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Comments and Response to
***"State Mental Health Commissions: Recommendations for Change
and Future Directions"***

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First I would like to thank NASMHPD for the effort put into gathering and analyzing the information in this document. It provides food for thought that will stimulate much discussion among families and consumers, state planners, advocates, data managers, researchers, and policy makers. My comments are from the perspective of families raising children who need and use behavioral health services - a constituency absent from the deliberations resulting in this report. They are based in the values and principles of systems of care and are intended to constructively contribute to this dialogue.

One of the key features of systems of care is their "strength-based" approach which would suggest reframing the dichotomies presented as "Key Tensions" into a series of dynamic continuums along which states could locate themselves. Movement to and fro would be expected over time as the political, social, financial, and scientific environment changes. Data about the events surrounding the shifts and patterns would help all stakeholders better understand the forces shaping children's mental health policy and lead to better decisions about where to put their limited resources to achieve desired outcomes.

The "Consensus Themes" are not surprising and, for the most part, reflect what families are experiencing across the country. Let me quickly point out highlight how these themes relate to children, youth, and families.

- ✓ Integrating mental health into public health and primary care and other natural settings would be fine PROVIDED THAT primary care providers, day care providers, and schools were trained to acknowledge the concerns parents express about their child's social, emotional, or behavioral adjustment and recognize them as early signs of mental health issues that need immediate attention.
- ✓ Educating the public and consumers about evidence-based practices is a fine idea. Practitioners need this education as well. And, there needs to

- be a great deal more field-based research on a wide variety of treatments, interventions, services and supports that are being used by children and their families to establish an evidence base about their effectiveness for specific disorders and the practicality of implementing them in specific and various kinds of settings.
- ✓ There is no dispute that we need to dramatically expand both access to and the array of available services for children and youth. Charter schools and voucher programs, after which the report suggests market-driven mental health services should be modeled, would be fine PROVIDED THAT there were standards for their operation and they were closely monitored to insure the desired outcomes were being achieved. In many cases, charter schools were developed to circumvent requirements and, therefore, have failed to appropriately and adequately meet our children's needs.
 - ✓ Certainly mental health funding should be adequate and states and communities should have flexibility to use money creatively while being held accountable. Children, however, deserve an equitable share of the resources - no matter how limited they are. The current block grant set aside for children is woefully inadequate and needs to be updated.
 - ✓ Yes, yes, yes - finally we are recognizing the mental health needs of children and youth in the juvenile justice system. And, yes, yes, yes prevention and early intervention in other systems - particularly mental health, child welfare, and education - would go a long way to help solve this problem. But, law enforcement and legal system personnel also need training to recognize signs of emotional or behavioral disorders in the children and youth who do come to their attention and make referrals for treatment accordingly.
 - ✓ There is an ongoing need for leadership development in states and local communities. Planning activities must include systematic activities to develop, support, and sustain leadership in the family movement as well.

The six "Goals" serve to focus our attention on key features of the planning process - be clear, keep it small enough to manage, choose goals that can be widely supported, develop leadership and incorporate varied perspectives. And, of course, increase funding. To these I would add - choose to work on things that will make a qualitative difference in the lives of children, youth, and families, track

implementation activities, and measure the results. What is most essential, however, is to take the next steps towards developing practical strategies to implement the proposed actions. State planning and advisory councils should play a significant role in this process insuring that there is ample family and consumer input as well.

When Barbara Huff was originally asked to be part of this panel, she was also charged with presenting her "views on priority issues that the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health should address." Quickly here are the Federation's recommendations.

- ✓ Coordination of services is not enough. There must be significant expansion of options available to children and youth and their families. These options must be appropriate, effective, affordable, accessibly and respectful of family values and culture.
- ✓ Children and youth and their families must be treated equitably. They must get their fair share of the resources for services, state and family network infrastructures, and research.
- ✓ The voices of families and youth must be heard. Resources need to be allocated to recruit, train, support, and sustain the participation of family members and youth who come from the full spectrum of the community.

This is a hefty agenda but it is critical to implement and the Federation and families around the country stand ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work along side you.