Executive Summary

Connecting Need and Capacity:
A Study of Mental Health Services for Milwaukee County Youth

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Many providers of mental health services in Milwaukee report shortages of key personnel and programs that interfere with the delivery of needed treatment to youth with serious disorders. Treatment options appear especially limited for children from low-income families. Their experience questions whether the mental health delivery system contains sufficient capacity to address the quantity and nature of these disorders among Milwaukee County's youth. In fact, there are very few sources of information that bear directly on this issue. No community-wide mental health needs assessment or capacity assessment has been conducted previously. This study attempts to fill that void by approaching need and capacity through prevalence research, via a quantitative survey of youth mental health service providers, and by in-depth interviews with key persons in the field.

The 2000 U.S. Census establishes that 247,707 children live in Milwaukee County. Children as a group are slightly concentrated in the City of Milwaukee, where 171,131 (69%) of them live. Importantly, almost all of the county's low-income children and almost all of the county's children of color also live in the city. Prevalence research shows that 15% of youth suffer from a mental disorder accompanied by impairment. That rate predicts that about 37,000 of Milwaukee County children currently experience such a condition and have a need for treatment. About 26,000 of them live within the city, and about 8,500 live in low-income households.

The survey of youth mental health providers, conducted in February and March 2005, elicited a wide variety of data on services offered, staffing, caseload, hours of service, waiting lists, fees, and revenue sources from 18 non-profit and public organizations in Milwaukee who together appear to constitute about one-quarter of the youth mental health system capacity. These data, compared to the expected numbers of youth with mental disorders, show a service delivery system that is roughly in balance with need at the most general level. The data also demonstrate that need overwhelms capacity at particular points of service delivery, including especially psychiatric assessment and consultation, and outpatient therapy.

Interviews with leaders of mental health agencies complemented the survey data by identifying how mental health services have evolved at the agency level, where there are gaps in services for youth, what interferes with service delivery, and how agencies relate to each other. In the absence of guidance from prior needs assessments or community-wide information resources that capture the youth mental health scene, providers have applied eclectic criteria in service planning, yielding a set of capacities that only partly articulate with recognized needs. Interviewees identified significant service gaps at the prevention end of the service continuum,

and in services for youth who cross seams in the system, especially at the youth-adult boundary. They describe real shortages in personnel, particularly therapists, that share the ethnic and cultural background and life experiences of the youth they are trying to help. They also lack a forum that would bring them into connection with each other for service coordination or common action.

The study addresses several fundamental issues about service delivery in Milwaukee County. It affirms that the surveyed agencies are making a concerted effort to serve low-income youth and minorities, though more comprehensive data from a broader set of providers are needed to draw firm conclusions. Youth mental health providers have focused their service delivery on treatment methods, mostly at the deep end that manages serious disorders, crises, and high risk cases. The network of providers is loosely connected and has not yet developed common definitions, conventions, and understandings that are the hallmarks of mature systems. The network lacks institutions and functions that would cause it to behave like an organized system, including central information resources and centralized direction or oversight. This nature appears related to the reported overloading of service capacity at particular points and in particular circuits.