

Creating a Child and Family-Centered Mental Health System

By Barbara Shaw, Chair
Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership

Research has clearly demonstrated that social and emotional well-being is essential for children's healthy development and critical to their ability to learn and succeed in life. Mental health promotion for children of all ages should be as high a priority for families and child-serving systems as academic preparedness and physical health.

Children are born with great promise, and we must do everything possible to help them develop so they can meet the challenges of learning and living in today's complex society. Unfortunately many children, including very young children, experience psychological trauma and mental health problems that, if untreated, negatively affect their brain, their behavior and their academic and social success. Services must reach these young children and their families early to avoid more serious and costly problems. A full range of treatment services must also be available for those children who suffer from serious mental health disorders.

Sadly, we are failing our children in these very important areas. The children's mental health

system in Illinois can barely be called a system. There is little or no emphasis on prevention or early intervention, and only a small percentage of Illinois children who need mental health treatment receive it. While many agencies and systems in Illinois, including child welfare, education, human service and juvenile justice systems, attempt to address children's mental health, there is little coordination and resources are not maximized, leaving children, families, schools and communities struggling to cope with children's mental health needs and problems.

The Illinois Children's Mental Health Act, developed and supported by a broad coalition of groups concerned about children, presents a cutting-edge approach to the continuum of mental health development, support and treat-

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ment that children need from birth to age 18. The Act requires the development of a comprehensive Children's Mental Health Plan and requires that social and emotional learning be integrated into the Illinois Learning Standards and our state's education system. The preliminary plan has been submitted to the Governor and includes the following priority short-term recommendations:

- Develop a mental health system accessible to all children from birth to 18 years old that respects, supports and treats families and caregivers as key partners.
- Develop mechanisms, as part of the system of care design, to provide assistance and direct families and caregivers to culturally competent, gender and clinically appropriate services.

- Develop a comprehensive, culturally inclusive, and multi-faceted public awareness campaign to reduce the stigma of mental illness.
- Maximize the use of key federal and state program funds for children's mental health, integrate multiple federal and state funding streams and promote the use of local matching funds.
- Initiate efforts to expand the mental health workforce to ensure a diverse, adequately trained and qualified workforce that meets the needs of children and their families.



A complete set of recommendations and the entire plan along with the executive summary are available on Voices for Illinois Children's website at www.voices4kids.org/other_pub.htm.

The Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership, which is overseeing work on the plan, has already made progress in key areas of the children's mental health system. On December 31, 2004, the Illinois State Board of Education submitted a plan to the Governor to incorporate the Social and Emotional Learning Standards developed by the Partnership into the Illinois Learning Standards. During the coming months the Partnership and its standing committees will work on the final strategic plan that will be submitted to the Governor on June 30, 2005. The Partnership will also begin planning for a large-scale children's mental health public awareness campaign to reduce the stigma of mental illness and educate the public about the importance of children's social and emotional development. The implementation of the Children's Mental Health Act has the potential to dramatically change the state's current mental health system to one that is child and family centered and capable of meeting the mental health development, early intervention and treatment needs of Illinois children. Our children deserve no less.

Barbara Shaw chaired the Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force, a broad coalition that successfully advocated for the passage of groundbreaking legislation, the Illinois Children's Mental Health Act of 2003. In the fall of 2003 she was appointed chair of the Children's Mental Health Partnership by Governor Blagojevich. Shaw is also director of the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, a state agency charged with planning, coordinating, funding and evaluating violence prevention efforts in Illinois.

CHALLENGE TO ILLINOIS

To determine and collect data that reflect children's mental health status and access to services