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## A focus on mental health of children

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FRAMINGHAM — Struggling with bipolar disorder, Julie James' son was eventually admitted to a school outside their district that could meet his needs. But not before the Department of Mental Health dropped the then 11-year-old's in-home services, leaving a temporary void.

"He felt that no one cared," the Framingham resident said. "He says that he did not want to live anymore."

James told her story during a gathering at the Memorial Building yesterday to discuss children's mental health and a recent Beacon Hill bill addressing advocates' concerns.

The legislation, signed by Gov. Deval Patrick in August and backed by a coalition called the Children's Mental Health Campaign, encourages doctors to screen their young patients for disorders and seeks to have mental health assessments provided at day care and pre-K programs.

The bill also establishes a pool of outside experts to advise school staff, promotes cooperation between state agencies, seeks to quickly place children in appropriate treatment settings and requires insurance companies to pay for out-of-network services they can't offer.

"It will have a profound effect on the lives of many families in Massachusetts," said Rep. Pam Richardson, a Framingham Democrat who supported the bill and spoke at the session.

According to a study by Children's Hospital Boston and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the state has the ninth highest pre-K expulsion rate in the country, a statistic tied to mental health.

Also, 140,000 children need mental health services but only 40,000 receive them. And with suicide the third-leading cause of death for those ages 10 to 24, 90 percent of the victims have a diagnosable and treatable mental illness. The legislation is known as Yolanda's Law after one of them, 16-year-old Yolanda Torres.

After the session speakers finished, one parent rose and noted the urgency in enacting the legislation's provisions. Her son, she said, had tried to kill himself and her, with her family struggling through a system she deemed broken.

Earlier, Gail Carey, clinical co-director at South Middlesex Opportunity Council and the mother of a child with a mental illness, explained how she had struggled to find the best service providers and to deal with insurance companies. At one point, she ran into roadblocks until she mentioned that she worked in the mental health field.

"All of a sudden, doors starting opening for me, and that's not right," she said. "I think parents know what their children's needs are better than anybody."

Another speaker, former Framingham School Guidance Director Nanci Keller, explained how a teacher and her preschool student struggled with the girl's mental illness for months, with a doctor not having time to read the teacher's description of the problem and leaving the girl on the same problematic medications until she came back for another visit.

"It's just an indicator of how we have to do a better job collaborating and building a system that works," Keller said.

While several parents commended Framingham schools for their efforts to help children, school officials and staff noted how budget cuts had gutted mental health positions, even at a time when the district was encountering increasingly complex disorders among students.

One new resource available, however, is a program by Framingham's Wayside Youth and Family Support Network to assist area parents in navigating the mental health system.

Advocates also expect Yolanda's Law to help, though Children's Mental Health Campaign spokesman Matt Noyes acknowledges the coalition does not believe it will provide all the answers.

As a follow-up effort, the group is seeking legislation requiring private insurers to pay mental health professionals for time spent consulting with parents, teachers and family doctors, a reimbursement already offered by the state's MassHealth program.

"There should not be a two-tier system," he said.

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