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Mental Health: Virginia: Ready to Fix A Broken System?

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Recent reports by David Ress of the Richmond Times-Dispatch (June 3 and 5) call attention to decisions in Virginia's child mental health system. Is it too much to hope that this negative attention will actually produce a beneficial outcome for that system? It may, if it opens the door to a bigger and more compelling story that should be told.

Here's the real story: Virginia's child mental health system is broken. Recent reforms to the larger mental health system, though commendable and sorely needed, have focused largely on adult services. Kids have been left out and left behind.

The results of this long-term neglect? Our child mental health system is underfunded, fragmented, and largely ineffective. Too many communities lack adequate services and far too many families are unable to obtain the help they need. While a few pockets of excellence can be found, access and quality statewide are highly variable and much too dependent on where one lives.

Untreated mental health problems lead to long-lasting and sometimes devastating consequences for children and their families. Estimates are that one in five children and teens have a mental health problem, and one in 10 a problem serious enough to cause significant family distress, academic under-achievement, and disturbed peer relationships. Yet of those needing treatment, tragically only one in five can find appropriate services. Best-practice treatments can reduce symptoms and improve functioning and outcomes for many child disorders. How tragic that the turmoil and lost potential suffered by many children could be avoided if Virginia's system delivered the services they need.

Tragic, too, is the crushing burden of system failures falling on the many parents who struggle, often without success, to obtain the services they need. We know from their wrenching testimony that even the most loving and capable parents may crack under the strain, weakening families and marriages sometimes to the breaking point.

System failure exists alongside another -- a failure of leadership. For too long the child mental health cause has had few champions among state mental health officials, and few elected officials with the political courage to push for reform. Lack of strong leadership has undercut efforts to make children's mental health a high priority.

Until now, that is. The Campaign for Children's Mental Health, launched by the statewide child advocacy organization Voices for Virginia's Children in December, has already enrolled 60-plus organizations and more than 500 stakeholders, and secured funding to support an unprecedented three-year effort to reform the child mental health system. This outpouring of support confirms the urgent need for reform and the pent-up energy of supporters eager to join the fight.

The Campaign Steering Group includes the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Virginia, Mental Health America-Virginia, and the Virginia Association of Community Services Boards. The campaign will mobilize multiple stakeholders, including parents, public and private service providers, state and local officials, and child advocates; identify system shortcomings and needed reforms; articulate a compelling vision for an improved system; cultivate reform champions among elected officials and decision makers; work with legislators and administration officials to develop a reform package including policy and budget proposals; and mobilize broad public support to push the reform proposals to the top of the policy agenda.

A new chapter in this story may now be written. Gov. Bob McDonnell pledged during his campaign to improve child mental health services. He has chosen a highly respected mental health system veteran, Jim Stewart, to lead the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. That department has responded quickly and capably to the General Assembly request to study child mental health services and recommend improvements. The new secretary of Health and Human Resources, Dr. William Hazel, has stated his intention to continue the Children's Services Transformation Initiative, launched during the previous administration. That initiative produced measurable improvements and set the stage for a new focus on child mental health, the linchpin of further progress.

Now, for the first time, Virginia has a campaign in place with the resources and commitment to prod, support, champion, and monitor a sincere reform effort. This time, kids will not be left behind. Now, that's a good story.

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