A series of investigative reports by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in early 2007 uncovered serious problems within Georgia’s state-run mental hospitals, including questionable deaths among the patients. It documented Department of Justice interviews with hospital staff who characterized hospital conditions as “continuing clinical chaos.” One staff member notoriously reported that children are safer outside of these hospitals than they are inside. Indeed, a fourteen-year-old girl died about a month after checking in for treatment at one such facility in 2006, one of many troubling stories highlighting failures to adequately address the mental health needs in our state. Such stories have increased awareness, and decision makers are now more keenly aware of the urgency of public concerns. Yet Georgia’s mental health system remains inadequate to serve all children in need.

JUST HOW PREVALENT AND SERIOUS ARE MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSES AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS?

Voices for Georgia’s Children measures and tracks the prevalence of depressed mood among adolescents, a contributor to clinical depression. Twenty percent of Georgia’s children suffer at least one episode of major depression before reaching adulthood. Depression is a leading risk factor for youth suicide, with 21% of depressed youth reporting that they had attempted suicide. Affected children will have a greater predisposition to certain problems during adulthood, including recurrent depression, other mental health disorders, low educational achievement, poor physical health, substance use and social isolation.

WHAT CAN GEORGIA DO TODAY TO PREVENT CHILDREN FROM FALLING VICTIM TO A BROKEN SYSTEM?

The fragmented structure of Georgia’s current system to help children with mental health problems allows many of them to slip through the cracks. While the challenges are daunting, several initiatives have aligned to focus renewed energy and attention on Georgia’s policies and investments to improve services for children. Georgia’s leaders are presented with an opportunity to learn from these initiatives, topple the silos, and create a system that will better meet the health needs of all Georgians, especially our children.

THESE INITIATIVES PRESENT OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN IN GEORGIA:

BOTH THE GOVERNOR’S MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE DELIVERY COMMISSION AND THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY’S JOINT STUDY COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH WERE CREATED AND CHARGED WITH TAKING A CRITICAL LOOK AT OUR CURRENT SYSTEM AND MAKING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

In response to the Department of Justice investigation, Governor Perdue created the Mental Health Service Delivery Commission ("Commission"), which issued a Final Report in December 2008. Recommendations include: establishing a continuum of case management services; developing a statewide System of Care for children with serious emotional disturbances; establishing a comprehensive Coordinating Council to resolve systemic barriers to services; and establishing a single benefit package for children receiving publicly funded mental health services.

The specific needs of children with mental health problems are of such importance that a legislative Joint Study Committee on Children’s Mental Health ("Joint Committee") also was formed in 2008. The Joint Committee will soon provide recommendations for legislation to address issues for children, as well as their families, who are in need of mental health services. Recommendations are expected to include: supporting creation of a division focused on children and adolescents within the proposed Department of Behavioral Health; supporting new programs addressing community-based care management; establishing a single point of entry for all children with mental health issues; and requiring the tracking of outcomes from the Department of Behavioral Health and all other agencies.

A GOVERNOR’S TASK FORCE PROPOSES REORGANIZATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES (DHR). A NEW DEPARTMENT OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CAN ESTABLISH GOALS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH AND IDENTIFY NEEDED RESOURCES.

Within the proposed DHR organization structure, the creation of a Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) presents an opportunity to improve mental health service provision to children and adults. The proposed structure calls for a DBH Coordinating Council comprised

1Please refer to Voices’ website at www.georgiavoices.org for a complete listing of all references cited in this publication.

*In January 2009, Georgia reached a settlement agreement with the Department of Justice, agreeing to correct deficiencies in its seven state-run mental hospitals. Specific details of the settlement agreement are not yet public.

**The term “Coordinating Council” was used by the Health and Human Services Task Force in its discussion of the proposed reorganization of the Department of Human Resources. The Commission’s Final Report, however, addresses this entity as a “Behavioral Health Collaborative.”
of representatives from different agencies that address and fund behavioral health services. Voices supports the creation of this new DBH and urges that the Coordinating Council set specific, measurable goals for improvement in children’s mental health outcomes.

GEORGIA IS ADOPTING A SYSTEM OF CARE MODEL OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICE DELIVERY THAT IMPLEMENTS BEST PRACTICES AND DELIVERS PROVEN OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN.

System of Care is a model of behavioral health service provision that focuses on the child and his or her family. System of Care principles include comprehensive services based on a child’s individual needs, including integrated and culturally responsive service delivery, among many others. In 1999, Rockdale County received a federal grant to implement its System of Care-based KidsNet program for children at risk for out-of-home placements who were diagnosed with serious emotional disturbances. Given the success of the KidsNet Rockdale program and a national movement to advance System of Care practices, Georgia has implemented KidsNet Georgia through a process of “targeted expansion,” with a presence in about a dozen counties thus far. Meaningful implementation of KidsNet Georgia statewide could eventually improve outcomes for children and youth at significantly lower costs and with better long-term results.

JUVENILE JUSTICE STAKEHOLDERS OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORT A NEW JUVENILE CODE FOR GEORGIA TO PROVIDE FOR THE WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND TO PROMOTE THE OVERALL SAFETY OF COMMUNITIES.

JUSTGeorgia, a state-wide coalition working for the justice and safety of Georgia’s young people, is working with members of the Georgia General Assembly to ensure passage of a new Juvenile Code, one that reflects the scientific findings and best practices in the child development field. A recently completed study on Georgia’s current practices based on stakeholder interviews notably cited the lack of mental health services for young people as an acute problem. This is particularly troubling since about 65% to 70% of youth in the juvenile justice system have at least one diagnosable mental health disorder. Passage of a new code can lead to creation of new mechanisms to assure early identification, prevention, and treatment across Georgia’s child-serving mental health system.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION:

AS NOTED EARLIER, A CONVERGENCE OF INITIATIVES MAKES 2009 A PRIME TIME TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN. VOICES OFFERS THE FOLLOWING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE:

WITHIN PROPOSED CREATION OF DEPARTMENT OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH:

• Create a division focused specifically on children and adolescents
• Establish outcome indicators and set appropriate goals regarding children’s mental health outcomes
• Within the proposed DBH Coordinating Council, create a working group specifically to address children’s issues
• Also within the DBH Coordinating Council, require a regular inventory of spending and achievements/results across service sectors that fund provision of children’s mental health services

TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN:

• Support passage of the proposed legislation containing a comprehensive rewrite of Georgia’s Juvenile Code
• Support increased investment in and expansion of KidsNet Georgia to address the needs of children with serious emotional disturbances

Particularly for children with mental health issues, health coverage is essential to ensure that children receive the health services they need. With this in mind, Voices offers additional opportunities for action:

SUPPORT COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH COVERAGE, INCLUDING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, FOR CHILDREN:

• Maintain funding for Georgia’s Medicaid and PeachCare for Kids programs to continue coverage and to support children newly eligible due to the economic downturn
• Encourage Georgia’s Congressional representatives to support initiatives at the federal level that will maintain and strengthen Georgia’s Medicaid and PeachCare for Kids programs

Please visit www.georgiavoices.org for more information on Voices for Georgia’s Children.