



BLEAK OUTLOOK: Bob Bailey, medical director of Children's Psychiatric Hospital at the University of New Mexico, says mental health care in the state is in a crisis. He is shown here in one of the units hospital officials closed because they couldn't afford to keep it open.

Children in Crisis

Experts, parents grapple with fewer mental health care services for youths

Editor's note: It's been three years since the state revamped Medicaid, and critics say the new program has wrecked mental health care services, especially for youths. Others praise Salud! for making doctors and health centers more accountable. The Journal today begins a two-day series examining the state of mental health care for New Mexico's children.

BY JACKIE JADRNAK
Journal Staff Writer

Bab Bailey says he doesn't like to throw around words like "crisis" loosely. Yet that is the word he uses to describe the State of mental health care in New Mexico — especially when it comes to children.

"It (the mental health system) is not working now," said Bailey, a psychiatrist and medical director of Children's Psychiatric Hospital at the University of New Mexico.

Others who provide mental health care and the parents who seek that care also say the system is in crisis.

Businesses that provide mental health care are shutting down. Psychiatrists are leaving the State or leaving their practices. Jails are scrambling to come up with mental health services once provided by mental or social service agencies.

And this is happening in a state that never ranked high in the quality or availability of mental health service. New Mexico's suicide rates in 1993 were the fifth highest in the country.

New Mexicans between 15 and 24 years old have been killing themselves at a rate 75 percent higher than the national average; 21

suicides per 100,000 people, compared to the national average of 12.

Yet, in recent years:

- Twenty-two child psychiatrists have left New Mexico, leaving the state with a number that is half the national average.

- The University of New Mexico's psychiatric wards are so full that ambulances carrying patients with mental illnesses are being sent elsewhere

- The availability of certain mental health services has dropped anywhere between 20 percent and 65 percent.

- People committed by courts to psychiatric treatment have had to wait for beds to open up at the Las Vegas Medical Center, the only state-run psychiatric hospital.

Increasingly, people are falling through the cracks.

This isn't news to Jonnie Banks and Laurie Welch. The Albuquerque mothers, both of whom work for St. Joseph Healthcare, have been trying for years to get the help they think their troubled children need. They aren't seeking the care for their children through their employer because their insurance requires



DEAN HANSON/JOURNAL

ONE DAY AT A TIME Christopher Sinderar, right, helps his mother, Laurie Welch, prepare dinner in the kitchen of their Northeast Heights home. Welch says she has had difficulty getting consistent mental health care for her 15-year-old son who suffered a brain injury after being hit by a car.

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them to go elsewhere.

And that fight has gotten much harder in the past year, they said.

Loss of professionals

It's clear to Welch that fewer people are in the mental health business these days. Her 15-year-old son, Christopher Sindelar, has needed help since a car hit him walking home from school in 1994, leaving him with a brain injury and behavior problems.

Within the past year, he lost behavior management and case management services as well as his psychiatrist. A case manager generally seeks out and coordinates the services a child needs.

Christopher's injury has left him with problems interacting with people, focusing his attention, following directions and thinking through problems.

A behavior manager might take him to a fast-food restaurant and encourage him to interact with a worker to order and pay for his food, she said. The hubbub of a restaurant often distracts him so much that he feels the need to escape.

"He needs someone to help him problem-solve, to monitor and redirect him," she said. "He gets most of that from me, and I think he hates my guts most of the time. He knows he can do anything, and I'm not going to leave, I'm not going to give up on him."

He lost his last behavior manager a year ago, she said.

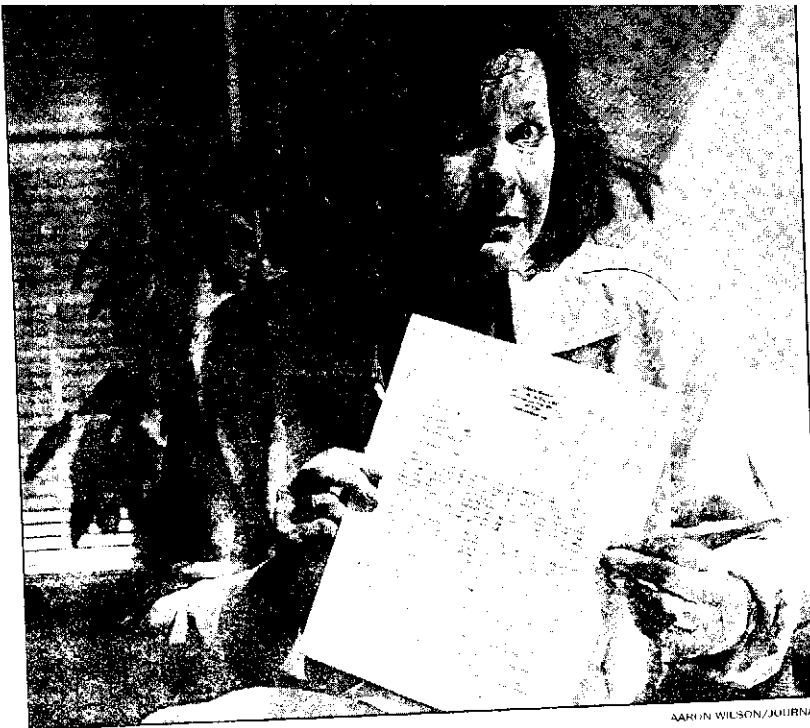
In June, his case management was canceled because the company providing it was going out of that business. In four years, Welch said, Christopher has had eight or nine case managers.

And at the end of June, she was told that Christopher's psychiatrist no longer would accept Medicaid clients, so he doesn't have a psychiatrist. Until Welch can find another one, Christopher's medications — he's on a regimen of five drugs — will be handled by his primary-care physician, she said.

