

Easing troubled minds

The District can do more to get children the mental health services they need.

CHILDREN WITH unmet mental health problems suffer the effects. So do their families. But the consequences don't stop there: Many of these children will need costly special education, end up in the juvenile justice system, drop out of school and grow into adults who are unable to get work and will rely on public assistance. The cost to children, families and society is why it is so important that the D.C. government focus attention on improving its children's mental health system.

A report released this month by the Children's Law Center, a leading advocacy group for at-risk

children, estimated that at least 5,000 District children are going without needed mental health services. Nationally, 12.4 percent of children ages 6 to 17 who receive Medicaid have mental health conditions, yet the District, where more than 61 percent of children are on Medicaid, is serving less than 6 percent of such children.

"Such a large gap between the children who need services and those receiving them is particularly worrisome," the report concluded in outlining a series of recommendations to improve access to care. Foremost is restructuring the managed-care organizations responsible for pro-

viding these services so that more children can be served.

The District has made great strides in reforming mental health services. It settled the class-action lawsuit filed four decades ago against a dysfunctional system, and the D.C. Council recently enacted legislation targeting youth behavioral health. Recommendations outlined by the Children's Law Center — streamlining cumbersome credentialing procedures, ensuring competitive reimbursement rates, changing policies that hinder good case management — are logical next steps.