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Conn College forum focuses on children's behavioral health

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

New London — To improve behavioral health care for children, the state needs to reduce fragmentation of services, increase access to counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists, make services more readily available before children are in crisis and be more attentive to the needs of parents and foster parents.

Those were some of the suggestions made by parents and advocates at a forum at Connecticut College Tuesday held to gather input for a children's behavioral health plan that will be created over the next three months in response to a state law enacted in July. The third of six forums around the state organized by the Child Health and Development Institute, a private, nonprofit agency preparing the plan for the state Department of Children and Families, drew about 35 people, 13 of whom spoke.

Margaret Crockett-Gonzalez of Norwich, the first speaker, grew tearful as she described the pain of having to say goodbye to the foster children she'd cared for when permanent homes were found for them. Foster parents should be offered counseling to help them adjust, she said.

"There's no support," she said. "It's just, 'thank you and have a nice day.'"

Susan Corrice of Montville described the difficulty of obtaining services for her children, both of whom have special needs.

"There should be more help for borderline cases so they don't become intense cases," she said.

"Any parent who's trying to find the help they think their children need should get it. It would save us millions of dollars if we give it to them when they're 3 so they don't need it when they're 18."

Several social service professionals swaid more coordination between providers and more early intervention is needed.

"We know early intervention makes a difference," said Cara Westcott, vice president of behavioral health and United Community & Family Services in Norwich.

Lorna Grivois of Colchester said time limits on services covered by insurance are unrealistic for children with serious mental health issues. She described how her adopted son, who is diagnosed with several mental health conditions, would "slowly spiral out of control again" after his regular counseling appointments stopped.

"I had to get him to the breaking point until people would start to listen," she said. "What does that kind of trauma do to us as a family?"

Donna Holman of Groton advocated for more education for families of those diagnosed with psychiatric illnesses, adding that a course she took offered by the National Alliance on Mental Illness "saved my life."

"It helps the parent help the child. It helps you understand the chemical and biological changes going on inside your child's head," she said. "It's not just your child being a brat."

Forum moderator Michael Hoge, psychology professor at the Yale School of Medicine and a consultant to the institute, said the comments from the six forums will be summarized and incorporated into the plan. A draft version will be available online by August, with another opportunity for the public to comment. A revised version would then be submitted to the state legislature by October.

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More information

For more information on the draft, upcoming forums and to submit written comments, visit www.plan4children.org.