non-profit organizations that should be doing homeless prevention now doing mental health housing. This does not provide the core problem which is the mental health issue.

d. We have very little services for children with mental health issues and the Department of Education is not equipped to provide adequate services with the IEP.

e. Children with parents who suffer from Mental Illness don't have an action plan in place for them in terms of safety or activities. This should be a coordinated effort between the Department of Human Services and the Department of Behavioral Health.

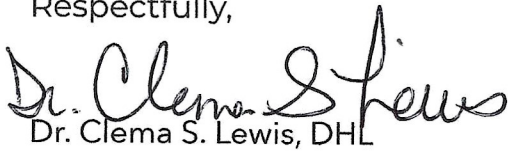
The National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports that 57.8 million adults live with some form of mental illness. The severity of a mental illness can vary from person to person.  
Jan 3, 2024

The NIH reports that the most prevalent mental illnesses for adults in the United States are various anxiety disorders.<sup>7</sup> **Approximately 19.1% of adults have had an anxiety disorder within the last year.**<sup>7</sup> Anxiety disorders come in many different forms and can include panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, phobia and more.

This concludes our presentation. The Women's Coalition of St. Croix supports all efforts to assist with assisting the mentally disabled in our community.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Clema S. Lewis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "D".

Dr. Clema S. Lewis, DHL

Executive Director

Women's Coalition of St. Croix