A first for Iowa’s children: New mental health system devoted to them

2019 law is based on input from experts in the field, reforms of adult system

by Iowa Rep. Joel Fry (joel.fry@legis.iowa.gov)

We have all seen the heartbreaking news stories of a young person taking his or her own life due to depression, other mental illnesses or bullying.

Many of us, too, have been directly impacted by knowing someone personally who has faced mental health issues.

Teen suicide and mental illness are issues that plague not only Iowa families, but communities all across the Midwest and nation. Unfortunately, it has become all too common for a parent to recognize that his or her child is suffering from mental illness, but then struggle to find an on-ramp into the system and access treatment.

That is why this year, Iowa lawmakers and Gov. Kim Reynolds worked across the aisle to pass a historic children’s mental health legislative package. Our goal: ensure that Iowa parents and young people have a place to turn for help.

As a licensed independent social worker, I was especially proud to be the floor manager for HF 690, the governor’s bill to create a children’s mental health system.

Changes in funding, governance

The May 2019 signing of HF 690 marked a significant milestone in Iowa, but it also was the culmination of a multi-year effort to reform mental health services for people of all ages.

In our state, adult mental health had been delivered through county-based services until 2015, when the Legislature switched to a regional governance structure. Iowa’s 99 counties were formed into 14 Mental Health and Disability Services (MHDS) regions. This move allowed counties to pool their resources and offer a core set of services that met statewide standards.

The voting membership in each of these regions consists of one elected supervisor from each county, thus keeping the decisions local and accountable.

Every year since this change in governance structure, we have made adjustments in funding for the 14 MHDS regions or to the core-service requirements. Most significantly, in 2018, the Legislature unanimously passed HF 2456, which made sweeping reforms to how our regional systems address and help adults with complicated mental health needs.

We sought to fill the gaps in Iowa’s adult system with additional crisis services and long-term treatment options, ensuring that those with mental illness can access services near their families and in their home communities.

The next step: Improve services for children. Soon after last year’s signing of HF 2456, Gov. Reynolds established a Children’s Mental Health Board. Its task: “Take a comprehensive look at what resources are currently in place and develop a strategic plan with specific recommendations to implement a

[Regional] children’s services coordinators will ensure that children are able to access crisis services, in-patient treatment and outpatient therapy.

Improving access to services

Throughout the summer and fall of 2018, the board met to develop recommendations with input from providers, educators, parents, state agencies and advocates, with a focus on local access and care coordination of mental health services for children. After examining all the options, the board recommended that the children’s system be built upon the existing adult MHDS regions. Its strategic plan became the basis for this year’s HF 690 and related budget recommendations.

Under the new law, a state board will implement and manage Iowa’s new mental health system for children. Made up of 17 voting members appointed by the governor (including Iowans with experience in education, mental health, child welfare and juvenile justice), the board will provide guidance to Iowa’s MHDS regions.

Each region, in turn, will have a dedicated children’s services coordinator who will focus solely on the development of children’s mental health services in that area. The coordinator will ensure that children are able to access crisis services, inpatient treatment and outpatient therapy — closer to home and their families. HF 690 also expanded voting membership of these regional boards to include not only county supervisors, but also a representative from the education system and a parent of a child who utilizes children’s behavioral health services.

In the Iowa House, I serve as chairman of the Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee, which included all the budget recommendations from the governor and the Children’s Mental Health Board. We provided significant state investment to eliminate a waiting list of about 1,000 kids to access the Children’s Mental Health Home and Community Based Services Waiver. These new state dollars will allow these children and their families to immediately receive much-needed services close to home.

We also funded a statewide, 24-hour crisis hot line for all ages, as well as new psychiatric residencies to bring providers to rural communities. In our state’s budget for education, we invested $1.2 million to provide mental health awareness training for educators and schools, along with $750,000 to develop additional ways for schools to meet mental health needs and strengthen community supports for students.

This legislative package was the product of many folks working together. I would credit bringing together so many professionals, experts and advocates in the mental health field to craft the best legislation possible. Throughout the development of the legislation and appropriation process, lawmakers of both parties collaborated to do what was best for Iowa’s children.

Parents should always have a place to turn when seeking treatment for their child. This year’s legislation was a big step forward and builds a foundation for future advancements.

By April, we will receive implementation reports from each of the MHDS regions to see how they plan on advancing children’s mental health services in their area, and I look forward to addressing this bipartisan priority in the years to come.

Rep. Joel Fry has been a member of the Iowa House since 2011. He also is a 2012 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD).

Submissions welcome

This page is designed to be a forum for legislators and constitutional officers. The opinions expressed on this page do not reflect those of the Council of State Governments or the Midwestern Legislative Conference. Responses to any FirstPerson article are welcome, as are pieces written on other topics. For more information, contact Tim Anderson at 630.925.1922 or tanderson@csgr.org.


% of children diagnosed with depression, anxiety and behavior disorders

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Behavioral/conduct problems

Depression

Anxiety


Depression, Anxiety and Conduct Problems in U.S. Children