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## **Eckstrom: Our shared battle against mental illness**

By Richard Eckstrom

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Some of my earliest public service was serving on the board of the Greenville County Mental Health Center – including as its chairman – in the early '90s. I later served on the S.C. Mental Health Commission.

Mental illness had already been an issue I felt strongly about, but those positions gave me unique insights into the challenges facing the mentally ill and their loved ones.

Experts believe the prevalence of mental illness is higher than most people realize: About one in 17 adults lives with some sort of mental illness, such as schizophrenia, major depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder, according to the National Alliance for Mental Illness.

If left untreated, mental illness can wreck lives, destroy families, cause people to abuse drugs and alcohol, and result in physical illness. Those with serious mental illness live an average of about 25 years less than other Americans, according to NAMI.

The good news is treatment for people facing these afflictions is often highly effective.

The bad news is most people don't seek treatment. One possible reason is that because mental illness doesn't receive as much attention as physical ailments such as cancer, diabetes or a heart condition, many people don't know enough to recognize the symptoms. Another reason that's sometimes given is those who need help worry about what others will think.

Thus, our shared battle against mental illness starts with making sure those who need help seek it.

The first full week of October is designated as National Mental Health Awareness Week.

Mental Health Awareness Week was established in 1990 to foster a broader understanding of mental illness and related issues. The weeklong observance is used by advocacy groups to raise awareness of treatment programs, push for public policy changes, educate people about warning signs, promote mental health screenings and raise funds for a variety of causes related to mental health.

Perhaps most importantly, we can use this occasion to offer a show of support for those afflicted – and to celebrate the passion and strength of the family members, health care workers and mental health advocates who stand with them.

One key to recovery is realizing they're not alone. With strong support, hopefully more people will seek help. And getting treatment – particularly in the early stages of illness – can have a long-term impact on their quality of life ... and maybe even save a life.

Richard Eckstrom is a CPA and South Carolina's comptroller.

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