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Treatment Failures at Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents

Virginia's mental health system harms its most vulnerable and marginalized population, children with serious mental health needs, according to an investigation done by the disAbility Law Center of Virginia (dLCV). In October of last year, dLCV launched an investigation into conditions and treatment at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA), after receiving allegations of abuse at the Staunton institution. dLCV's investigation, summarized in a report released today, found a pattern of coercive and excessive restraint practices at the state-operated facility. The study found that CCCA fails to provide a safe environment for children. Even after investing in significant training, the facility does not adhere to a treatment concept known as "trauma-informed care."

According to the report, the use of restraint is a treatment failure, not a behavioral intervention. Experts in the field agree that restraint has no therapeutic benefit. Contrary to these accepted standards, CCCA recently introduced a new form of restraint, known as an "Emergency Restraint Chair." Although banned in some adult facilities, Virginia uses this dangerous form of restraint on children at CCCA. According to data from the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, the introduction of the restraint chair at CCCA has directly contributed to a near doubling of the use of restraints. Non-ambulatory restraint incidents have increased by 163% since the introduction of the restraint chair.

Most alarming, children at CCCA have been seriously injured with the use of the restraint chair. dLCV's investigation describes an example where CCCA staff broke a child's arm while forcing him into the chair.

"The Commonwealth Center has a long history of abusive and traumatic restraint," said Colleen Miller, the executive director of the disAbility Law Center of Virginia. "This is supposed to be a healing environment. We fear for the safety of the children there."

dLCV's report urges CCCA to implement immediate reforms, including full implementation of trauma-informed responses. "Trauma informed care principles are accepted across the nation and have been for decades. CCCA is reluctant to incorporate these basic concepts, even after extensive staff education efforts." Miller stated, "The Commonwealth must take immediate steps to protect these children."

dLCV is a nonprofit organization that serves as the Commonwealth's designated protection and advocacy system. dLCV's mission is to fight abuse and neglect and to encourage people with disabilities to have choice, independence, and inclusion in all aspect of life.

To read the full report and the Department's reply, visit www.dLCV.org