

Forum leaders work to improve children's mental health services

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The Lynchburg area has a good reputation within Virginia for children's mental health services, but local providers and parents still see room for improvement.

On Wednesday, Virginia Special Advisor for Children's Services Raymond Ratke joined Margret Nimmo Crowe, an advocate with Voices for Virginia's Children, for a forum on that subject in Lynchburg.

Crowe's organization has launched a three-year statewide campaign to improve mental health for children in Virginia. She and Ratke began a statewide listening tour to gather ideas here in the city.

"It's our goal to, sort of, enlist an army," Crowe said, adding that since one in five U.S. children has a mental health problem, she thinks the people who love those children could be a natural source of grassroots support.

Roughly 60 people attended the forum, held at the Lynchburg Public Library. Most were professionals involved in providing services for children, but some parents also attended.

Forum leaders asked participants to brainstorm what has improved in the area and how children's mental health in the area could be further improved.

In general, forum participants applauded the expansion of home-based mental health services in the area, but had plenty of ideas for upgrades.

In the brainstorming session, several local government service agency leaders suggested changes at the state level could benefit local services, for example if state agencies would come to consensus with one another before handing down guidelines. A call for less paperwork brought a round of applause.

Parents at the forum wanted to improve social situations at schools as a way to promote mental health. They suggested more after-school programs for students with special needs and peer-mentoring programs to help students help each other.

Bill Semones, Centra Health's Vice President for Mental Health Services, stopped in briefly and voiced a few concerns of his own during the small-group brainstorming session.

Semones said he's worried that some people offering mental health services in the area may be underqualified. He thinks patient no-shows for appointments with psychologists and other professionals are driving up costs and that some doctors are being priced out of being able to help children on Medicaid.

Other ideas for improvement raised by participants included:

- more mental health services for children with autism and developmental disabilities;
- better benchmarks for mental health success in some areas, for example audits and assessments based on whether children get better, rather than how many visits a mental health professional makes;
- more local training for mental health professionals.

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