

Personal Reflection on Advocacy and the State of Child Mental Health Care

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Advocating for systemic change in child mental health care is a deeply personal and profoundly challenging endeavor. The issue of inadequate inpatient care for children and adolescents resonates deeply with me, rooted in both professional concern and personal tragedy. My son's heartbreaking journey through a failing system underscores the urgency of addressing the ethical and structural flaws inherent in Washington State's mental health care services.

The ethical concerns surrounding the placement of children in inpatient facilities are glaring. Housing court-ordered adolescents with histories of violence alongside children struggling with other mental health conditions creates an unsafe and chaotic environment. These placements lack the thoughtful consideration necessary to meet diverse therapeutic needs, perpetuating harm rather than fostering healing. Beyond placement issues, the systemic underfunding of mental health services, particularly for children and adolescents, exacerbates the problem. Without adequate resources, children are left without appropriate care, interventions, or support—an unacceptable failure for a system designed to protect and nurture our most vulnerable populations.

Reflecting on my son's experience illuminates the human cost of these systemic failures. His time in inpatient and residential programs was marked by insufficient therapeutic interventions and poor communication among providers. Despite his courageous efforts to seek help, he was met with a fragmented system that lacked evidence-based practices and continuity of care. The overmedication he endured—three black-box warning drugs, none FDA-approved for children, was a chilling reminder of the gaps in knowledge and communication among providers. His tragic passing at the age of 13 was not just a personal loss but an indictment of a broken system that failed to meet his needs.

Writing to Representative Derek Kilmer was an act of advocacy born out of despair and hope. While the lack of a designated mental health category in the dropdown menu was disheartening, it highlighted the broader neglect of this critical issue at the policy level. My feelings of being unheard and insignificant, “a tiny drop of water in a vast ocean,” are shared by many parents navigating similar struggles. Yet, this sense of helplessness does not diminish the importance of speaking out. Each letter, each conversation, and each effort to bring attention to the crisis in child mental health care contributes to the larger movement for systemic change.

Moving forward, I recognize the need for sustained advocacy, even in the face of discouragement. Seeking guidance from professional organizations like the American Counseling Association (ACA) can provide valuable resources and strategies for engaging with legislators and stakeholders. While increased funding to Washington State's Department of Health Mental Health Services division is an essential starting point, a comprehensive overhaul of residential mental health services is necessary. This includes better training for staff, implementing evidence-based interventions, and creating systems that prioritize individualized, compassionate care.

This reflection has reinforced my commitment to advocacy as an integral part of my journey as a mental health professional. My son's story is not an isolated one, and it compels me to push for change—not only in honor of his memory but for the countless children and families who continue to suffer. The system is broken, but with persistent effort and collective action, it is possible to create a future where every child has access to the quality mental health care they deserve.