

## Christian: Youth with mental health issues can find help

By Nancy Christian  
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The theme of National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day is "Thriving in the Community" and will be held Friday.

According to National Council Magazine, for young people with serious mental illness to succeed in the adult world, they need more than treatment. They need to be truly integrated into their communities. They need jobs that offer skills, dignity, independence and peers. And they need a responsible and caring older adult who can help them.

Although it is impossible to determine exactly how many children with serious mental illnesses are in foster care or the justice system, research shows that children in these systems have high rates of mental illness. According to the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities of Tennessee, 7 percent, or 97,969, of the children in Tennessee have a diagnosis of serious emotional disturbance. The majority of children in state custody (51 percent) have a mental health diagnosis. In 93 percent of cases of children in state custody, the child and/or a parent has either a mental health diagnosis and/or substance abuse issues.

Many youths enter the juvenile justice system as a direct result of their unaddressed mental health issues. The National Alliance on Mental Illness found that 36 percent of the families it surveyed reported placing their children in the juvenile justice system to access mental health services that were unavailable to them in the community.

A congressional oversight committee concluded that 33 states hold youth living with mental illness - who have committed no crime - behind bars solely as a result of their mental health needs. Research shows that 60 percent of boys and 70 percent of girls in the juvenile justice system are diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and 20 percent live with a severe mental illness. About half also have co-occurring substance use issues.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reviews of the child mental health system in this country conclude that nationally we're doing a poor job of providing prevention and early intervention services to our most vulnerable children and families. Major public systems that serve these families, including education, child welfare, juvenile justice and the welfare system, are often ill-equipped to deal with mental health issues.

In order to become a productive and successful member of the community as an adult, children and youth living with mental illnesses must be properly diagnosed and appropriately treated. The Florence Crittenton Agency offers services and programs to children and youth with mental health needs and their families in our community.

These services are accessible to the private sector without intervention by the justice system.

To find out more about the programs and services offered by the Florence Crittenton Agency to address these needs in our community, please visit our Web site at [www.fcaknox.org](http://www.fcaknox.org). It is currently FCA's annual fund drive, and you can be a part of supporting the leading mental health provider in Knoxville and surrounding areas.

Pat Summitt has become involved; will you?

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