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Critical Issues Committee Position Statement

Interagency Services for Youth with Cognitive Disabilities and Mental Health Needs

The Critical Issues Committee of MRDD realizes that many individuals with cognitive disabilities may also have significant mental health needs. Yet, it is often difficult for such individuals to obtain effective and appropriate mental health services. Meeting the unique needs of students with both cognitive and mental health disabilities is a challenge both for the professionals and the systems funding services. Restrictions on funding sources hamper some delivery options. Often, solutions that are as unique as the situations themselves are required to adequately meet the needs of these individuals.

While most educational and mental health professionals realize that there are unique needs to be met with this population, the mechanism to access and coordinate the necessary interagency services is often not available. More often, services are provided by each agency separately and at times in conflict with other. A coordinated effort is necessary.

Essential to the coordination process is the loosening of funding restrictions from the various school and community agencies involved. While schools are mandated to serve all children with disabilities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- IDEA), community mental health agencies often operate under different regulations that may exclude such youth from services based on different eligibility criteria. These issues present further evidence that coordination is necessary.

Treatment of mental illness is a discipline rarely understood by special educators trained primarily in cognitive disabilities. Additionally, individuals with cognitive disabilities present unique issues to professionals in mental health fields. When a young person presents both of these disabling conditions, few professionals or service delivery systems are prepared to address their needs. Techniques used in traditional therapy do not always offer solutions for individuals with cognitive disabilities. An integrated knowledge of both cognitive and mental health/behavioral disabilities is essential to the development of effective strategies for these individuals.

Several states and communities have developed ways to coordinate and provide appropriate services to youth with cognitive and mental health disabilities through a wraparound service approach. This approach addresses the needs of the whole individual in school, home, and community by “wrapping around” the services to help individuals be successful in all aspects of life. This approach encourages the use of an interagency team of educators, social & mental health service providers, and family members, with other natural supporters within the school and community. The approach further allows for the creative use of funds across participating agencies to meet the unique educational and emotional needs of individuals. Whether developed as an interagency community effort or through one organization, the wraparound approach has proven successful in addressing the unique needs of children and youth with cognitive and mental health needs. In support of the wraparound approach to interagency services for this group of youth, CEC-MRDD makes the following resolution:

Whereas CEC-MRDD realizes that there are unique needs individuals with both cognitive and mental health needs and;

Whereas interagency services and supports to meet the unique needs of these individuals are not readily available in all states and communities and;

Whereas necessary interagency services and supports could be available through the development and implementation of a wraparound approach;

Be it resolved that CEC-MRDD supports states and communities in the development of interagency teams to develop and implement a wraparound approach to services to meet the needs of individuals with both cognitive disabilities and mental health needs.

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