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Coalition advocate mental-health care for children

By David Ress

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For one Shenandoah Valley mother, professional advice about treatment for her troubled teenager was simple: Put him in foster care and walk away.

It is scores of tales like hers that are leading a coalition of mental-health groups, educators, juvenile-justice workers and health-care groups to join in a three-year campaign to reform the children's mental-health system in Virginia.

According to the new Campaign for Children's Mental Health, just one in five children with mental-health needs in Virginia are getting treatment, campaign coordinator Margaret Nimmo Crowe said this week.

The group also wants to break down some of the barriers that interfere with delivering care, particularly challenges of coordinating the various programs offered by different state and local agencies, said Crowe, a senior policy analyst at Voices for Virginia's Children.

"The question is, How do you get government working better for these kids?" said John Morgan, executive director of Voices for Virginia's Children.

Mira Signer, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said her nonprofit agency hears daily from families who can't get help, including the mother from the valley.

Vicki Hardy-Murrell, director of the Virginia Federation of Families, said she has notebooks full of similar stories, including one from a central Virginia family whose 14-year-old has been stuck in a residential treatment facility for three years because local services aren't available, or the parents of a 7-year-old in Tidewater who had to go to court to get a judge to order local agencies to provide services.

Children wait an average of 26 days for services at the state's 40 community services boards and 31 days on average if they need a psychiatrist, said Jennifer Faison, public policy manager of the Virginia Association of Community Services Boards.

"That means waiting a month when there's a crisis," and that's if the service is available, she said.

Only one community services board in Virginia, the one serving Hampton and Newport News, offers all the 12 key services -- ranging from emergency care to school-based day programs to

medication to therapy -- that state officials say are basic. A recent survey found 12 boards offered half or fewer of the key services.

The Richmond Behavioral Health Authority offers nine, while boards serving Chesterfield and Henrico counties offer seven, Hanover County's provides 10 and the board serving the Tri-Cities provides six.

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