

Spotlight on the Safety Net

A Community Collaboration

North Carolina Families United Supports Mental and Behavioral Health for Children and Families

Gail Cormier remembers a phone call from a Forsyth County woman worried for her life and the life of her child. The child was living in a psychiatric residential treatment facility, but their needs were not being met. The mother was hungry, in need of clean clothing, and unsuccessfully looking for work. A family partner (FP) associated with North Carolina Families United (NCFU)—the organization Cormier directs—stepped in to advocate for the family, helping to find a new facility for the child and food, clothing, and a job for the parent. The FP also left them with tools for how to navigate the complex mental and behavioral health system in North Carolina going forward.

“She and many, many other parents say that if it wasn’t for the family partners and North Carolina Families United, they wouldn’t know where their families or they themselves would be,” Cormier said in an interview.

In fiscal year 2016, there were an estimated 233,648 children and youth under the age of 18 in North Carolina with severe emotional disturbance [2]. In the same year, the state’s public behavioral health system reached 16.7% of those in need [1]. Research shows that children and youth with this or a similar diagnosis are at greater risk for not completing school because of dropout or expulsion, abusing drugs and/or alcohol, accidental teen pregnancy, and involvement with the criminal justice system [1].

NCFU was formed in 1989 by a group of parents frustrated by the lack of support in schools, medical practices, and communities for children and families dealing with emotional and behavioral health concerns. Funding came from a federal System of Care grant focused on building coordinated, community-based mental health networks for children and adolescents at the state level. Though the System of Care grant has ended, NCFU still abides by the System of Care core values of family-driven,

youth-guided work that is evidence-based and culturally informed [1]. NCFU’s primary work is to link families of children and young people with serious behavioral and mental health challenges to supports throughout the state. The organization’s board maintains a 51% majority of people with personal or family experience with the issues facing those they serve.

“We are here to ensure that policies for families who are struggling with youth and children with mental health issues are written as family-driven and youth-informed,” said Cormier.

NCFU does this in two ways: 1) by sitting at many policy tables, from state and local collaboratives to the Mental Health Block Grant Planning Council at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services; and 2) by facilitating family and youth peer support, training programs, service connections, and policy work at the state and federal level.

Youth and Family Peer Support

NCFU employs peer support professionals with personal or family experience with youth mental and behavioral health issues to help parents navigate the system. With Medicaid transformation, the organization hopes family partner will receive a Medicaid service definition so that Medicaid can help fund this work, which is now primarily financed through grants and some managed care organization (MCO) budgets.

NCFU’s youth peer support program is based on the RENEW model, which helps youth with emo-

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tional and behavioral challenges transition from school to career and was pioneered by Cormier and colleagues in New Hampshire in 1996 [3]. NCFU's youth transition director, Lacy Flintall, went through the RENEW program himself.

With Youth M.O.V.E. (Motivating Others through Voices of Experience) North Carolina, NCFU brings together young people with behavioral, emotional, and mental health challenges to learn from one another's experiences and train to be leaders in their communities.

"We're not only providing an opportunity for them to grow as young leaders through advocacy and fellowship, but also connecting them with each other and creating a kind of support group that is not often found in other places," Youth Coordinator Kyle Reece said in an interview.

Healthy Transitions

One of NCFU's newest programs is the Healthy Transitions Project, funded by a 5-year grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), aimed assisting youth aged 16-25 who may otherwise fall through the cracks as they age out of public systems [4]. Racheal Laundau, director of the project, told the NCMJ in an interview that two of its goals are to link transition-aged youth with peer support and to increase the number who are assessed for serious emotional disturbance and mental illness. The project provides transportation, job-search and interviewing support, and other services. These are especially important for youth who are transitioning out of inpatient or in-home care, said Laundau.

Further Resources and Supports

In addition to peer support and service connections, NCFU operates the Family, Youth and Cross Systems Resource and Training Center, which provides System of Care training to youth behavioral and mental health stakeholders such as families, youth, advocates, community health organizations, and service providers [5]. The organization is currently developing a database of trainers from across the state as well as a youth and fam-

ily agency resource directory to be disseminated to families, according to an NCMJ interview with Associate Director Stacy Justiss.

With funds from fees charged for online trainings, NCFU's board makes donations to the North Carolina State Collaborative for Children, Youth, and Families, which works on policy change in this area. NCFU also works with the i2i Center for Integrative Health on developing legislative messaging to disseminate to community collaboratives throughout the state.

The most direct impact of NCFU might be in the initial phone call, when Renee Cordero, office administrator and head of data collection, makes the first touch point with a parent or young person in crisis. In an interview with the NCMJ, Cordero said: "They feel like they finally have reached someone that listens." NCMJ

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