

## Little Voices, Big Impact

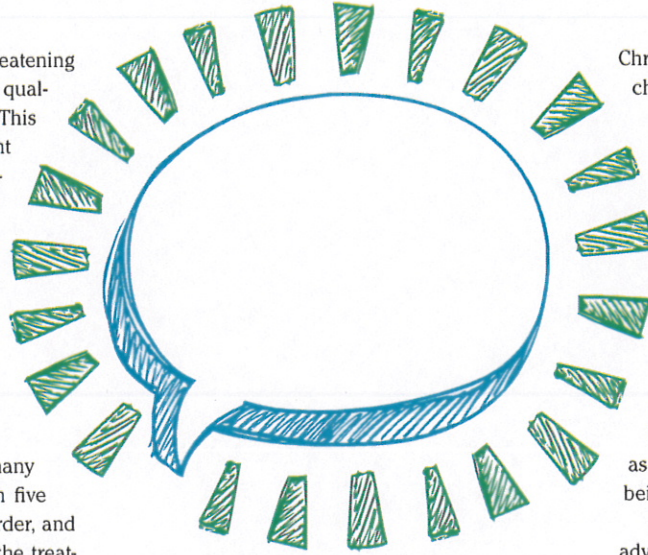
“It should not take a life-threatening event to be provided with quality mental health services.” This heart-wrenching statement was delivered by Erik Christenson, an articulate young man diagnosed with bipolar disorder and Asperger’s syndrome, when he spoke at the recent Step Up for Kids Rally at the State Capitol. He was referring to his own suicide attempt as a teenager, a catalyzing event that finally led to him and his family to receive an accurate diagnosis and treatment after years of unsuccessful involvement with the mental health system.

You might be surprised to learn how many children share Christenson’s struggle: one in five children in Virginia has a mental health disorder, and only one in five of those children is getting the treatment he or she needs. We could fill the Richmond Coliseum almost three times with the number of children in metro Richmond alone who have untreated mental health conditions.

What happens when we don’t treat children’s mental health problems? They’re more likely to drop out of school, use substances, become involved in crime and take their own lives. As if the human toll of untreated mental illness were not reason enough to act, the fiscal burden on our localities and the Commonwealth is additional fuel for reform. We spend much more money incarcerating children than we do helping treat their mental health conditions.

What can we, as caring members of our community, do about this problem? We can help children one by one through our support of direct service organizations in the Richmond area that help children with mental health problems and their families. But it’s time to take it a step further: We need to become child advocates and help children by the thousands.

Child advocates realize that it’s not only individual circumstances that lead to children and families being in need of help, but also the public policies behind those circumstances that either exacerbate or ameliorate their needs. Child advocates speak up to our elected officials to protect those policies that are good for children and families and fight those that do harm. We



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hold our government accountable for the decisions it makes regarding funding and other policies that affect kids. And children, more than any other constituency, need us to speak up on their behalf because they can’t speak for themselves at the polls.

When it comes to children’s mental health policy in Virginia, we’re in desperate need of child advocates. The policies that have been enacted, along with many years of inaction, have created a fragmented, inconsistent and inadequate system of services. Families spend months and sometimes years trying to navigate the system to get their children the diagnosis and treatment that can help them live up to their potential. Moreover, they must constantly face the stigma of mental illness, a condition many of us still don’t want to talk about. As

Christenson said, it shouldn’t be this difficult. Virginia’s children deserve better.

We at Voices for Virginia’s Children have a mission to improve the lives of children in our state by advancing effective public policies. Voices is a statewide, privately funded, nonpartisan awareness and advocacy organization. We mobilize support for a variety of issues by conducting research, developing policies, building coalitions and helping people articulate their support for children. We work to cultivate positive relationships with elected officials, both in the executive and legislative branches of government and in both political parties. We’ve built a solid reputation as a provider of factual, unbiased data about the well-being of Virginia’s children.

In our Campaign for Children’s Mental Health, we advocate for state policies that result in all affected children having access to the high quality treatment they need. What can you do to help? Go to our website, [www.1in5kids.org](http://www.1in5kids.org), and join the nearly 700 other Virginians who have signed up to receive campaign e-mail alerts. Learn the facts and read the stories of real families. Then, when we send out an action alert, respond! At critical times, we’ll ask you to e-mail your elected officials about a specific action they can take to make services more accessible. The more e-mails we send, the greater the impact. Finally, if you have experience dealing with children’s mental health issues, either in your family or through your work, visit your state legislators and tell them about it. Legislators listen to their constituents first.

When it comes to helping children with mental health problems and their families, there is more than enough opportunity to go around. By all means, please support the organizations that help children and families one by one. But also help children by the thousands by becoming a child advocate.

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*Opinions in First Person are those of the writers and not necessarily those of Richmond Giving.*