

Report: Va. not meeting kids' mental health needs

Jan Powell's 15-year-old adopted son was recently released from a youth shelter in Loudoun County where he had been held for eight months. Powell says he never should have been sent there. Her son isn't a juvenile delinquent, she said. He has mental health issues.

But Virginia doesn't have adequate services to help children like Powell's son, according to a report released Tuesday. As a result, children who should be receiving care are instead being sent to detention or residential centers.

"I had days of going to the juvenile court systems, family services. Each one was saying, 'We can't help you, you go here,' " Powell said. "They seem to not understand that his problems are mental health issues. He's not a juvenile delinquent -- he had never been in trouble with the law. ... It became a nightmare."

The state's 40 locally run community services boards provide an array of treatments for children with mental health issues, including in-home care. But only a quarter of the boards provide services within all four categories of "base" services, which include outpatient services like psychiatry, case management, community-based services, and crisis response services, according to the report from Voices for Virginia's Children, a child advocacy group.

"By not serving the children in those areas, we are paying for them in other ways," said Margaret Nimmo Crowe, senior policy analyst who wrote the report.

More than half of the young people committed to Virginia's juvenile correctional centers last year had mental health disorders -- excluding attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and those related to delinquency, such as conduct disorder, the report said.

But kids like Powell's son can also find themselves out of luck. Soon after he returned home from the Loudoun shelter, the boy ran away and was sent back to the shelter, she said.

"He needs treatment," she said. "He's in desperate need of treatment. ... One hour a week of in-home therapy isn't going to do it. These kids with mental health issues are ending up in the wrong place."

Providing better services, however, would require money, Crowe said.

"I think clearly it's going to call for more funding," she said. Investing more in community services would be offset by savings in other areas, such as residential treatment, acute hospitalization, and juvenile justice costs, she said.

Some Northern Virginia jurisdictions are trying to pick up the slack. Fairfax County funds the Leland House, a facility for youth in crisis. Alexandria uses grant money to help keep children out of residential care and put them back in their homes.

