

Reforms sought on mental health

Panel told about the hardships faced by families and the ill

Wednesday, Oct 10, 2007 - 12:09 AM

By PAMELA STALLSMITH
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Linda Townsend calls her late husband and her son victims of mental illness.

Nine years ago, her son Michael -- who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia -- was convicted of the murder of his father in Chesterfield County. Now 28, he is serving a 40-year sentence, with 15 years suspended, for a shooting committed while in a psychotic state.

"Mental illness is a brain disorder like any other disease that attacks our body. Mental illness is treatable," Townsend told the House Health, Welfare and Institutions Committee yesterday afternoon.

"We need new laws that allow family members to intervene and seek help for their loved ones. These changes need to be now in order to avoid another tragedy like Virginia Tech, or a tragedy like my son Michael."

Medical privacy laws restrict what information can be shared with others, even family members.

Townsend was among more than two dozen mental-health professionals, family members, advocates and illness sufferers who addressed the committee with often moving and poignant remarks during a three-hour hearing.

Yesterday's was the last of four meetings convened in the aftermath of the April 16 rampage at Virginia Tech by Seung-Hui Cho, a mentally ill student who fatally shot 32 people before turning the gun on himself.

"April 16 certainly put mental health front and center for every legislator," Del. Phillip A. Hamilton, R-Newport News, the committee's chairman, said after the meeting.

Mental-health reforms will rank among the dominant issues in this winter's General Assembly, which will be grappling with a budget shortfall.

Mental-health professionals described Virginia's system as chronically underfunded and

in need of more treatment facilities, among many suggestions.

"I know there is a budget shortfall, but I am not suggesting caviar and champagne, but just meat and potatoes to nourish and sustain a system that has been so neglected," said Dr. Aradhana "Bela" Sood, a professor of psychiatry with the VCU Health Systems and a member of the Virginia Tech Review Panel.

Those with mental illness offered some of the most powerful testimony and said overcoming societal stigma is a huge hurdle.

"We are the experts," said Sherry Rose of Fairfax County. "We do not want to be sick."

Family members such as Townsend provided heart-wrenching stories of dealing with mentally ill adult relatives and the frustrations they encountered with treatment and the legal system.

Barbara Kunowsky, executive director of Midlothian-based FACES, a family support group, cited an article in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on Sunday that detailed the disturbing plight of mentally ill inmates in the Richmond City Jail.

"I would ask you where is the outcry? We have made it a crime to have a mental illness, and shame on our society," she said.

Contact Pamela Stallsmith at (804) 649-6746 or pstallsmith@timesdispatch.com.

[Go Back](#)

[News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Living](#) | [Shopping/Classifieds](#) | [Weather](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Obituaries](#) | [Services/Contact Us](#)

© 2007, [Media General Inc.](#) All Rights Reserved. [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Site Map](#)

-- Part of the [GatewayVa](#) Network --

webmaster@inrich.com

