

The psychological help New York's kids need right now

RICHARD GOTTFRIED FEBRUARY 18, 2021

More than 4,000 children in New York have lost their parent or caregiver to COVID-19, and 325,000 children are newly living in or near poverty. Many don't know where their next meal will come from, or how they'll make it through the school year, or if their family will lose their home. They are experiencing profound trauma taking a toll on their mental health.

The pandemic has worsened an already dire situation for child and adolescent behavioral health. Even prior to the pandemic, suicide was the second leading cause of death for New York children ages 15-19, and the third leading cause of death for children 5-14. Statewide surveys show an increase in anxiety and depression among young people, and a growing number of young people are coming to hospitals with dangerous psychiatric emergencies. A disproportionate number of these children come from communities of color — the same communities hit hardest by the pandemic. To make matters worse, we've seen a dramatic decline in primary and preventive services across the country, including a 44% decline in child screenings and outpatient mental health services for children enrolled in Medicaid and Child Health Plus from March through May 2020 in comparison to the previous year.

This means that hundreds of thousands of children in need of care are going without it, including a disproportionately high number of children from communities of color.

We see it all too often: as children struggle to cope with the traumas of the pandemic, their parents simply can't get them the behavioral health support they need. Service providers are underfunded and overbooked. Countless parents who are under unprecedented stress themselves face obstacle after obstacle in trying to get their kids quality, affordable care close to home.

The pandemic has worsened an already dire situation for child and adolescent behavioral health. (Shutterstock) If we force parents to remain trapped in this battle for care, even more children will suffer life-altering mental health conditions well into adulthood. Addressing New York's children's behavioral health crisis will require a long-term, comprehensive approach. But there are steps we can take right now. New York can start by passing legislation we have authored that would offer the 425,000 New York children enrolled in Child Health Plus access to life-saving health services under the federal Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) program, some of which are currently only available to children in Medicaid.

Among the critical mental health supports covered by EPSDT are services known as Children and Family Treatment and Support Services (CFTSS), which include crisis intervention, family peer support, community psychiatric supports and treatment, rehabilitation from substance use and more. Millions of New Yorkers have lost their jobs and their family's employer-sponsored health insurance, during the most severe health crisis our state and nation have faced in a century. This means more children than ever are relying on programs like CHP. For those children who have experienced economic hardship, loss of loved ones, social isolation, and other challenges tied to the pandemic, the need for behavioral health supports is even greater than it was before. Covering CFTSS in CHP will enable these children to get critical services that support children where they belong: in their communities and with their families.

Additionally, CHP is the primary program available for children who are not eligible for Medicaid because of their immigration status (in addition to children whose family's income is a little above the Medicaid level). The Trump administration consistently and explicitly excluded undocumented immigrants from its federal COVID relief efforts, leaving immigrant families with fewer resources even as they are disproportionately represented among essential workers and positive COVID-19 cases.

Covering CFTSS services specifically is one way to ensure all immigrant families have access to the behavioral health supports they need. In addition to passing our legislation, the state must also protect child and family services from harmful budget cuts and increase investments in clinical and community-based behavioral health services. We can't allow more kids to grow up with untreated mental illness. New York State must take an immediate and comprehensive action to address the mental health needs of children and families.