

## Cuts in social services for at-risk youths may come back to haunt Virginia

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GOV. ROBERT F. McDONNELL of Virginia has proposed to reduce funding for services for at-risk children and teenagers. Those affected would include youths with mental health, emotional and behavioral problems, or with autism; and young people living with specially trained foster parents. The cuts would save a relative pittance: \$12.5 million in the context of the state's \$16 billion general fund budget for the fiscal year starting this July. The potential cost - to children, families, communities and the state - is great.

By some estimates, one in five American children has some sort of mental health disorder; of that population, only a fifth get the services and treatment they need. In Virginia, the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech led to an overhaul and some additional money in the mental health system for adults. Meanwhile, most such state services for youths, woefully inadequate to start with, were not improved.

When social workers, therapists and other mental health specialists are able to intervene early, they can often help avoid more severe problems - and even more expensive state-provided services - a few years down the line. Further depleting funds for troubled youths - especially when the budgetary benefit is so slight - seems like folly.

In particular, two of Mr. McDonnell's [proposed changes](#) would likely permit some children already in trouble to slip through the cracks. One would ax \$5 million in spending by simply refusing to pay for mental health services provided to about 1,375 youth now covered by state funding. These are youth whose problems don't fit neatly into federally mandated categories for which the state must pay, but who nonetheless have mental health problems that put them at acute risk; in many cases, they are already in the juvenile justice system, in detention or on parole.

It's possible that the McDonnell administration believes local governments will be forced to pick up the tab; some may. But given the severe budget crunches facing localities, others may throw up their hands.

Another of the governor's ideas is to offload state spending, in this case about \$7.5 million, to localities by fiddling with a state funding formula that supports troubled youth - often those who have been abused or neglected - living with specially trained foster parents. The state argues that many are getting more intensive treatment than they require and are staying in foster care too long. But if the governor's proposal goes forward, it could prompt localities to uproot children from those foster homes and send them to residential treatment facilities - essentially, large state institutions - that are farther from their families and homes. That would reverse a salutary trend toward closer-to-home treatment in recent years.

State legislators concerned with at-risk youth have introduced amendments to reverse these cuts. Other lawmakers should take a hard look and measure the savings in the governor's proposals against the likely damage they would do.

