

Children deserve better-run mental health system

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I am writing regarding the Jan. 23 article written by David Ress, "Medicaid pays more, kids get less, audits show." The problems described in this article, unfortunately, are a result of the state's piece-meal approach to addressing children's mental health needs that has been going on for more than two decades.

One of Virginia's greatest failings in this area, despite hard work by many individuals in state and local government, is that no administration has yet taken on the task of coordinating the various functions in the executive branch that fund or provide children's mental health services. Responsibilities are fragmented across an array of health and social service agencies, not to mention the education and juvenile justice systems. This leads to inefficiencies, huge gaps in services, and in the case of in-home services, a situation ripe for fraud and abuse. Meanwhile, children with true mental health disorders suffer from lack of access to appropriate treatment, often reaching a point of crisis and ending up in our foster care and juvenile justice systems.

Gov. McDonnell has taken some first steps toward improving the system by recommending a care coordination system for behavioral health services in Medicaid. If implemented correctly, such an approach could improve both quality and access to services while reducing opportunities for fraud and abuse. However, his administration is also taking a step backward by recommending cuts to vital funding sources for children's mental health treatment.

The Campaign for Children's Mental Health, an advocacy initiative led by Voices for Virginia's Children, calls for a comprehensive reform of the state's system designed to help these children. We look forward to working with the McDonnell administration and the General Assembly to help design a well-coordinated system that directs resources to high quality mental health services for children who need them, rather than to those out to make a buck off the Medicaid system.

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