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Mental health advocates try to seize the moment in Va.

By [Annys Shin](#), Published: January 20

RICHMOND — They were not as easy to pick out as the gun rights advocates with the bright orange stickers that read “Guns Save Lives” or the medical marijuana legalization supporters. But close to 200 advocates for the mentally ill wound their way through the Virginia General Assembly Building on Monday to try to make the most of a moment they know may not last.

The death of Austin “Gus” Deeds, who killed himself after stabbing his father, [state Sen. R. Creigh Deeds \(D-Bath\)](#), has placed mental health reform at the top of Virginia lawmakers’ agenda. At least 40 bills have already been introduced, many of which are focused on the involuntary commitment process that apparently failed Gus Deeds, who committed the attack [after a psychiatric bed could not be found for him](#).

Many of the advocates had similar stories to share of hours spent in emergency rooms, glued to cellphones, waiting to hear whether a bed had been located for their loved one before the six-hour legally mandated time limit to find one runs out. Several lawmakers, including Sen. Deeds, have introduced bills to extend that time limit.

Sandy Mottesheard and her husband, Courtney Mottesheard, of Gloucester, have run up against that time limit many times with their son since he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in his early teens. Their son, now 25, has been in and out of hospitals and group homes and has attempted suicide several times, the couple said. He once threw gasoline on himself. Courtney Mottesheard said he once struggled with his son to get a knife away from him. After the last frantic search for a bed, their son eventually ended up in an assisted-living facility seven hours away, one of about eight non-geriatric residents.

The couple’s fear, like that of many of the advocates who came to Richmond on Monday, was that lawmakers

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are focused too narrowly on just one or two of the many holes in the safety net for the mentally ill.

“I know all the focus is on [temporary detention orders] because of Creigh Deeds,” Sandy Mottesheard told Del. M. Keith Hodges (R-Gloucester). “But if there is nowhere for them to go, what’s the point?”

“We need more supportive housing,” her husband said.

Cristy Smith of Mechanicsville came Monday on behalf of her 17-year-old daughter, for whom she has been struggling to get mental health services for more than three years. She said the wait to see a counselor through her Community Service Board — the frontline provider of publicly funded mental health services at the local level — was more than two months. But they couldn’t wait that long because her daughter attempted suicide and ended up in a hospital and then a residential treatment facility. Another suicide attempt and hospitalization later, her daughter ended up in a group home in Charlottesville.

Like many parents in her situation, Smith is worried that the estimated 100,000 minors with severe mental health issues in the state are not on lawmakers’ radar.

Only one in five mentally ill children and youth are estimated to be getting treatment, said Margaret Nimmo Crowe, executive director of Voices for Virginia’s Children. Her group and the Virginia chapter of the National Alliance on Mentally Illness organized the lobbying day.

“There is a tendency after a crisis for lawmakers to focus on the exact circumstances of that tragedy,” Crowe said. “Children with severe mental illness grow into adults with mental illness, and it is better if they get treated earlier. We want [lawmakers] to look at the whole continuum.”

Rep. Robert B. Bell (R-Charlottesville), a member of the governor’s task force on mental illness, said that while there is a “willingness to look at big-picture issues,” the focus is likely to be on addressing the immediate failures that surfaced in the Deeds case. He said he is backing legislation that would require state hospitals to take in individuals who can’t be placed within the six-hour window, to create what he called “a bed of last resort.”

Lisa Andrews of Springfield, who has lived with bipolar disorder since 2002, is hoping she can keep the long-range view on lawmakers’ agenda. She would like to be included on the governor’s task force.

“It always takes a tragedy for people to wake up,” she said. “But it is everyone’s problem, and everyone knows someone with a mental illness.”



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