

## **House plans will harm kids in need**

Letter to the editor, February 17, 2011

The House of Delegates has dealt a severe blow to Virginia's mentally ill children with its proposed state budget now in conference committee.

Mental Health America of Augusta, a leading advocate for adult and children's mental health services, calls upon the General Assembly budget conferees to immediately reject the House of Delegates proposal to cut \$21.6 million from Medicaid mental health services for children. The cut was made in conjunction with moving all children covered by these services into the Comprehensive Services Act system.

A hurriedly undertaken major policy shift, this move would move the care for many ill children into an already crowded program which was never intended for the mentally ill. The CSA system is supported by local governments, which already struggle to respond to fund the existing caseload. The result of this sudden move will be to reduce the state budget at the expense of already severely strained local budgets and to create huge delays in treatment for mentally ill children.

Like many physical medical illnesses, those with mental illnesses must have prompt treatment to avoid reaching a point of crisis. Moving these children to the CSA system will unquestionably mean serious delays -- at the very least -- and will create medical crises that will have tragic consequences for the children, their families and their communities. Ultimately, it will substantially increase state costs for hospitalization and, potentially, the criminal justice system.

MHA-A supports the creation of a care coordination system for both children and adults who are eligible for Medicaid behavioral health services. We believe care coordination can provide the necessary oversight to ensure appropriate usage of Medicaid mental health services for all, while minimizing costs.

Using care for mentally ill children as a negotiating ploy or gambit to fight abuses of the Medicaid system is morally wrong and economically short-sighted.

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Editor's Note: The writer is president of Mental Health America of Augusta