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Advocates start bid to expand children's mental health services under bleak budget

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Advocates for mentally ill children have started an ambitious effort to protect state funding from cuts amid a gaping budget shortfall, and even expand services for what they say is a desperately underserved population.

The Campaign for Children's Mental Health joins scores of other interests hoping to convince state lawmakers -- faced with multibillion-dollar deficits -- not to deliver big cuts to core government functions next session. Medicaid spending, which represents one of the fastest-growing parts of Virginia's budget, is likely to bear a hefty share of those reductions.

That's particularly worrisome for Margaret Nimmo Crowe, the campaign's coordinator and a senior policy analyst for the nonprofit Voices for Virginia's Children. A large part of mental health services are administered through local Community Services Boards. Because more than half of those agencies' children's programs are funded through Medicaid, the federal health program for the poor and disabled, "that would be devastating to take a hit," Crowe said.

The group said only one in five youths with mental health problems received the treatment they needed. It also is pushing for broad reforms to how Virginia helps those youths, including streamlining what is now a confusing patchwork of agencies giving different services.

The campaign is backing Gov.-elect Bob McDonnell's proposed mental health package, which calls for expanding community-based care and strengthening services for children.

Gov. Tim Kaine is expected to roll out the final budget proposal of his four-year term on Dec. 18, after which it will be dissected, amended and eventually approved by the General Assembly. Kaine has said that package may include a tax increase, but also will include cuts to health care and education. Virginia officials need to close a budget gap of as much as \$3 billion through mid-2012.

Preserving mental health dollars may be more difficult with the departure of Del. Phil Hamilton, one of the legislature's strongest advocates for the mentally ill and disabled, who lost re-election in November amid an ethics scandal and resigned shortly after. Crowe called Hamilton's absence "a loss," but said the cause still has champions in the legislature.

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