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# A troubling gap in mental health care

*By Richard "Dickie" Bell*

Just off Interstate 81 in Staunton stands Virginia's last remaining state-run children's mental health hospital.

The Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents helps heal children with varying levels of mental illness, including children who have been deemed a danger to themselves and others.

The Commonwealth Center lies in my legislative district, so I have a vested interest in Virginia's children's mental health system. That is, in part, why I followed this year's disturbing news reports of abuse at The Pines Residential Treatment Center in the Tidewater area, Gov. Bob McDonnell's home region.

During my career as a high school special education teacher, I saw firsthand the consequences of inadequate mental health treatment in children.

As a state legislator, I am working to share these important lessons with my colleagues, including those who hail from the Tidewater region.

The data are troubling. The readmissions rate at Commonwealth Center is at 20 percent and increasing.

Many children cannot access the support and services they need to stay healthy once they return home. Our communities simply do not have adequate resources to meet each child's needs.

Even more troubling, Virginia's children have to wait an average of seven weeks for psychiatric services, according to the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services.

This lack of services often forces these children to leave the comfort of their families to seek treatment.

This is a critical time in Virginia as McDonnell and his team are preparing their proposed state budget. They are determining the best way to support core services such as transportation, public safety and education.

Mental health care must be added to the list of critical services we provide to Virginians.

McDonnell's own Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services recently issued a report study urging the General Assembly to find a way to invest more in our children's mental health system and bring the commonwealth in line with minimum standards. The report is based on two years of study.

Some may ask me how I can justify the cost of improving mental health services for children. I ask them how they can justify the cost of letting Virginia's children unnecessarily suffer from mental illness.

After all, just one young life lost to mental illness is one life too many.

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