

“Children Need Our Mental Help”

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“My child had a diagnosis of a mood disorder. He sometimes would go into a rage and punch holes in our wall and destroy things..... The counselor advised me to press charges.... My son spent over a month in detention just waiting for a psychological evaluation at Commonwealth [Center for Children and Adolescents]. Because I had filed charges, the private hospital within a ten minute drive of our house was not an option.... I was very upset that he had to spend time in detention waiting for an evaluation - but if Commonwealth didn't exist - what options would there be? There are not options around here for adolescents who have charges filed against them, nor are their options for families who do not have insurance. Our kids would end up staying in detentionwith their mental state deteriorating, instead of receiving evaluation and treatment.”

This family’s story is just one of the many heard from families across Virginia recently in response to the proposed closure of the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents in Staunton and the adolescent unit of Southwestern Virginia Mental Health Institute in Marion. These 64 beds are the only remaining state-run acute-care psychiatric hospital beds for children and youth. The previous administration proposed closing these beds last year, yet the General Assembly reinstated funding for them after hearing the public outcry. In response to the dire budget situation, the beds are once again slated to be closed to save the Commonwealth roughly \$19 million over the next two years.

Yes, budget cuts are needed to fill the \$4 billion hole in the state budget. But closing hospital beds for children and youth with emergency psychiatric needs is potentially harmful and may have dire consequences for the child and his or her family, school and community. Those with untreated psychiatric emergencies are likely to further deteriorate, becoming more prone to aggressive outbursts, violent mood swings, impulsive risk-taking, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, or other highly troublesome symptoms. When these beds are lost, many of the more than 800 youth per year normally served at these facilities will be denied necessary treatment.

There are more than 200 private psychiatric hospital beds for children in Virginia, yet most of the children served by Commonwealth or Southwestern will not have access to these private sector beds. Why? Private hospitals won’t admit them because their symptoms are too severe or complex, or they have complicating medical disorders or juvenile justice involvement, or they don’t have insurance coverage or their insurance has run out.

For these reasons, families, treatment providers and community leaders are gravely concerned at the prospect of losing the public safety net. More than 20 organizations across Virginia have joined the **Campaign for Children’s Mental Health**, a statewide initiative led by Voices for Virginia’s Children to promote critically-needed reforms in Virginia’s child mental health system. The Campaign opposes the immediate closure of these facilities. Simply put, it is dangerous to deny acute inpatient care to children and adolescents in psychiatric crisis. Those beds cannot be closed safely until local, community-based alternative treatment options have been developed, a process that is no farther along than it was when the previous administration first proposed closing these same beds one year ago.

The Campaign for Children's Mental Health believes that consideration of closing the state facilities should be part of a **larger, long-overdue reform of Virginia's child mental health system**. That system is fragmented, underfunded and woefully ineffective. It fails to deliver the services required to help the thousands of children and families in need. As evidenced by the story above, too many children find themselves caught up inappropriately in the justice system or elsewhere, when what they desperately need is mental health treatment.

The Child and Adolescent State and Community Consensus and Planning Team established by the General Assembly last year to study the issue recommended that specific reforms be enacted before closing these hospitals. The General Assembly should postpone the closure of these beds until the following have been accomplished:

- A wider array of community-based care, including crisis stabilization and other intensive services, must be developed and funded in every region of Virginia to help reduce the need for inpatient care. To do so, savings from closing the hospital beds must be reinvested in new community services.
- State government must preserve a safety net to ensure that all children in need of inpatient care can be served. The state must partner with private hospitals and/or the state university teaching hospitals to develop adequate acute-care psychiatric hospitalization in each region of the state. There must be capacity to serve children with the types of needs shown by those currently served by state hospitals, including those children with difficult behaviors and co-occurring conditions who cannot currently be served by the private sector.
- Adequate funds must be provided to purchase acute psychiatric care for children without insurance coverage or for those whose coverage has run out.
- In collaboration with the Department of Juvenile Justice, alternative services must be developed to identify and treat those in the juvenile justice system with acute psychiatric needs.

Tough, painful decisions must be made to balance the budget. Yet closing psychiatric beds for children is potentially dangerous and clearly not in the best interest of children and families. Ironically, if long-overdue child mental health system reforms were already in place, the beds could now be closed safely. In the absence of reforms, and in spite of the budget crisis, the beds should remain open.

Voices for Virginia's Children (www.vakids.org) is a statewide, nonprofit, policy research and advocacy organization. For more information about the Campaign for Children's Mental Health, visit www.1in5kids.org.