



The Bell Policy Center

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Colorado is failing its mentally ill children and public schools are left to shoulder the burden

By Sarah Rich and Robin Baker

The Boulder Daily Camera • August 22, 2004

Remember when public schools were just about providing education? Not any more. With ongoing cuts to funding for health and human services statewide, schools are also becoming default facilities for seriously mentally and emotionally disturbed children with no place else to go.

Our schools were created to provide an appropriate education for all children, including those with special needs. But they can't always do it alone. Traditionally, educational and therapeutic services for children with mental illness have been provided through a collaboration among school districts, county departments of Human Services, and foster-care and adoptive family programs.

But this long-standing collaboration is ending. Between 1997 and 2004, total county child welfare expenditures per child decreased by 6.7 percent in Colorado. When Human Services is forced to cut expenditures, public school districts are called upon to absorb the fiscal and societal costs of caring for seriously mentally ill children in their schools. For example, public school systems such as Littleton and Englewood, which used to supply \$7,000 of the total amount required to educate a special needs child, now pay upwards of \$20,000 per student to compensate for mental health costs no longer covered by state and county funds. Additionally, because the school year is only nine months long, mentally ill kids are left high and dry through the summer months.

This situation is a detriment not only to school staff and students, but also to the mentally ill child and his or her family. And the chain of injury does not stop there. Ultimately, this lack of adequate care affects society at large, as children grow past the age where early treatment can prevent the development of more serious problems. These children grow to be adults who often need intensive psychiatric care and public assistance. It is also well-documented that our prisons are full of seriously mentally ill adults, whose prison stay is compliments of the taxpayers.

The lack of appropriate services for mentally ill kids has become so dire that some families have resorted to relinquishing custody or dissolving foster parent rights just to get help from the state. Deborah Cave, president of the Colorado Coalition of Adoptive Families, received calls from three families just last week who were desperate for out-of-home placement for their children; two of the adoptions were at risk of dissolution because the family could not get the financial help for a child who has become dangerous in the home. Most of these families have tried everything and are at the end of their ropes with no place left to go.

Stories like that of 15-year-old Jason are becoming more and more common. Jason was diagnosed with mental illness at the age of 3 and had spent his school years in a day treatment special education facility. But when it came time for more budget cuts, the severity of Jason's condition was deemed "less severe" and he was switched into a regular classroom at a neighborhood public school. According to his mother, this change resulted in intolerable behavior both at school and at home.



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When the school year ended, Jason's behavior deteriorated even further. He became a physical threat to his siblings and neighbors. Eventually his mother chose to take him to a residential treatment center, where the intake worker informed her that they only took children referred by human services for having suffered abuse or neglect. In desperation, Jason's mother took him back to the center at the end of the summer and left him, hoping that this would force them to provide him with care. She succeeded in getting Jason accepted but was charged with parental neglect for "abandoning" him.

Social services are increasingly rejecting cases like Jason's, saying that they treat only abused, neglected, addicted kids, not kids with mental illness. Mental health centers often send the child back to social services citing neglect or abuse, which may or may not exist, in an endless cycle, with the family and child caught in the middle. Parents can be forced to falsely create a situation in which they are deemed negligent in order to get care for their children. And unfortunately, many do not have the means or resources to deal with the consequences. Jason's mother was able to fight the abuse charge and keep him in the residential treatment center.

Of course, had Jason been able to remain in the day facility, his lengthy and costly stay at the treatment center might not have been necessary. Numerous studies confirm that up-front funding is much more cost-effective in the long-term. For example, a legislative Joint Budget Committee review notes that comprehensive therapy programs have proven effective in reducing the use of residential treatment, reducing the number of psychiatric hospitalizations, and reducing the number of arrests of delinquent youth. The program is currently available on a small scale in the Denver metro area, on the Western Slope, and in the northeast section of the state. The program costs about \$6,700 per youth for an average of four months of intensive therapy. In comparison, the average cost for treatment in a residential treatment center is \$52,000 and upwards of \$56,000 in the Division of Youth Corrections. Pre-emptive programs provide services to high risk youth and their families before problems become even more complex and expensive to address.

To be forced into charges of negligence just to get help is outrageous and only hurts families and children that are already suffering. The costs — financial, emotional, and societal — of early care and appropriate education are much less than the costs of helping a child who has been virtually neglected by the system.

It's time for Colorado to take this burden off our public schools and provide the necessary resources to help kids with mental illness. If we don't, our children — all of them — will suffer.

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