

## EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

### Emergency Departments (EDs) are overcrowded:

Overcrowding in EDs is the biggest issue affecting hospitals nationwide. A 2002 study found that 90% of large hospitals' EDs are operating at or over capacity. ED visits in 2000 rose 14% since 1997, up to 108 million from 95 million, while hospitals providing emergency care decreased in number to 3,934 from 4,005. Wait times average over an hour for more than 40% of ED patients.

**Costs:** While physicians' offices typically collect 85% of their fees, EDs only receive payment for approximately 50% of their fees.

Many EDs are operating in a deficit and are facing the threat of being closed down. By law, EDs must treat all patients who enter the ED, and with the uninsured population in the U.S. numbering 43 million, the financial burden on EDs is astounding. **Due to overcrowding, patients are being diverted to other facilities:** ED patients typically require immediate care, but many are diverted to other hospitals because of overcrowding, which delays care and threatens patient health. Among urban hospitals, 66% reported diverting patients at some point in November 2001.

### A lack of inpatient beds forces a large number of people with mental illnesses to seek services in the ED.

- The U.S. maintained only 3.6 psychiatric beds per 10,000 population in 2000.
- Psychiatric beds continue to be lost due to state budget cuts that lead to decreases in mental health care funding. State spending on mental health care decreased from \$16.5 billion in 1955 to \$11.5 billion in 1997 (inflation adjusted).
- The number of resident mental health patients in the U.S. was 54,000 in 2000, down from 559,000 in 1955.
- Between 1992 and 2000, the number of state mental hospitals decreased by 29%; private mental hospitals decreased by 38%.

### Psychiatric EDs are reaching their limits as well.

- While psychiatric EDs divert people with mental illness from general EDs, they are at capacity as well, with up to nearly five-hour wait times for patient transfers to a psychiatric bed.
- Psychiatric EDs typically treat more than 7,000 patients annually, far more than they are prepared for.
- Without more specialized care, people with mental illness will continue to access care in general EDs, exacerbating the problem of overcrowding and financial deficits.

**Improving access to inpatient, emergency and community mental health care would alleviate the burden that people with mental illness place on overcrowded, financially strained EDs.**