

# Los Angeles Times

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To the judges,

Mental health is a defining issue of our times.

In Los Angeles, nearly every resident has a story of encountering a mentally ill person on the street. Homelessness pervades every neighborhood, and while the primary driver of that crisis is a lack of affordable housing, mental illness unquestionably worsens it. The California Policy Lab at UCLA estimates that more than 4,500 people on the streets in Los Angeles County suffer from a psychotic disorder like schizophrenia.

The poorly clothed, disoriented man suffering from hallucinations on the sidewalk provides the most dramatic public image of mental illness. But a quieter wave of less intense, but still serious, mental health problems has accompanied the death and isolation caused by COVID-19. A survey that The Times conducted with the California Endowment as part of our Mental Health Initiative found, for example, that more than three-quarters of Californians between the ages of 18 and 24 reported anxiety in the past year, more than half reported depression, 31% experienced suicidal thinking and 16% self-harm.

To address those twin crises – severe mental illness among the most vulnerable and widespread problems among the rest of the population, especially young people – The Times launched our Mental Health Initiative in 2022.

To pursue the goal of giving readers a special focus on mental health, the initiative used a wide range of journalism techniques, old and new: Thomas Curwen's account of Anthony Mazzucca's life with schizophrenia exemplified the best of traditional journalism, deeply reported over months of interviews in which Curwen gained the trust of Mazzucca and his family. Our puppet show, done with the Bob Baker Marionette Theater, illustrated a newer technique, designed to reach children with information about mental health and illness in an accessible and age-appropriate way. A special section on suicide prevention provided extensive service journalism and community resources.

The mental health initiative aimed to heighten awareness of the problem at a time when state and local officials had begun to debate new solutions. How to deal with mental illness, especially in the context of homelessness, was a major topic of debate in the Los Angeles mayoral race. On the state level, Gov. Gavin Newsom proposed a major overhaul of the state's basic mental health law this year, which the Legislature approved in August.

By focusing attention on the underlying issues of mental health, our reporting helped shape those debates and keep the public informed on a vital topic. We're pleased to submit it for your consideration.

Sincerely,

