

Posted on Fri, Dec. 01, 2006

FEEDBACK

Sick kids do count in N.C.

Successes of state's mental health care reform not well reported

From Carmen Hooker Odom, secretary of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services:

Your Nov. 24 editorial, "Sick kids come last," is long on rhetoric and short on facts. It is not only unconscionable but ludicrous that the editorial board of The Charlotte Observer could think, let alone print, that the administration of Gov. Mike Easley or the Department of Health and Human Services doesn't care about children with mental illness. Mental health reform is a wide ranging and all encompassing effort, its problems have been well reported, but critics never seem to be interested in reporting its successes. The highhandedness with which you dispense your pronouncements might be better tempered with the facts.

Since taking office in 2001, this administration has taken strong and direct action to increase and improve care across the spectrum of services to children.

As of today, 56.6 percent of all Medicaid recipients are under age 21. To date, 79,152 of Medicaid children received mental health services, as opposed to 24,910 in 2001. These benefits are superior to the coverage provided by any health insurer in North Carolina.

In the state's Health Choice children's health insurance program, which provides health benefits -- including mental health benefits -- for the working poor who do not qualify for Medicaid, we have seen an increase in our rolls, up from 72,024 in 2001 to 107,952 today. This includes transferring an additional 30,000 children age 0-5 to the Medicaid rolls.

In 2004, the Easley administration targeted \$7.2 million to provide 145 new nurses to public school systems across the state. In 2005, the governor created a new program -- Child and Family Support Teams -- to respond to the needs of at-risk children in low wealth schools. These nurses are providing vital care and services for children with physical and behavioral issues at our schools. With \$11 million of new funds, 100 schools now have child and family support teams comprised of an additional school nurse and a school social worker to identify and coordinate services for these children.

This administration has provided \$13 million in new funding for our Early Intervention programs, increasing the number of children through age 3 served. In 2001, 12,436 children were being served; as of today, that number has grown to 16,990. We have especially targeted children who have been the victims of abuse and neglect.

This administration takes its duties and responsibilities on mental health very seriously. Your editorial unfairly diminishes the hard work and dedicated efforts of the many thousands of people who work hard without praise to provide mental health care throughout the state. Because good news never travels as fast or far as problems, people and editors often only concentrate on its flaws. Have there been problems? Yes. Are they being addressed? Absolutely.

Feedback offers persons or groups criticized in Observer editorials, columns or news stories an opportunity to

respond.

© 2006 Charlotte Observer and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.charlotte.com>