



More than 10 million adults each year experience a serious mental illness (SMI) in the United States.¹ As defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), SMI is a “mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder that causes serious functional impairment that substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities” among adults 18 years of age or older.² These individuals suffer from high rates of homelessness and poverty, and nearly 90 percent of people who die by suicide show symptoms of a mental health condition.³ Additionally, an estimated 3.1 million adults suffer from co-occurring SMI and substance use disorder. As a result of these challenges, and other socioeconomic and health system factors, individuals with SMI have a lower life expectancy, dying 15 to 30 years younger than those without mental illness.^{4,5,6,7}

Although many groups and efforts have advocated for improved care and benefit parity for individuals with SMI, such efforts have yielded slow progress in improving health outcomes and life expectancy for individuals with SMI. Similarly, adolescents who experience a serious emotional disturbance (SED), or those who “experience a psychiatric disorder that causes substantial impairment in one or more functional domains” also face challenges and require coordinated efforts to facilitate access to early interventions and care to improve their quality of life.⁸

In an effort to foster change for adults with SMI, the National Quality Forum (NQF) convened the National Quality Partners™ (NQP™) Serious Mental Illness Action Team, bringing together 35 of NQF's member organizations from across the United States—organizations that represent patients, caregivers, clinicians, researchers, health systems, professional societies, payers, accrediting organizations, the pharmaceutical industry, and federal agencies. The diverse members of the NQP Serious Mental Illness Action Team share a common goal to improve the system of care that provides individuals with SMI the services and supports necessary to live independently and fully participate in the community. The NQP Action Team is committed to action-oriented strategies that will improve access to high-quality care for the millions of Americans with SMI.

The NQP Serious Mental Illness Action Team is issuing a national call to action for all healthcare organizations, patient advocacy organizations, community partners, payers, and policymakers to work together to remove barriers that currently prohibit individuals with SMI from getting the high-quality care they need. To improve health outcomes of individuals with SMI, diverse organizations must take collaborative action to:

- fight stigma and discrimination;
- promote early intervention;
- advance clinical education and knowledge to support effective behavioral health treatment and practices;
- improve client and caregiver engagement;
- reinforce parity; and,
- address behavioral health workforce shortages.

Organizations across all sectors must advocate together to enable everyone to value mental health the same as physical health. Only through collaborations and partnerships will we see advancements that ease access to high-quality care for individuals with SMI, leading to reductions in disparities and improvements in health outcomes, quality of life, and life expectancy.

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