



MENTAL HEALTH

2006 Community
Commitment Issue

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN SHOULD HAVE
ACCESS TO EARLY INTERVENTION AND
TREATMENT FOR MENTAL ILLNESS

Early intervention and treatment for mental illness promote child/family health

Untreated mental illness in children has profound and long-lasting consequences -- poor academic performance and school failure, child welfare system involvement, increased crime rates, a lack of later vocational success, health problems, suicide, and a dramatic increase in risk for substance abuse/use. With funding, there are many effective integrated systems of care models and programs that can make a real difference in the lives of children and their families and lead to positive mental health and emotional well-being. Like any health concern, early detection and treatment of mental illness allows for a more effective intervention at a lower level of treatment intensity.

Mental health and substance use disorders often go undiagnosed and untreated for years after the first onset of symptoms. National estimates indicate that 5 to 9 percent of children have a serious emotional disturbance (SED) with an extreme functional impairment and as much as 20 percent of the child population has a diagnosable mental illness. An estimated 7.9 percent of Florida's 4.1 million children (approximately 322,000) have a serious emotional disturbance; however, nearly 79,000 (25 percent) are unable to get care from the publicly financed mental health system.²⁰ A recent national study of geographic disparities in children's mental health care found that Florida ranked 3rd in the rate of unmet needs for children's mental health care; it is estimated that approximately 74 percent of Florida's children requiring mental health care are unable to get services.²¹ There is pressure on the publicly-financed care systems, as well; Florida is one of the states that does not require private health insurers to provide "parity" or comparable coverage for mental health treatment.²²

In a recent ranking of the 50 states, Florida is near the bottom in per capita spending on mental health care (48th), in contrast to being at the mid-range in per capita income (24th), and is near the top for suicides (15th).²³ States that make a strong commitment to their child behavioral health systems experience dramatic decreases in the costs of hospital emergency department use, juvenile detention facilities and, later, in prisons and jails. These states often find that low-cost interventions provide substantial returns on investments. Treatment success rates for such disorders as schizophrenia (60 percent), depression (more than 80 percent) and panic disorder (70 to 90 percent) surpass those of other medical conditions, such as heart disease (45 to 50 percent) and other chronic illnesses.²⁴

Research demonstrates the following benefits of a properly funded, integrated system of mental health care:

- **Child and family health benefits.** Early diagnosis and treatment allow children and adolescents to remain with their families and in the community, to succeed in school, and to develop into functioning adults.
- **Community benefits.** Access to diagnosis, treatment and services reduces the severity of mental illness and leads to reductions in hospitalization and crime.
- **Economic benefits.** Access to timely and appropriate treatment reduces costs for emergency health care and avoids cost-shifting to the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems.