

Report: Va lacks mental health services for kids

Tuesday May 3, 2011 RICHMOND, Va. - Virginia fails to provide adequate mental health services for children in the community, often resulting in costly stays in psychiatric facilities or incarceration, according to a report released Tuesday by a children's advocacy group.

The Voices for Virginia's Children report says too few services are available in the community, and there are "unacceptably long" waits to access those that are available. Services for those in crisis are particularly lacking, it found.

When the needed services aren't available, children often end up in residential facilities or in the juvenile justice system. The report found that more than half of incarcerated juveniles have a diagnosed mental illness beyond those that are likely to contribute to their criminal behavior, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or substance abuse problems.

"We're going to pay for high-need kids one way or another, and wouldn't it be better to meet their mental health needs early on to try to keep them in their own homes and in their own school systems?" said Margaret Nimmo Crowe, a senior policy analyst for the organization and author of the report. "It's better for the child. It's better for the family, and it helps keep them out of things that are going to cost us more."

The report comes on the heels of state action against a Norfolk-based treatment center for troubled children for repeated violations. Last week, the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services suspended admissions to and downgraded the license of The Pines Residential Treatment Center's three Hampton Roads-area facilities after a North Carolina boy's claims of sexual abuse by another resident weren't properly reported.

The agency said it was the latest of more than 150 investigations in the centers, which opened in 1986 and provide in-patient treatment for more than 400 youth. Agency spokeswoman Meghan McGuire said the department wanted to work with the center to correct the problems rather than shut it down because there are few options for residential mental health services for children.

Only one state-run facility remains open. Last year, more than 750 children cycled through the 48 beds at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents in Staunton.

"The fact that we rely so heavily on a facility that has had a history of problems and licensing violations and safety concerns for children just shows you how strained the system is — that if we had other community-based services for these kids we'd be using them," Crowe said.

National statistics estimate that one in five children has a diagnosable mental illness, and one in 10 — or at least 85,000 Virginia kids and adolescents — experiences a severe emotional disturbance.

While there are a variety of services available for Virginia's children, they aren't available in all areas of the state, the report found. Virginia's system is too fragmented, the report said, forcing parents to navigate a complex labyrinth of local and state-funded programs in order to get help for their children.

For Jesselle Christenson of Hanover County, it took her son Erik trying to hang himself during gym class in 2003 for her to finally get some help.

At 11 Erik was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder characterized by difficulties with social interaction. The family took him to psychiatrists and therapists, but it often took months to get appointments and even his pediatrician didn't know where to steer them for help.

After the suicide attempt, Erik attended a day treatment program and spent four months in residential care. Christenson, now 65, said she doesn't know what she would have done without help navigating the system.

"There are a lot of families out here in crisis that need some understanding," she said. "They need some help. They need a gateway. They need a path."

Eight years after his suicide attempt, his mother says you would think the access to care would be better. Instead, budget cuts have claimed both the residential and day treatment programs that helped Erik, now 22.

She hopes the report will erase some of the stigma of mental illness in children and possibly convince legislators to put more money into community-based services that can make a difference before a child is in crisis.

"If we were talking about cancer or childhood diseases, if we were talking about an epidemic of children breaking bones or malnutrition we would have people interested," she said. "These are families and children who deserve help."

Often, the report found, either the funding is available in an area but services aren't provided, or the services are available but the child who needs help doesn't qualify for Medicaid or other programs to help cover the cost.

"Ideally, whether a kid can access services should be based on the acuity level of their mental health profile. It should not be based on socio-economic factors," said Beth Rafferty, director of the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, which receives state and local funding to provide community-based treatment.

The authority is one of 40 local agencies statewide charged with providing community care — everything from psychiatric treatment to crisis management.

A department report released in January found that only one in four community services boards offered services in four core areas: outpatient services like counseling, case management, home-based services and crisis response programs.

The agency acknowledged services are inadequate, and that more money is needed to help more kids in the community.

"The kids deserve more than what they're getting," Rafferty said.

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