

Mental Health in Transition

Series summary and recommendations

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Series Summary

Mental Health in Transition was a 3-part series, presented by Fountain House in partnership with Trinity Church Wall Street, that explored the intersections of public safety, housing, and public health and mental health. The series aimed to inform the incoming NYC Administration on issues around mental health, equity and policy in New York City.

Close to 1000 attendees joined live to listen to 11 expert panelists, with three media moderators, over the course of 5 weeks. The moderators were: Caroline Lewis, Health Reporter at WNYC/Gothamist; Andy Newman, reporter at The New York Times; and Nsikan Akpan, Health and Science Editor at WNYC. Attendees engaged passionately during the panels, asking critical questions of panelists about opportunities to address these issues in the incoming administration.



The Issues

Panel 1: Reinventing Public Safety

We need to fundamentally change our approach to public safety and law enforcement, including what sectors are responsible for and involved in the process of creating and protecting community safety and wellbeing. As Dr. Ashwin Vasan, president and CEO of Fountain House, stated in his opening remarks of this first panel, “just as health is not merely the absence of illness, safety is not merely the absence of crime.” Safety encompasses far more, such as community connection and collaboration as well as adequate social services.

People with mental illness are disproportionately caught up in the criminal legal system and the consequences of this can be deadly. Rather than criminalizing people living with mental illness and treating them with predominantly punitive approaches, the new administration has an opportunity to be both preventative and protective. This includes working to close Rikers Island, creating more secure and stable housing, and evolving our approach to mental health crises away from police involvement towards caring, public health approaches that are peer inclusive.

“The program is taught by peers. So it was a bottom-up approach to teaching, and it was taught by peers and friends and families who have been directly impacted by those with lived experience. Peers was selected as instructors because those who are closest to the problems are closest to the solution.”

- Christina Sparrock, Peer and Mental Health Advocate, speaking about Fort Greene Person-Centered Intervention Training Program

“It's what we've learned from research over and over again - that access to education, decent schools, parks, all these other things, is what makes us safe.”

-Elizabeth Glazer, Founder of Vital City

“I mean it's clear that... all of the movements have really opened our eyes and the eyes of many Americans and clearly many New Yorkers, about the appropriate relationship between communities and law enforcement, and what we want from our policing and where we could do something better. And it's also shined a light on

things that we kind of know about but maybe ordinary New Yorkers don't know - that Rikers is the number one mental health facility in the city and that's absurd and wrong”

-Eric Gonzalez, Brooklyn District Attorney

“I think city-wide we need to acknowledge the pain and the need for healing that we all really need to have as a result of this pandemic, the continuing pandemic, the losses that we've experienced, the lack of social interaction, all of that. And so there needs to be spaces all around the city that welcome individuals to be in community and to heal and to be at peace. Public spaces are very limited for everybody, especially if someone does have justice system involvement, or has been in touch with law enforcement because of mental health or other issues and we need to really expand that as well”

-Susan Shah, Managing Director, Racial Justice at Trinity Church Wall Street

Recommendations from our panel experts

- Susan Shah, Managing Director, Racial Justice at Trinity Church Wall Street:
 - Learn from, expand, and improve the [Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division](#) (B-HEARD) Pilot Program where teams of health professionals are responding to 911 mental health calls and evaluate other issues police respond to from 911 calls.
 - Get everyone off Rikers Island – 20 percent of the population is characterized as living with a serious mental illness.
 - Schools need to have onsite or ready-to-access mental health supports.
- Christina Sparrock, Peer and Mental Health Advocate:
 - Involve peers in all levels of decision-making and problem-solving process.
 - Normalize mental health and treat it as a public health issue. Place more emphasis on prevention and intervention as opposed to solely crisis response.
 - See how models like clubhouses operate and work well and then fund them fully.
- Eric Gonzalez, Brooklyn District Attorney:

- More diversion programming and community partner programming, such as [Brownsville Safety Alliance](#) that can provide long-term connections for people.
- Elizabeth Glazer:
 - Have peers and communities involved-- build a sense of community and connection on the path to safer environments.
 - Close Rikers – the first [report](#) from Glazer’s publication Vital City proposes steps to take in the effort to close Rikers as we pave the way to a safer city for all and incarceration as the last resort.

Panel 2: Rethinking Housing

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic we had a housing problem in NYC, but the pandemic has only made matters worse and highlighted some of the most pressing issues. The unhoused population has been on the rise, leaving more individuals and families to live on the streets, exposed to interpersonal harm and police sweeps, or in congregate shelters, where they risk safety and face COVID exposure. We saw some innovative solutions utilized throughout the pandemic such as the use of vacant hotel rooms for people experiencing homelessness. Sadly, many times these actions were met with community backlash and stigma. This makes our challenge going forward twofold: securing stable and quality housing for all New Yorkers as well as working to shift our collective understanding regarding homelessness and community belonging.

A large percentage of people experiencing homelessness live with serious mental illness and are caught in a cyclical relationship, where one reinforces and exacerbates the other. For people living with serious mental illness, housing is vital to recovery - and there are innovative solutions to tap into and ensure that everyone has access to dignified housing options.

“If I thought I was bad before I walked in there [congregate shelter] simply because I didn’t have a home, it got worse when I walked through those doors. And it was so bad for me that I ended up going to the safety of the streets, where I was able to regain, believe it or not, a sense of dignity on my park bench in Harlem and have a

little space to myself and not be subjected to these type of experiences that are dehumanizing.”

-Shams DaBaron, Homeless Advocate aka *Da Homeless Hero*

“When I reflect on it, we shouldn’t have a system that the unhoused and people in need of assistance have to fit into. We should have a system that adapts to meet the needs of those in need of assistance.”

