

Shore up mental health services



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FOR THE ONE in five Virginia children who struggle with mental illness, the world can be scary, lonely and dark, particularly when they cannot get the treatment they need.

This week marks National Children's Mental Health Awareness Week, offering a fitting opportunity to look at how children who face serious mental and emotional problems fare in Virginia.

While some Virginia communities offer kids the comprehensive mental health services they need and deserve, many more do not, according to a new report released this week by Voices for Virginia's Children, a nonpartisan, nonprofit child advocacy organization.

This unique report gives the first holistic view of data from multiple public agencies involved in children's mental health treatment, painting a more complete picture of the services in our com-

monwealth. Across Virginia, shortages of services result in more children being placed in places such as The Pines Residential Treatment Center, which has been in the news lately for alarming violations of child safety.

Across the state, shortages of services mean many kids have long waits for the community-based treatments they need — if the treatments are available at all.

These shortages result in more children being placed in high-end services, such as

The Pines Residential Treatment Center in Portsmouth and Norfolk, which has been in the news lately for alarming violations of child safety.

The report's findings, coupled with news that the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents in Staunton — Virginia's only remaining state-run psychiatric hospital for children — has been close to overflowing for the past month, point to a mental health system strained almost to the breaking point.

When children do not receive appropriate treatment for mental health problems, they are more likely to land in the juvenile justice system.

In fact, more than half of incarcerated youth have a mental health diagnosis, according to the report.

No single agency or lawmaker can fix the problem.

Policy makers, private and public mental health providers, and state administrators

need to work together to expand community-based mental health services for children.

Through its Campaign for Children's Mental Health, Voices for Virginia's Children challenges our leaders to build a cohesive statewide system of care.

That system must start by including the basic services throughout our state: psychiatric treatment, case management, high-quality in-home services and crisis response.

With access to proper treatment and support, Virginia's children with mental illnesses can have the same thing we all want for our kids — the chance for a meaningful and an enjoyable life.

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