

Christenson: Don't wait for a near-tragedy before treatment

By **ERIK CHRISTENSON**, spokesman for the Campaign for Children's Mental Health (Contact him in care of the campaign coordinator, Margaret Nimmo Crowe, at Margaret@vakids.org.)

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I am 22 years old and have struggled with mental-health issues for as long as I can remember. My unusual behavior and trouble at school started in my early elementary years. It led to a variety of theories and misdiagnoses, including simple laziness.

None of the explanations seemed to fit. My parents, who have been my greatest supporters throughout my life, refused to believe what they knew intuitively couldn't be true and continued seeking help for me.

But without proper treatment, my mental condition deteriorated. On May 6, 2003, at age 14, I attempted suicide by suffocation during after-school track practice. I was found unconscious. Paramedics rushed me to the hospital, where I spent a week — two days of which were under sedation and on a ventilator. I am told that if I had been found a few minutes later I would have lost most or all of my brain functions — or my life.

After my suicide attempt I was hospitalized at the Virginia Treatment Center for Children. It was there, thanks to the excellent care of my therapist and psychiatrist, that I finally received the diagnosis and knowledge that have assured I will never walk that dark path again.

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a form of severe depression marked by mood swings and impulsive thought processes. This new diagnosis, coupled with my earlier diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, was the first one that made sense. An analysis of my history revealed that the signs were all there as early as infancy and would have been seen by a highly trained and intuitive mental-health professional.

There it was: quality mental-health care. After years of referrals, dead ends, breakdowns and medication trials, it took an event in which I almost killed myself to find competent people who could help turn my life around and set me on a path of recovery.

I am sharing my story so that the other estimated 100,000 Virginia children who suffer from serious emotional disturbances will not have to go through the same horrendous process. I lend my voice to the Campaign for Children's Mental Health — a project of the nonprofit, nonpartisan group Voices for Virginia's Children — because it is working to transform the mental-health system in Virginia to help young people like me recover.

Earlier this week, the campaign delivered a letter to Gov. Bob McDonnell and other state lawmakers calling for these simple policy reforms:

- 1) Virginia must provide adequate mental-health services so children can be treated in their communities and with their families at their sides. The support of my family and the availability of treatment in my hometown made all the difference in my recovery. Being able to establish long-term, trusting relationships with my psychiatrist and therapists has provided stability through the inevitable ups and downs of recovery. All areas of the state should offer these four basic services: psychiatry, case management, in-home services and crisis-response services.
- 2) Virginia must develop a comprehensive plan for its child mental-health system. My family struggled to navigate this confusing, fragmented system while I received misdiagnosis after misdiagnosis. No more children should fall through the cracks because our state doesn't properly coordinate resources.
- 3) Virginia must do a better job listening to families. My parents tried for years to advocate on my behalf, but they were not taken seriously until it was almost too late. All professionals who work with children must recognize that parents and families are key to successful treatment. Virginia must put in place strategies that acknowledge that kids and families are experts on their own treatment needs.

My struggle is not unique. My plight is the plight of many. It is my hope that sharing my voice will help convince our elected leaders to make children's mental health a priority this year.