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## **Mobile psych unit reaching youths in crisis**

By Judy Benson Day Staff Writer

Thanks to improvements to a statewide emergency response program for children and teenagers having a psychological crisis, more people are using the service and more youths are getting help outside of hospital emergency rooms.

That's the assessment of local hospital officials of the Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services program offered by the state Department of Children and Families. Offered for the last seven years but enhanced in the last year, it gives parents, school officials, police and others dealing with a child in crisis ready access to mental health professionals who can offer help immediately over the phone or within 45 minutes at the child's home.

"It's been a pretty positive alternative to families in crisis to bringing their child to the emergency room," said Max Gorski, director for patient-care services for Lawrence & Memorial Hospital. "If you're a child having an emotional crisis, the emergency room can be a very frightening place. The emergency room should be a last resort."

From October to February, there were 270 calls to the program from eastern Connecticut that resulted in services being provided, according to information provided by DCF. United Community and Family Service in Norwich is the agency that runs the program in eastern Connecticut.

Statewide, the program is seeing a 50 percent increase in the number of calls since it implemented several changes, according to Bert Plant, director of community programs and services for DCF.

The phone number to access the program was changed from various seven-digit numbers across the state, depending on the local agency in charge, to a uniform, three-digit number, 2-1-1. In addition, "hours of mobility" were extended.

Counselors can be reached 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and mental health professionals can now be dispatched from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. on weekdays and from 1 to 10 p.m. on weekends and holidays. The program has also standardized training for staff statewide and improved data collection and reporting, Plant said.

It has also worked to spread the word about the program to parents, school officials and others who deal with children and teenagers in crisis, so that they call 2-1-1 instead of bringing the youth to the hospital.

"A lot of kids show up at the emergency room who don't need to be there," he said. In addition to providing help through the immediate crisis, the program's mental health workers also set up follow-up appointments and services, and continue to meet with the youth and their family until those begin, Plant said.

James O'Dea, assistant vice president of programs and services at The William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich, praised the mobile program as helping to address the need for more mental health services for youth in crisis. Natchaug Hospital has also been working to alleviate that problem with the 2008 addition of four inpatient beds at its Mansfield facility specifically for youth.

When the program first started, he said, he was skeptical.

"But I've been very, very impressed," he said.

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