-Tom Harris, President, Times Square Alliance

“It [supportive housing] really is the most humane way of addressing the needs of these populations. It’s also really cost-effective; there have been multiple studies that have shown the amount of money that is saved across various systems, including healthcare and many others, when you house somebody in supportive housing and it works”

-Bea De La Torre, Managing Director, Housing and Homelessness at Trinity Church

“Sometimes we have to take things slowly, we have to just slow down and be present with people and that’s the key because change can be incredibly slow. We may think we know the solution for people, but when they’re at a place in their lives where they can’t feel trust, [it] can take a whole lifetime to erase what has been done. Most of the people that are on the street have a huge history of trauma and to erase that and to build trust is an art so we have to just keep plugging along and working at it”

-Nancy Young, Director of OnRamps, Fountain House

Recommendations from our panel experts

- Tom Harris, President, Times Square Alliance:
 - Fund and expand programs like [Community First](#), an initiative where navigators on the streets take time to build trusting relationships with vulnerable populations in Times Square and offer services when people are ready to accept them.
- Shams DaBaron, Homeless Advocate aka *Da Homeless Hero*:

- Appoint a deputy mayor or commissioner of housing and homelessness, as well as a commission to address housing and homelessness that is comprised of all stakeholders.
- More support for people who do secure housing through obtaining housing vouchers – help with learning to live alone with regards to budgeting and managing a home.
- Nancy Young, Director of OnRamps, Fountain House:
 - Increasing the number of stabilization beds, creating single rooms for women and wheelchair accessible rooms.
 - Fund and create more respite centers as alternatives to hospitals. They should be fully equipped with social service supports, case management and peer support.
- Bea De La Torre, Managing Director, Housing and Homelessness at Trinity Church:
 - Expand supportive housing stock for both individuals and families.
 - Given the spectrum of housing needs, we need to have an array of housing options available to people. For example, some people just need a key and know how to manage a home, at the other end of the spectrum people need supportive housing which includes an array of services on-site to gain back that independence.

Panel 3: Mental Health as Public Health

At its core, public health is about saving lives, at scale. It is about affecting and improving the health of entire populations at the intersection of science and society. COVID-19 has shown us just how crucial this crossover really is and how science alone is sometimes not enough. The same is true of ameliorating our mental health crisis, which predates COVID-19 but has certainly been exacerbated as a result. In order to work through this mental health crisis and all the social issues that intersect with it, it will require an effective public health approach that is rooted in social needs and healthcare.

“[Treatment for] mental health has been very very pigeonholed to certain areas like to psychiatrists, to these very specialized entities, without a global understanding that it is us. It is our communities, it is our churches, it is our schools that all play a collective responsibility in addressing mental health. [We need to bring] that back in and say that it is all of our responsibility...”

- Dr. Amanda Parsons, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, MetroPlus Health Plan

“I’m reminded in this moment of Maya Angelou’s words when she said, ‘when you know better, you do better.’ And in recent years, at FPWA, we’ve learned more and we are seeking to do more with all of the research that abounds helping us appreciate the inextricable link between poverty and mental health, between incarceration and mental health, between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and mental health, between structural racism and trauma and mental health. We’re seeking to do better. And the research and the data unfortunately in this society, just as Amanda was speaking to, it’s like if you can’t document it – even if you can feel it, even if you can see it – if it can’t be documented then how significant is the problem? What I’m grateful for is that there is more research, and there is more data that’s documenting the problem, which is a first key step here in America for dealing with it”

-Jennifer Jones Austin, CEO and Executive Director, FPWA

“The contribution of healthcare to health by most estimates and most studies is 15-20% – the rest is behavior, genetics, and society. And what this raises to me in a zooming out lens is that public health needs to step it up and that leaders... need to resource it at a level commensurate with its importance in society”

- Dr. Ashwin Vasani, President and CEO, Fountain House

Recommendations from our panel experts

- Dr. Ashwin Vasani, President and CEO, Fountain House:
 - Increase federal spending on mental healthcare to be commensurate with its impact.
 - Invest in the public health workforce regularly and not just in times of crisis such as during pandemics and epidemics.
 - Ensure that we use data to influence policy prescriptions.
- Dr. Amanda Parsons, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, MetroPlus Health Plan:

- Utilize and draw upon peer knowledge to not only address physician shortages but also engage with patients on health and wellness journeys which they can do more effectively than physicians because of lived experiences.
 - Gather more data on mental health issues and care-- build this out and use it to inform solutions.
- Jennifer Jones Austin, CEO and Executive Director, FPWA:
 - Build out trauma-informed care where practitioners can work to help people who have poverty-related stresses, justice involvement stresses, racism-related stresses.
 - Utilize data to inform policy practices.
 - Ensure adequate coverage and funding for mental health supports that intersect with other social issues. Enact preventative measures for social determinants of health.

Successes

Fountain House has been able to draw on the success and recommendations of the Mental Health in Transition virtual panel series to propel the organization forward in its New York City policy and advocacy goals.

Dr. Ashwin Vasan has been named co-lead for Eric Adams Health transition team. Eric Adams has accepted a Fountain House invitation to tour our programs on January 14, 2021, where we will present him with a set of recommendations informed by the issues explored in Mental Health in Transition, as well as the results of Fountain House's policy and advocacy survey, which sought direct feedback on the most pressing issues impacting the lives of our members.

Fountain House member Kane Balser was interviewed and featured in the *New York Times* December 3rd article ["Is the Chance to Turn Hotels Into Affordable Housing Slipping Away?"](#) as a direct result of the engagement with Andy Newman for the second panel in our series. We are continuing to pursue related media opportunities.