

## October 1963: President Kennedy signs Community Mental Health Act into law; his last legislative signature

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The March 1963 issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* published a summary from the American Medical Association on a multi-million dollar program President John F. Kennedy proposed to Congress to combat mental illness. It called for the establishment of hundreds of community health centers and services to research and address the needs of those with mental health issues and developmental disabilities, to be financed by federal and state or local governments. Congress was asked to appropriate \$31.3 million in fiscal 1964 for the program.

According to the summary, President Kennedy listed three objectives:

1. Determining the causes of mental illness and finding effective treatments for them
2. Research and training of skilled personnel
3. Strengthening and improvement of programs and facilities for treating the mentally afflicted

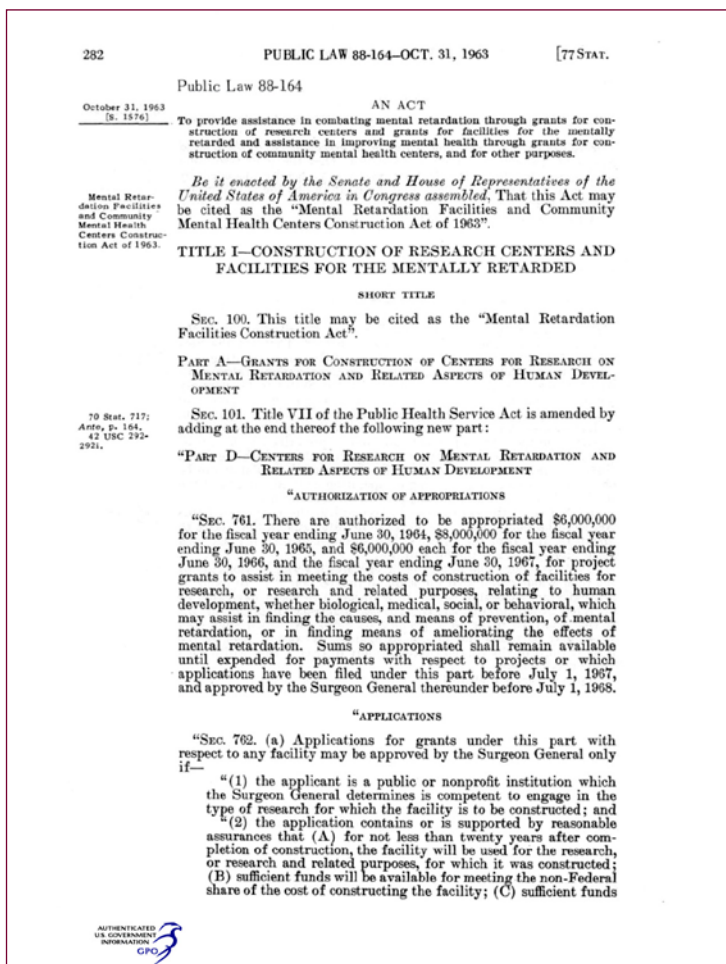


In the Cabinet Room of the White House, President John F. Kennedy signs the Community Mental Health Act (left) in October 1963. Looking on (L-R): Rep. Leo W. O'Brien of New York; Rep. Edith Green of Oregon; Rep. Albert Thomas of Texas; and Sen. Ralph Yarborough of Texas. The law became effective on October 31, 1963.

"This approach is designed, in large measure, to use federal resources to stimulate state, local and private action," President Kennedy said. "When carried out, reliance on the cold mercy of custodial isolation will be supplanted by the open warmth of community concern and capability. Emphasis on prevention, treatment and rehabilitation will be substituted for a desultory interest in confining patients in an institution to wither away."

The President asked for prompt Congressional approval of legislation that would authorize grants to the states beginning in fiscal 1965 for establishment of comprehensive community mental health centers with the federal government providing from 45 to 75 percent of the project costs and short-term grants for initial staffing costs. The federal government would provide

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President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy arrive at Love Field, Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.

up to 75 percent of operation costs in early months and phase out such support in about four years.

In addition, the summary reported, the Kennedy Administration's budget for fiscal 1964 calls for increases for all activities of the National Institutes of Health with a boost of nearly 50 percent, to \$166 million, for mental health work.

The estimated expenditures in the new budget for medical research through the NIH totaled \$850 million.

On October 31, 1963, he would sign the legislation, known as the Community Mental Health Act, into law. *(previous page)* The law was a start and much work needs

to be done to fulfill President Kennedy's vision 57 years ago.

It was the last piece of legislation he signed; three weeks later he was assassinated, on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas. ❖

Witnesses lay down in the grass immediately following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Bill and Gayle Newman cover their children, Clayton and Billy (hidden) at left. Photographers, including White House Motion Picture Photographer, Lieutenant Thomas M. Atkins (right), film in center. Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas.



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