Duterte urged to sign mental health bill

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An official of the House of Representatives is urging President Duterte to sign the Mental Health bill into law as soon as possible in light of two recent suicide incidents involving high-profile US personalities.

"The recent deaths of fashion designer Kate Spade and celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain have once more brought the issue of mental health to the forefront," House Deputy Speaker and Marikina Rep. Romero Quimbo said yesterday.

Quimbo is the principal author of the proposed Mental Health Act. He is a member of the bicameral conference committee which consolidated the House and Senate versions of the measure that aims to help emotionally disturbed persons.

"Apart from the messages of support and calls for greater awareness of mental health issues, what is needed most by the countless Filipinos who live with mental health problems is concrete action by the government," Quimbo said.

"Advocates tirelessly pushed for the Mental Health Act for well over a decade and in the past year, both houses of Congress have finally passed and consolidated this important measure. Now that the ball is in its court, hopefully Malacañang will act soon," he added.

Quimbo said inadequate government support, coupled with the stigma attached to mental health problems in society, has led to the suffering of many in the Philippines.

"Far too many promising lives have been destroyed or diminished because of unaddressed mental health care needs," he said, citing DOH data that showed one in five adults and one in 10 children in the country have experienced mental health problems.

"The stigma attached to mental health in our society forces many to endure in silence, the actual figure is likely much higher," he said, adding Filipinos living with mental health problems have no health facilities or psychiatrists to turn to.

"This is precisely why the Mental Health Act is needed now," he said.

The Mental Health Act, which was approved on third reading by the House in November 2017 and consolidated by both Houses of Congress in January this year, aims to address current shortcomings in the government response to the mental health needs of Filipinos.

This is by providing a coherent, rational and unified response to mental health problems through the reconstitution and strengthening of the Philippine Mental Health Council, as well as the formulation and implementation of the National Mental Health Care Delivery System.

The bill declares that every person has the right to the best available mental health care service and for those who live with mental disorders to be free from any form of exploitation and discrimination on the ground of their condition.

Crucially, the bill also provides for the establishment and operation of community-based mental health care facilities with the target of eventually having one in each cluster municipality in the country.