

Haworth: Remember kids' mental health in budget negotiations

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In a few weeks, my son, Logan, will turn 8. Like most boys his age, he is looking forward to receiving gifts — especially electronics.

My wish for Logan is simple: I want him to be home with his family.

This has been a rough year for my son, whose bipolar disorder landed him in the hospital five times in recent months.

Having a son with a bipolar disorder is tough, but the shortage of crisis services for kids with mental health disorders makes it even harder. I am surprised at how challenging it can be even for me, a certified mental health professional with a master's degree in applied behavioral analysis.

In the Richmond area, only two hospitals will take Logan because he has some other health conditions. But all across Virginia, kids often face long waiting lists because most communities lack the right services for kids, according to a report the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services gave to state lawmakers just two years ago. That's a big problem, given that approximately 100,000 children in the commonwealth struggle with serious mental health disorders.

Virginians are far too familiar with the tragic consequences that can happen when adults with mental health disorders don't get the care they need. I am grateful that the state's legislators made significant changes to help adult patients before the General Assembly adjourned March 8.

But I am also worried legislators are on the verge of ignoring our youngest Virginians with mental health disorders. That's troubling, given that half of all mental illness begins before age 14, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Treating kids when they first show symptoms is critical in keeping them on a positive trajectory of completing school, avoiding the juvenile justice system and avoiding such behaviors as substance abuse for which they are at higher risk.

The legislature adjourned without passing a budget, but they will be back soon to try to find a compromise. One issue that should be included in the final budget is the proposal originally backed by the Senate: \$1.5 million for children's crisis services and child psychiatry over the next two years. This funding builds upon the \$3.65 million the legislature provided in the past two years that is already making a big difference for kids in crisis.

In fact, Horizon Behavioral Health, the community services board that serves the Lynchburg area, was able to reduce admissions to the state mental health hospital for children by 71 percent, using these funds to provide crisis services in the community.

While \$1.5 million is small compared to the investment lawmakers are considering for adults, it would go a long way toward helping kids such as Logan get the care they need when they're at their most vulnerable.

We are lucky that so many legislators are willing to invest in the adult mental health system. But investing in children's mental health now could save our state a significant amount of money in the long run. More important, it can help get Virginia kids off waiting lists and into the treatment they need to get well.

I hope Gov. McAuliffe and the lawmakers negotiating our state's budget in the upcoming special session will remember the importance of investing in children's mental health. That would be a lasting gift not only for Logan as he turns 8, but for all Virginia kids with mental health disorders.