

Too many would be harmed if center were to be closed

March 2, 2010

I am writing in response to your editorial "Just Keep Center Open" from Feb. 25. Thank you for your extensive coverage of the proposed closure of the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents. As you have described, the center plays a key role in the children's mental health system in Virginia, providing acute inpatient hospitalization for children in crisis. And in particular, it serves children who are not being served by private hospitals.

The controversy over the center is symptomatic of a much larger problem: A children's mental health system that is inadequate, underfunded and extremely fragmented. The system should provide an array of community-based treatment programs for children with mental health problems. Instead, the availability of community-based services varies greatly from one locality to the next. Services in many communities are severely limited, and even when available, too often they cannot be accessed because the delivery systems are confusing and waiting times are long. This leads to unnecessary crises for children with mental health problems.

There is a growing number of citizens in Virginia who are dedicated to the cause of transforming Virginia's mental health system for children, and we are mobilizing for action. The Campaign for Children's Mental Health is a statewide advocacy initiative launched late last year by Voices for Virginia's Children, a nonprofit, nonpartisan child advocacy, research and policy organization. More than 40 organizations have signed on so far as partners in the campaign.

The goal of the campaign is simple: To make mental health services more available and accessible to the children who need them, regardless of where in Virginia they live or what "system" identifies their needs. By developing strong citizen and community support, we are determined to build the political will in Virginia to transform the child mental health system.

We encourage your readers to go to the campaign's Web site to learn more and to join in our efforts: www.1in5kids.org.

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