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Give kids treatment they deserve

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A teenage boy is languishing in a youth shelter with no treatment because the "system" can't agree on a treatment plan. The devastated mother of a 6-year-old girl just diagnosed with bipolar disorder doesn't know where get help for such a young child. An 18-year-old with depression has been hospitalized 10 times in four years because she cannot access adequate community services to keep her stabilized.

In the past few months, an increasing number of parents have been calling me in desperation, reporting they cannot get their children the mental health treatment they need.

Their heart-breaking stories haunt me. Each one represents a valuable child who deserves the same thing we all want for our children: the chance to live up to their potential. Each one represents a family torn apart unnecessarily because it can't get access to basic mental health care for their children.

It's a bigger problem than many realize. One in five children has a mental health disorder. In Virginia alone, about 100,000 young people suffer from a serious emotional disturbance, according to the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services.

Our last remaining state-run psychiatric hospital for children, the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents in Staunton, has been operating at or near capacity since admissions began spiking in February.

Many communities fail to offer even the most basic services for children's mental health disorders. The Roanoke Valley offers more treatment options than much of the state, but even here, we cannot meet all the needs.

The good news is that there is a solution. Elected officials need to make children with mental illness a priority. Earlier this week, my organization -- Voices for Virginia's Children, a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group -- gave them a road map to make our family-focused state a leader in children's mental health.

As part of our Campaign for Children's Mental Health, we delivered to Gov. Bob McDonnell and state legislators a common-sense, three-step plan:

1. Invest in children's mental health so that all young Virginians can get four basic mental health treatment services in their own communities: psychiatric services, case management, crisis response services and in-home services. Local crisis services for kids go a long way toward preventing costly hospitalizations and residential treatment stays.
2. Develop a comprehensive plan for our child mental health system that includes all Virginia kids who receive services through the public sector. Our fragmented system is confusing to families and costly to taxpayers. Recent news reports on Roanoke's use of state and local funds for at-risk youth highlight the potential for wasted resources in the absence of well-managed programs.
3. Listen to children and families. All professionals working with children need to recognize that patients and their families need to be an integral part of the treatment team. Our state must put in place strategies that acknowledge that kids and families are experts on their own treatment needs.

No single leader or agency can solve these problems. McDonnell, legislators, public and private mental health providers, advocates and families must work together so we can make a difference for children in this upcoming budget cycle and legislative session.