

Prince William has a new mental health service

Goal is early care for young adults after their first psychotic break

BY JIM BARNES

Prince William and Loudoun counties are among eight localities in Virginia that have begun offering care to young adults who have recently experienced their first psychotic episode.

The programs — GetOnTrack in Prince William and LINC (Linking Individuals & Navigating Care) in Loudoun — aim to help clients recover by providing treatment and support services soon after their first psychotic break. The programs also help families cope with a life-changing experience that one mother described as “overwhelming.”

Early intervention is the key to recovery, mental health professionals in both programs said.

“Research is showing that the earlier the intervention, the earlier you can get folks on effective medications, the quicker they can get back to going to school or having a job,” said Jeanie Furnari of the Loudoun County Community Services Board, which manages LINC in partnership with PRS, a nonprofit mental health services provider.

The first episode of schizophrenia and related disorders typically occurs between ages 17 and 21 — often when the person is in college, said DeAnne Mullins, team leader of GetOnTrack.

Symptoms can include “delusions — a belief in something that is verifiably untrue — hearing voices, visual hallucinations and thought process issues,” said



JIM BARNES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The GetOnTrack team leaders in Prince William County, from left: Lisa Madron of the Prince William Community Services Board, DeAnne Mullins of Community Residences and Ritu Chahil, a psychiatrist.

Mullins, who works for Community Residences, a nonprofit service provider that manages GetOnTrack in partnership with the Prince William Community Services Board.

and employment and educational support specialists.

“We start where they are,” said Lisa Madron of Prince William Community Services. “We focus on getting them back in school or

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Lisa Madron, Prince William Community Services

The programs provide outpatient medical treatment and community-based support services. Each team has a part-time psychiatrist, peer specialists who talk with clients about their own experiences with mental illness,

getting a job . . . and showing them that they still have their potential, that their brain can change, and it doesn’t have to be a downward spiral.”

Both programs started last year — GetOnTrack in June and

LINC in November. They serve clients as young as 16 who have experienced their first psychotic break within the past two years.

The local community services boards receive state and federal funding to run the programs, said Rhonda Thissen of the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, which coordinates the specialty care programs in Virginia. Communities are given some flexibility to tailor the program to their residents, in the context of the overall goals, she said.

Prince William’s GetOnTrack program serves people from ages 16 to 25, and Loudoun accepts clients from 16 to 30. Many of the clients are referred by family members, doctors or other mental health professionals, Mullins said.

The programs also focus on helping the families of those in

treatment.

“That family support, that family education, family understanding of what’s happening can be so effective,” Furnari said. “It’s important for parents to have support from other parents who are experiencing the same thing.”

Bonnie, a Prince William resident whose 24-year-old daughter, Sara, is recovering from a psychotic break, called the GetOnTrack program a “godsend” for her family. They are identified here by their first names only to protect Sara’s privacy.

“Mental illness is hard to recognize until it takes the person over the edge, and the family with them,” Bonnie wrote in an email. “It was obvious, bringing [Sara] home from a two-week involuntary treatment, that we were over our heads in understanding how to help her.”

In the email, Bonnie described the range of services her daughter and family received. Sara meets weekly with the team psychiatrist, and the team sends text messages reminding her to take her medications. An emergency contact can be reached around the clock. Individual and group counseling are available for family members.

“They are helping her stay anchored by talking with her in ways that she can hear,” Bonnie wrote. “They are teaching her coping skills at her most mind-numbing moments.

“As her mother, my . . . thoughts were coming from a place of complete and overwhelming fear of loss,” she added. “I am so beyond grateful.”

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