

A Model Program at Risk

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New Funding in Doubt for Montgomery's Community Kids

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Lisa Byerly's son was in trouble. Eleven-year-old Jonathan, who had attention deficit disorder and bipolar disease, was going through a crisis and needed hospitalization.

Rather than face the emergency on her own, the Damascus mother was able to reach out to an unusual Montgomery County program called Community Kids. It helped the family get through Jonathan's hospital stay. When he came home, a program coordinator worked with Byerly to make sure his medication was properly managed, that he received the therapy he needed and that his school developed an appropriate educational plan.

Jonathan, now 13, is heading to Damascus High School next year.

"Community Kids has been awesome," Byerly said.

Maryland officials recently identified the six-year-old effort as a model for a plan to expand home and community services to mentally ill and emotionally disturbed children throughout the state.

But the original \$7 million federal grant that helped launch Community Kids runs out this year. Other sources of funding remain uncertain.

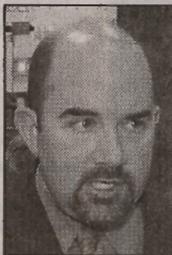
Mental health professionals call the program part of a "wraparound" system of care because the child and the family are enfolded in services. Besides coordinating the child's therapy and education, Community Kids has helped place troubled kids in summer camps, for instance, and on sports teams. The program also has helped children get sports equipment and other things they needed to take part in healthy activities.

"There was a little boy whose parent had committed suicide. All he wanted was a violin. We got some-

body to donate one," said Community Kids Director Jennifer Crawford.

Proponents of the program had hoped to have enough state and federal funding in place by the time the six-year grant ran out, but progress has been slow.

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) has committed \$1 million, to be shared by Community Kids and a similar initiative in Baltimore, to help establish them as pilot programs for a statewide shift to home- and community-based wrap-around services.



"Stay tuned,"
council member
George L.
Leventhal said.

Meanwhile, program officials in Montgomery turned to the County Council for the \$1.2 million they say they need to support their 100-child caseload for the coming year. Their prospects are unclear. The council is currently cutting tens of millions of dollars from the county executive's proposed 2006 budget in order to give residents property tax relief.

"I don't know whether this will survive," council member George L. Leventhal (At Large) told more than a dozen family members and staff members from Community Kids at a Health and Human Services Committee budget hearing.

The committee has supported the funding, but it needs the full council's approval.

"Nerves are frayed around here," Leventhal said. "Stay tuned."

Baltimore and Montgomery have taken the lead in setting up wrap-around services for Maryland children with mental and emotional disabilities.

Organizers of the two programs are working together to obtain a Medicaid waiver that would make them eligible for federal matching funds, said Gerry Grimm, who oversees Baltimore's program.

Grimm's program has its own funding worries. Its roughly \$2 million budget comes from the Gover-

nor's Office for Children, Youth and Families, which the Democrat-controlled General Assembly moved to dismantle in its last session. The governor, in turn, pledged to preserve agency functions through an executive order.

"We're continuing as though we have the funding," Grimm said.

If the two initiatives survive the year, Medicaid funding would help ensure their future.

The wraparound approach to providing services to children and their families has won praise from many experts and parents, who say it is often better for children and less expensive than institutionalization.

"With wraparound, they wrap their arms around you and don't let you go," said Roe Mitchell, a Derwood mother of three whose family has been helped by Community Kids.

In fiscal 2004, Maryland spent more than \$100 million to place about 3,000 mentally ill children in hospitals and residential treatment centers, according to the state Mental Hygiene Administration.

Every dollar spent to help keep children with their families saves \$10 in out-of-home placement costs, according to a report by the Governor's Office for Children Youth and Families.

Community Kids has helped 274 children in the past six years, making it possible for many of them to remain in the community and saving a great deal of money, said Daryl Plevy, Montgomery County's chief of behavioral health and crisis services.

"Eighty-eight percent have stayed in their community. Those kids typically would have gone to a residential treatment center," Plevy said.

Children in the program show improved ability to function, at a cost of \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month, compared with more than \$10,000 a month for a residential treatment center, Plevy said.

"It works," Plevy said, "and it's less expensive."