



The Campaign for Children's Mental Health

Overview of The Campaign

The Need

The Surgeon General reports that 1 in 5 kids has a mental health problem. Virginia's Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services estimates that between 92,000 and 111,000 Virginia children and adolescents have a *serious* emotional disturbance. Only one in five, however, receives needed treatment. Numerous studies and task forces have documented inadequacies in the child mental health service system in Virginia. Many children go unserved because the system is fragmented and uncoordinated, service availability and quality vary tremendously from locality to locality, community-based services are particularly lacking, and there is a severe shortage of professionals trained to treat child and adolescent disorders. At the state level, responsibility for the public child mental health system is split among three secretariats and four agencies, with no centralized authority or leadership to consolidate funding or create an accessible system. At the local level, service availability, eligibility criteria and admission processes vary greatly across localities, leaving many families confused and without access. Many children endure long waits before accessing services; a 2008 Inspector General's report found that the average wait at community services boards to see a child psychiatrist, for example, was 31 days.

While the adult mental health system has undergone substantive reforms in the last few years – from reinvestment of dollars from state institutions into the community to the law reforms enacted last year in the wake of the Virginia Tech tragedy – the children's mental health system has not experienced a similar transformation. However, greater awareness of the barriers for children exists today because of the publicity around the Tech tragedy, as well as because of the work of the Chief Justice's Mental Health Law Reform Task Force. Furthermore, in the last eighteen months Virginia has embarked upon a significant system reform effort within the Department of Social Services, specifically in foster care. This Transformation Initiative was originally focused on thirteen core localities but now is expanding statewide. One of its goals is to increase community-based services for children, including mental health services. Finally, Governor-elect Bob McDonnell voiced his support for making services more available during his campaign. The confluence of these events makes this a particularly opportune time to pursue transformation of the child mental health system.

The Campaign

Voices for Virginia's Children is leading *The Campaign for Children's Mental Health* to transform Virginia's child mental health system so that more children are able to obtain needed services. Children who receive services as soon as they begin to show symptoms are less likely to escalate to the point of crisis, which reduces the need for more expensive and restrictive treatments. Through a three-year, vigorous advocacy campaign, timed to coincide with a new administration, Voices will work closely with its partners to create the policy climate and public will that can motivate state lawmakers and mental health officials to address the system's shortcomings. The Campaign will work to achieve the following policy goals:

- Increase the array of community-based services (both public and private), particularly those that are more intensive than outpatient counseling and can help avoid over-reliance on residential treatment services.
- Establish an integrated and consolidated system within state government with clear authority and adequate resources.
- Increase uniformity of the system statewide so that families throughout Virginia, regardless of the jurisdiction in which they live, can access appropriate services.
- Enhance the training of the current workforce and the capacity of the future workforce to treat children with evidence-based, best practice services.

Voices will work with a wide variety of partners, including family members, treatment professionals, mental health service delivery organizations, child advocacy organizations, and policy experts to form a broad coalition to:

- recruit and mobilize parents as partners, advocates, and campaign leaders;
- cultivate key legislators and members of the McDonnell administration to champion this cause;
- persuade state and local mental health officials to advocate for needed reforms;
- mobilize the grassroots to support the cause; and
- educate the public about the importance of reforming the children's mental health system.

For more information about The Campaign for Children's Mental Health, please contact: Margaret Nimmo Crowe, campaign coordinator, (804) 649-0184 ext. 23, margaret@vakids.org.