

# Group Presses For More State Support For Children's Mental Health Services

By Amanda Iacone Virginia Statehouse News | Posted: Tuesday, June 21, 2011 9:15 am

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RICHMOND - The 15-year-old boy lived in seven foster homes over four years, before he was adopted. He was traumatized by the experience and still is trying to cope as a teenager.

Now his Ashburn family is struggling to find him the help and treatment he needs. The teen and his family aren't alone. Mental illness affects one out of five children and spans the socio-economic spectrum, according to mental health advocates.

Voices for Virginia's Children, which advocates for disadvantaged or vulnerable children, recently called on Gov. Bob McDonnell to include an additional \$20 million in the next biennial budget to provide crisis services and expand access to psychiatric services. They also say better care coordination is needed for those children receiving Medicaid-paid services.

The extra funding would double the amount of mental health funds the state currently provides.

State tax dollars go to 40 Community Service Boards, which are local agencies that work with children and adults suffering from mental illness, substance abuse or intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Funding from the localities varies as much as the level of service the boards provide. The pots of funding from the state vary as well.

For some children, Medicaid covers their mental health services, while state Community Service Act dollars pay for mental health services for foster or special education children.

But not all children qualify for Medicaid or Community Service Act funds. And the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services spent about \$22 million this year for children's mental services.

No family can afford the fees for residential psychiatric treatment, which costs thousands of dollars a month, said Jan, the adoptive mother of the 15-year-old boy for whom she is seeking help.

And there is nothing in her county between a youth shelter, which houses at-risk youth and low-level juvenile delinquents, and residential treatment, Jan said.

"It doesn't matter how much money you have. If the service isn't available, you can't purchase it," said Mary Ann Bergeron, executive director of the Virginia Association of Community Services Boards, which advocates for services boards and behavioral health authorities.

Preventing expensive hospitalizations or crisis situations is the goal that will take more psychiatric doctors, medication and outpatient therapy, Bergeron said.

In May, Voices for Virginia's Children released a report that found Virginia does not provide enough basic mental health services to keep children out of hospitals or residential treatment programs.

The report found that providing those basic services statewide would reduce the need for more expensive, long-term stays in privately run facilities or brief stays in the state's psychiatric hospital for children in Staunton. All Community Services Boards provide emergency services and some case management, but they lack psychiatry and in-home services.

Proactive planning, such as what Voices is recommending, could have prevented the problems the state is facing to address the needs of adults with mental health conditions, said state Delegate John O'Bannon, R-Henrico, a doctor who serves on the Legislature's joint commission on health care.

The state has been ordered by the U.S. Department of Justice to move many of the adults who suffer from developmental disorders from state-run institutions into houses and apartments with in-home services.

Lawmakers provided \$60 million to begin that transition in 2012, but more money is needed to pay for home care and treatment to comply with the federal directive.

"Eventually the kids grow up," O'Bannon said. "If you can identify these folks and get them good treatment early on in life, there is every reason to believe you'll save money in the long run."

McDonnell said he had not yet read the letter from Voices seeking the funding, but he will make more funding commitments to mental health. He said he believes community-based care is essential to improve the quality of life of the patients.

"It's good policy, plus we have the Justice Department urging us to do some things in that area, plus the inspector general's report that is also a pretty strong clarion call for community-based service. It's very evident to me that now is the time to really push this transition from institution to community-based care," McDonnell said.

While that may sound like a good goal, Jan said she isn't convinced.

Jan said the state can't limit residential treatment options and then not provide any immediate help when families are in a crisis like her family faced this past year. And her son's condition has worsened.

"What do they put in place if they are going to take all the residential treatment programs out of the picture? What have they put in place? Nothing," Jan said. "You're going to have so many families in crisis, if they don't do something."

She also said parents' opinions should be heard and considered, not questioned or ignored. She said she felt she was blamed for her son's problems, even as she was trying to get him help.

Her son spent seven months in a youth shelter, before he was transferred to a residential treatment facility in Central Virginia, she said.

Jan said she is glad he is receiving the treatment he needs.

"You need people to turn to for immediate help. If you don't have immediate help, you're going to run into worse problems," Jan said. "I don't know what's going to on in Virginia. They need to pull their socks up ... get their act together."

Editor's note: Virginia Statehouse News did not use complete names to protect the privacy of the minor whose story is told.