

Duterte finally OKs Mental Health Act

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President Duterte signed the Mental Health Act on Wednesday, ensuring state-funded provision of mental health care down to the grassroots and promotion of mental health education in schools and workplaces. “No longer shall Filipinos suffer silently in the dark,” Sen. Risa Hontiveros said. The law underscores awareness of mental health as suicide cases among the youth rise.



For Filipinos struggling with mental health problems in their families and communities alone and in silence, help is here.

“No longer shall Filipinos suffer silently in the dark,” Sen. Risa Hontiveros said in a statement on Thursday, a day after President Duterte approved the Mental Health Act.

The law will ensure the provision of mental health care down to the grassroots and promote mental health education in schools and workplaces.

“The people’s mental health issues will now cease to be seen as an invisible sickness spoken only in whispers. Finally, help is here,” said Hontiveros, an opposition member and one of the authors of the measure.

Accessible, affordable

The passage of the law is recognition that mental disorders are illnesses and proves the President’s commitment to provide accessible and affordable mental health care to all Filipinos, according to presidential spokesperson Harry Roque, who was a coauthor of the law when he served in the House of Representatives.

“Implementing a universal mental health care system in the country would provide more awareness regarding mental health among Filipinos, especially given the rising number of suicide cases among the youth,” Roque said.

In a statement, the Department of Health (DOH) said the law “underscores the basic right of all Filipinos to mental health care while shaping the structural and attitudinal challenges to achieving positive mental health.”

“It also underscores the basic right of all Filipinos to mental health care while shaping the structural and attitudinal challenges to achieving positive mental health,” the DOH said. According to Hontiveros, seven Filipinos commit suicide every day, while one in five Filipinos suffer from a form of mental disorder such as schizophrenia, depression and anxiety. The law will integrate psychiatric, psychosocial and neurologic services in regional, provincial and tertiary hospitals and pave the way for the improvement of mental health care facilities.

People with addiction

Under the law, people suffering from addiction and other substance-induced mental health conditions will be provided care and treatment. In this regard, hospitals will be required to coordinate with drug rehabilitation centers.

According to the law, each local health care facility must be capable of conducting drug screening “pursuant to its duty to provide mental health services and consistent with the policy of treating drug dependency as a mental health issue.”

Hontiveros last year said the Philippines had the highest number of depressed people in Southeast Asia.

Frequent natural disasters, forced displacement, terrorism and armed conflict, migration and violence, in addition to the impact of the war on drugs, were among the causes of stress among Filipinos, she said.

Sen. Sonny Angara, another author of the law, said it would help make mental health care more affordable.

PhilHealth coverage

He renewed his call to PhilHealth to cover fees for psychiatric consultations and medicines that would allow early intervention, which was vital to treating mental illness.

PhilHealth currently only covers hospitalization due to acute attacks of mental and behavioral disorders with a P7,800 package.

Angara also voiced hopes the law would remove the stigma surrounding mental health disorders and encourage sufferers to seek professional help.

“This law gives people with mental health problems and their families the opportunity to hope for better lives,” he said.

Gov’t priority

Another opposition lawmaker, Akbayan Rep. Tom Villarin, said the signing of the law was a “whiff of good air and provenance” that everyone should rally behind and support.

Quezon Rep. Angelina Tan, chair of the committee on health and one of the law’s authors in the House, described the law as “auspicious” as it came after the suicides of celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain and fashion designer Kate Spade.

The suicides “caught the attention of millions of people over the world on the importance of putting due attention to mental health and psychosocial well-being of every individual,” Tan said.