



New state commission on children’s mental health could have wide-ranging positive impact

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

In June, Georgia Governor Nathan Deal created a Commission on Children’s Mental Health, which met for the first time in July. More than addressing identified needs for children with mental health challenges, this initiative has the potential to impact one of the governor’s other key issues, criminal justice reform.

Over the past several years Georgia has emerged as a national leader in criminal justice reform, thanks in large part to Governor Deal’s leadership. The idea behind criminal justice reform is that when an individual commits a crime because of mental illness or addictive disease, that person is better served by receiving treatment instead of being locked up.

As a result, drug courts, mental health courts and accountability courts have proliferated in Georgia. Such courts help people access needed treatment services and, by doing so, reduce the risk they might reoffend due to mental illness or addiction. Access to mental health treatment also helps link people with other services they may need to live independently.

But what does a children’s mental health commission have to do with criminal justice reform? Quite a bit actually. One in four people develop a mental illness in his or her lifetime, and half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. Further, children with mental illness are more likely to receive lower grades, miss more school and drop out altogether.

While predicting what factors might ultimately lead to criminal behavior is complex, we know that approximately one-third, and by some estimates up to one-half, of individuals who are incarcerated have mental illness – a rate that is substantially higher than the population as a whole.

In other words, if we are able to intervene further “upstream,” if we can ensure children have access to the mental health services they need while they are young, we may be able to reduce the number of people with mental illness or addiction who end up incarcerated in the first place. That would be an unprecedented type of criminal justice reform.

Ensuring Georgia’s children have access to affordable, quality mental health services is the purpose of the Commission on Children’s Mental Health. According to the governor’s office, the commission will work to help ensure our youngest patients receive the treatment necessary to help them grow up as healthy and productive members of society.

The commission is modeled after several successful interagency collaborations, including the First Lady's Children's Cabinet, the Child Welfare Reform Council and the Criminal Justice Reform Council. It could also build on the work of the General Assembly's recent Study Committee on Children's Mental Health. Clearly, Georgia's leaders consider children's mental health to be a priority and have undertaken several initiatives to strengthen the system.

The new commission brings together the leaders of the agencies that have the most impact on children's mental health, including co-chairs Judy Fitzgerald, commissioner of the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, and Katie Childers, the governor's deputy chief of staff of policy.

Other members include Commissioner Frank Berry, Department of Community Health; Director Bobby Cagle, Department of Family and Child Services; Director Teresa MacCartney, Governor's Office of Planning and Budget; Stephanie Blank, chairwoman, Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students; Erica Fener Sitkoff, policy and outreach director, Voices for Georgia's Children; and Dr. Jordan Greenbaum, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

I am proud to see Georgia be a national model for criminal justice reform, and would love to see our state do the same with children's mental health services. With this new commission and the many other initiatives our state has undertaken, it seems we are on our way.