Medicaid, the program that covers Christopher, uses state and federal tax money to provide medical care to low-income people.

The choices for mental health care have narrowed in the past three years since the state started its Salud! managed-care program for Medicaid, according to a coalition of mental health service providers.

Of 11 different types of services, seven showed more than a 50 percent decrease over that time, according to a list of closings compiled by the coalition. No services showed an increase — the smallest decrease was a 20 percent



NOWHERE TO TURN: Jonnie Banks of Albuquerque is struggling to find proper treatment for her 15-year-old daughter, who has been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder. She has written a letter to New Mexico's two senators explaining her plight.

offshoot: The largest was a 65 percent reduction in behavior management services.

Last month, the Journal asked the Children, Youth and Families Department, which licenses such programs for children, for information about changes in the number of services available. The department has not responded with any data.

State officials acknowledge that Salud! needs some changes, but they say the program has improved mental health services in the state, at least in the rural areas.

It also has made doctors and other providers financially responsible rather than letting them collect Medicaid checks without being accountable, said Robin Dozier Otton, deputy secretary of the state Human Services Department.

But critics say Salud! has overburdened doctors and health care centers with reams of paperwork and bureaucracy while cutting the amount of money they get for serving Medicaid clients.

That, critics say, is the reason so many have gone out of business, left the state or stopped accepting Medicaid clients.

"I would say, in the last year, services have gotten far worse," Welch said.

She was told Christopher "probably should be put into a group home, because he's becoming an adolescent and I won't be able to control him." But she doesn't want to send him away.

Christopher, who gets special education through Albuquerque Public Schools, really likes computers and hopes to go to college and join the Marines, his mother said.

"He would love to play football, but he can't play contact sports," she said. "If he hit his head again, he could be a vegetable."

She doesn't know what his future holds, and she tries not to discourage any of his dreams.

"My biggest fear," Welch said, "is that he'll be a criminal."

Last-resort legal fight

Similar fears have crossed Banks' mind. Her 15-year-old daughter has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Her behavior can be combative, disruptive and aggressive, Banks said. She has destroyed objects in

their home and has purposefully cut herself, pulled out her hair and threatened suicide, Banks said.

Last November, she went into a rage and threw a picture frame at her mother. Banks said the frame hit her in the head, and she needed 11 staples to close the wound.

This summer, the teen was hospitalized after she refused to take the medication needed to control her bipolar disorder, and her behavior became increasingly erratic. Banks then launched a fight to keep her daughter in the hospital until appropriate treatment could be found.

That fight, Banks said, has eaten up her days with an endless round of phone calls. She said hospital officials even called state Child Protective Services when she refused to take her daughter home or approve a transfer to a residential treatment center south of Las Cruces. She said the hospital psychiatrist told her it was the only option with the proper level of services, an open bed and coverage by the girl's Medicaid insurance.

Banks finally sought help from a lawyer to block the transfer and bought herself some time.

"It's enough to make a sane



PRESCRIPTIONS IN JAIL: Janet Berry-Beltz, a nurse at the Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center, says nearly 60 percent of the young inmates are on medication related to a psychiatric condition.

person crazy," Banks said of the bureaucratic barriers.

The answer to why she fights so hard is easy: She loves her daughter.

The same girl who can grab a knife and threaten to kill herself also is beautiful and intelligent, Banks said. She has learned Spanish and enjoys speaking it. She could play back a tune on the piano when she was only 3 after watching someone else play it just once; now, she composes her own music. She has always loved bugs and animals and would like to be a veterinarian, her mother said.

Banks would like to see some of her daughter's dreams come true.

"I want her to be happy someday. I don't want to see her in the electric chair in Texas because of an impulsive, crazy mental disorder. I'll do whatever I can to stop that."

Getting care in jail

A shutdown of services — or managed-care limits on the numbers of days children can get them — sends ripples to other parts of the community. Increasingly, children once cared for in psychiatric hospitals or residential treatment centers are showing up in jails.

Rep. Rick Miera, D-Albuquerque, runs a drug-and-alcohol program for the Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center. An increasing number of youths there have serious mental health needs — and often the only care they can find is in jail, he said.

"When there is a shortage of places to reier them, judges are limited in what they can do with a child," he said.

Janet Berry-Beltz, a nurse at the juvenile jail, said nearly 60 percent of the youths are taking medications related to a psychiatric condition. Mental

health services provided in the detention center can cost taxpayers \$900 in one day, she said.

Child psychiatrists leaving

"The whole system has deteriorated," said Deify Peña Roach, executive director of Parents for Behaviorally Different Children. That group advocates for and provides information to families who have children with mental and behavioral problems.

"If you squeeze at one point in the balloon, another part will pop out."

Her 17-year-old child, diagnosed with bipolar disorder and psychosis when stressed, has not seen a psychiatrist for eight months. And that lull comes after having three different psychiatrists in the past three years under the Lovelace commercial health plan, she said.

"It would be nice to have a psychiatrist visit more than a month or two," Roach said.

In the past two years, 22 child psychiatrists have left their New Mexico practices, according to Lisa Forrest, a child psychiatrist in Albuquerque. Only three have started new practices in the state during that time.

According to her figures, 46 child psychiatrists are licensed to practice in New Mexico. On a per capita basis, that's half the national average.

In a way, Roach is lucky. Her child is stabilized on medications. "We are not in crisis. I can't imagine a family in crisis," she said.

Roach is one of the people families call when they need help. It's getting so that she doesn't know where to send them. And she fears that if she does get them into a program, it will close down in a month or two.

"The calls are getting pretty intense," she said. "Everything is falling apart."