

Managed Medicaid Called Cumbersome

■ *Mental health care program creates mounds of paperwork that siphon money from treatment, critics say*

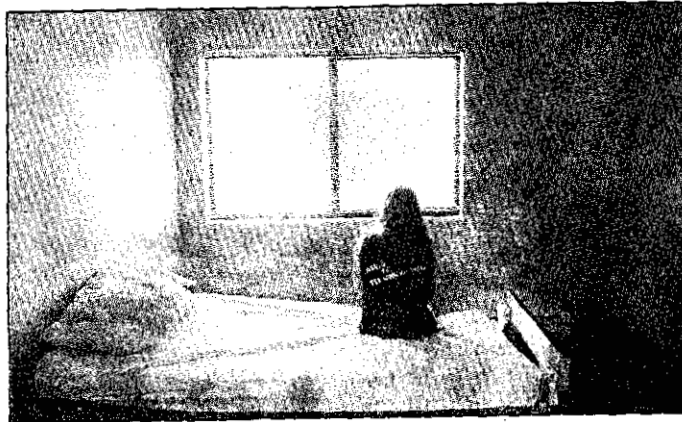
BY JACKIE JADRNAK
Journal Staff Writer

People who want to name a culprit responsible for the state's deteriorating mental health services point their fingers straight at New Mexico's Medicaid program.

Critics say the Salud! managed-care program that restructured Medicaid three years ago created mounds of paperwork, a maze of approvals and appeals to get care, low payments for that care and administrative layers that siphon money from direct care.

The result, they say, is that those who provide service have gone out of business or have stopped accepting Medicaid clients.

Robin Dozier Otten, deputy secretary of the state Human Services Department, said the Medicaid program has improved mental health services, at least in rural areas. While she concedes some problems need to be fixed, she said managed



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CENTER SCALES BACK: A 17-year-old girl spends time at the New Da Youth and Family Services shelter. The agency ended many of its other adolescent services earlier this year because it was running a \$150,000 deficit.

care has brought accountability to a program that once handed money out without checking to see if it was doing any good.

"It's not as good as we want it to be," Otten said of Salud! "But I think what we created is basically good."

Medicaid covers a large percentage of children who receive mental or behavioral health services. If

problems in Medicaid send doctors out of state, then people with private insurance also have a harder time finding help.

Medicaid is a state and federal program that pays for medical care for low-income people.

People on Medicaid are more likely to need mental health ser-

Editor's note: It has 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 concludes a two-day series examining the state of mental health care for New Mexico's children.

Mental Health Services Data Lacking

BY JACKIE JADRNAK
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It is tough to find statistics that can show whether mental health services have gotten better or worse since Salud! took over the state's Medicaid program in 1997.

The state doesn't have figures to compare how much was spent on mental health services vs. administration before and after Salud!, according to Rob Maruca, head of the state's Medicaid program.

Nor are there numbers to measure the quality of care — whether people are getting services that make their health better.

The number of people getting mental health care through Medicaid hasn't changed dramatically,

according to Human Services Department figures.

In the year before Salud! was phased in, 16,801 people covered by Medicaid were getting help for problems with their behavior, emotional problems, mental illnesses or substance abuse. The following year, the figure dropped to 15,178, but rose to 16,294 in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 1999.

Of \$509 million spent on all medical care for 202,364 people enrolled in Salud! that year, \$84.3 million was spent on those behavioral services, according to a study done by William M. Mercer Inc.

Some studies have detected problems in the program, though:

■ All three managed care companies were threatened with penalties

in April when a Human Services review found deficiencies in 83 percent of Presbyterian's files on behavioral health care, 48 percent of Lovelace's and 44 percent of Cimarron's. Reviewers will go back and see if the problems have been solved before fines are considered. The companies have argued the problems were with the paperwork and not with the care provided.

■ A May 25 Legislative Finance Committee audit complained the data collected by Human Services on medical care was so unreliable that it couldn't be released to the public. Robin Dozier Otten, deputy secretary of the department, said those problems have been corrected and current data is reliable.