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Children's Mental Health Center Needs Support

By EVA TEIG HARDY

As Virginia's budget crisis enters its fourth year, the robust debate about what constitutes core state services continues. That debate should include children's mental health. The choice is simple: We can pay now in a common-sense way to address children's mental health needs. Or we can pay vastly more later through other state services, disrupted families, ruined lives, and wasted potential.

As Virginia's budget crisis enters its fourth year, the robust debate about what constitutes core state services continues. That debate should include children's mental health. The choice is simple: We can pay now in a common-sense way to address children's mental health needs. Or we can pay vastly more later through other state services, disrupted families, ruined lives, and wasted potential.

Despite efforts during the 2008 General Assembly session to improve children's mental health services after the Virginia Tech tragedy, our system continues to have significant shortcomings.

The wait for an acute-care bed can take many days and result in a placement hundreds of miles away. The state's mental health agency is largely exiting its traditional role of providing mental health beds for children.

Residential services are in decline as state and local governments attempt to save money. (Private insurance generally does not pay for this level of care.) Community services are fragmented and difficult for families to navigate.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that we have great resources to build upon -- for instance, right here in Richmond at the Virginia Treatment Center for Children (VTCC).

VTCC has long been the centerpiece of the commonwealth's mental health system for our children. This was true when I became secretary of health and human resources in the administration of Gov. Gerald Baliles 25 years ago. And it remains true today.

As a result of a budget-cutting effort during a previous state financial crisis, VTCC is now part of the VCU Health System. But its role remains the same: providing world-class mental health care for children; performing cutting-edge research on prevention and treatment issues; and training the next generation of children's mental health professionals -- physicians, nurses, social workers, and psychologists.

VTCC has won national and international recognition for the quality of its patient care, research, and training.

It is heartening that so much good work is happening here in Central Virginia. Yet this critical work is taking place in an antiquated building that will need major structural changes in the future to comply with safety and health codes.

VTCC also operates in a difficult political environment. It is no longer part of the state mental health agency and therefore not traditionally a priority for the executive branch of state government.

At the same time, VTCC must compete for resources within a large university health system with a wide range of needs and a large charity caseload.

Children's mental health services are heavily dependent on shrinking state and local resources and do not make much, if any, money for health systems. That is why so few hospitals offer these services.

The state mental health agency and most private hospitals no longer can afford to offer such services. How will this growing gap be filled?

VTCC remains ready and able to offer the best care possible for mentally ill children. However, VTCC can succeed only if it has sufficient community support. That is why I am urging community and government leaders across the state and region to begin to give serious thought to investing in one of the hidden jewels in our state.

A private-public sector partnership is critical to providing the kind of mental health services that all our children deserve.

Eva Teig Hardy recently retired as executive vice president at Dominion Resources Inc. She served as Virginia's secretary of health and human resources under Gov. Gerald L. Baliles. Contact her at Evhardy1@gmail.com.
