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MARGARET MEAD

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## Mental Health Care Need To Be Consumer- and Family-Driven

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by Valerie Dalton

The New Freedom Commission on Mental Health spent a year studying the current mental health system in America before making recommendations designed to enable adults with serious mental illnesses and children with serious emotional disturbances to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities.

One recommendation the Commission made was that our mental health care system needs to be consumer- and family-driven. The Commission reported that the needs of mental health care consumers and their families must be what drives the care and services they receive. Today, consumers have little influence over the care they receive and often the services are fragmented, restricted by bureaucratic regulations, and are driven by confusing federal financing rules and regulations. The Commission wrote: "Increasing opportunities for consumers to choose their providers and allowing consumers and families to have greater control over funds spent on their care facilitates personal responsibility, creates an economic interest in obtaining and sustaining recovery, and shift the incentives towards a system that promotes learning, self-monitoring, and accountability. Increasing choice protects individuals and encourages quality. Evidence shows that offering a full range of community-based alternatives is more effective than hospitalization and emergency room treatment. Without choice and the availability of acceptable treatment options, people with mental illnesses are unlikely to engage in treatment or to participate in appropriate and timely interventions. Thus, giving consumers access to a range of effective, community-based treatment options is critical to achieving their full community participation. To ensure this access, the array of community-based treatment options must be expanded. In particular, community-based treatment options for children and youth with serious emotional disorders must be expanded."

Other important information to come from the Commission's report included:

- People with mental illnesses have one of the lowest levels of employment of any group with disabilities — only about one in three is employed. More must be done to correct this problem.

- The lack of decent, safe, affordable, and integrated housing is one of the most significant barriers to full participation in community life for people with serious mental illnesses.
- The federal government is the largest single payer for mental health and supportive services, including health care, employment, housing, and education. To be effective, federal funding and regulatory systems must make the necessary range of services, treatments, and supports accessible.

The Commission recommended that every adult with a serious mental illness and child with a serious emotional disturbance have an individualized plan of care. Consumers and their families should be involved in developing a new mental health care system that is more oriented to their needs. Each state should develop a comprehensive mental health care plan, and we should all work to protect and enhance the rights of persons with mental illnesses.

To read the Commission's full report, please visit my Web site at [www.valeriedaltonlpc.com](http://www.valeriedaltonlpc.com).

*This column is for informational purposes only. Clinical issues should be directed to a licensed clinician or your physician. Valerie Dalton, M.Ed. is a Licensed Professional Counselor with a private practice serving adolescents and adults. For more information about her counseling and consulting services, please call (804) 743-7736 or email [valeriedaltonlpc@comcast.net](mailto:valeriedaltonlpc@comcast.net).*