

Riverside County Mental Health Department - Children's Services

Background

The Mental Health Department of Riverside County administers a service system that offers a comprehensive array of mental health services for all ages. The Program Chief is responsible for the formulation, implementation and continued quality of all program aspects of clinical services provided by the department. The three regions of the county (western, mid-county, desert) have individual region managers.

The Central Mental Health Services manager (adult, children and youth) is responsible for providing a county-wide planning perspective for specific target populations.

This report is focused on the mental health services for children and youth in Riverside County. The county began implementing an interagency system of mental health care for minors under Assembly Bill 377 in February 1989. This system of care offers an opportunity to address the increasing number of emotionally disturbed minors being placed in group homes and state hospitals. The county also began implementing a federally managed care grant in 1994.

The goals of the Riverside Mental Health Department of Children's Services System of Care are as follows:

- Establish a continuum of local mental health services to a specialized target population.
- Provide alternatives to out-of-home placement.
- Provide a system of evaluation to measure improvement in skills of children, program and system outcome, interagency coordination, and reduction of problems of the children.

Children's outpatient services offer individual, group and family treatment involving the child and family. Psychological testing and psychiatric evaluation/medications are available.

Specialized treatment and support groups are available in some locations. Intensive groups for younger children are in place. A day treatment program for twelve to fifteen year olds, five afternoons a week is available. Group homes and other structured living facilities are used in many cases. Some children do well with treatment along with family members in their own homes.

Children who are clients of the Mental Health Department are seriously mentally ill. Average treatment length is one and one-half years. The children addicted to alcohol or drugs are taken care of by the programs offered by the Department of Public Social Services.

A new program using Enriched Foster Homes helps keep many children from being confined to mental hospitals or other institutions. Enriched foster care parents are trained to work with children suffering from mental illness. The department is in constant contact with these parents and visit the homes frequently. Currently there are four of these homes in Riverside County. State-funded AB 2726 guarantees every child with problems that interfere with their learning ability or the learning capabilities of others receives free treatment.

Findings

1. Enriched foster homes are limited to two children per home. These homes cost \$1,000 per child per month as compared with the \$5,000 cost for institutionalization. This affords a savings of \$4,000 per child per month. The limited number of these homes limits the number of children to be helped and adds to the cost of treatment.

2. There are very few "gap" shelters in Riverside County. These six-bed shelters fill the gap for children during an emotional break with their families. This temporary situation can often be corrected with the intervention of Mental Health Department personnel, which prevents children from committing crime or being exploited.

3. Few clinics have day care treatment available. Day care treatment lasts four to five days per week at least four hours per day in specialized groups. Most clients are seen only one to two days per week for one to two hours. For some this is sufficient, but many need more intensive care. This lack of capability to treat properly is due to a shortage of personnel and space.

4. All mental health clinics have a long waiting list of children needing help. The length of time a child has to wait for help and the number waiting is different for each clinic. Historically, mental health problems worsen if treatment is delayed.

Recommendations

Director of Mental Health Department:

1. Develop a marketing approach that will assist in the recruitment of mature persons to participate in the Enriched Foster Home program.

2. Provide additional "gap" shelters for temporary stays for disturbed children who need time away from their home environment. Arrange for enough mental health workers to be available to supervise treatment.

3. Expand the day care treatment program for specialized groups by using volunteer student workers majoring in social sciences. Graduate students to be assigned as interns to help reduce the waiting list of children needing help.

4. Explore the possibilities of additional children's mental health clinics in all areas of Riverside County.