NAMI Slams BP Pay-Out Director Over Comments about Mental Health

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Can gulf coasters ever catch a break? Ever since the BP drilling platform exploded and began gushing oil into the gulf in April, it seems like the residents of coastal communities in Louisianna, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida have had to endure one insult after another. The latest "dis" came from BP oil spill fund administrator, Kenneth Feinberg, who told legislators at a recent congressional hearing that the $20 billion fund is not likely to pay damages for mental illness and distress caused by the spill unless a "physical injury" is also present.

Those were fighting words for country's largest mental health advocacy organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Their executive director, Michael J. Fitzpatrick, expressed the group's outrage in terse terms, saying that Feinberg's statement was, "incompatible with modern scientific knowledge of mental illness and the impact of traumatic events."

"Denial of a class of individuals with medical disorders affecting the brain from compensation that is available to those with medical disorders affecting other organs of the body would be neither fair nor equitable," Fitzpatrick continued.

A severe trauma, regardless of its source, can negatively impact individuals and their families for years afterward. People who endured the ravages of Katrina only five summers ago, were starting to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, but that progress was precarious. For many, the "great recession" was a severe, but survivable, injury to an already weakened system. The BP disaster could be the death blow for some.

With gulf states slashing their mental health budgets, failure on the part of the fund to cover mental health claims could take away a vital safety net that has the potential to help people bounce back from this tragedy. Without it, the devastation will likely resound for years to come.

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