

# Opinion: New mental health resources coming for children in Polk County

*Anger has been the pilot light that has kept AMOS leaders doggedly pursuing the implementation of youth mental health crisis services for over four years.*

**Lindsey Braun and Benjamin C. Bell Jr.**

Guest columnists

On May 21, a Des Moines Register editorial asked, “Where does a parent turn when a child attempts suicide?” This is the question that has driven AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy) for the past four years to advocate for children’s mental health services.

And starting July 1, Polk County families, schools, and adolescents will finally have additional resources to turn to when youth experience a mental health crisis.

On May 18, Broadlawns Medical Center presented a plan to hire two new pediatric mobile crisis responders funded by local option sales tax dollars, something fought for by AMOS. Mental health crisis presents differently in youths than in adults, and we need mobile crisis responders who have expertise in supporting our youth in crisis. Nearly 100 AMOS leaders attended the Broadlawns trustee meeting in support of this investment. On June 2, Broadlawns trustees approved this plan. We urge Des Moines City Council members to similarly vote in support.

Mental health crisis services for children and adolescents have been a long time coming. Through an intensive small-group listening process across central Iowa, AMOS has heard story after story illustrating the consequences of nonexistent and underfunded children’s crisis mental health services:

- A church deacon who lost his teenage son to suicide.
- Parents who face violence at the hands of their children with mental illness but fear what will happen if police arrive on the scene when they call 911 for help.
- Educators and school staff who have few options to help stabilize a child in crisis beyond clearing the classroom of other children, sending the child home with their parents, or transporting the child to a hospital waiting room.

- Police officers/paramedics frequently called to respond to mental health calls who feel underequipped to adequately triage a mental health emergency.
- Parents hearing their child say “it’d be better if I died” as isolation and anxiety magnify stress on youth and their families through the pandemic

These parents and community members quickly realized that a good answer did not exist for a youth experiencing a mental health crisis in Polk County. And they were told an answer never would be found, that little progress had been made in decades. These experiences became the fuel that sustained and pushed AMOS forward.

Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper writes of anger as “a force directed toward the difficult of achievement, toward the thing beyond the easy grasp, ever ready to expose itself whenever an 'arduous good' waits to be conquered.”

Anger has been the pilot light that has kept AMOS leaders doggedly pursuing the implementation of youth mental health crisis services for over four years. Now, literally hundreds of meetings later, this anger will result in significant new options for children and youth in mental health crisis starting this July.

- Using local option sales tax revenue, Des Moines Police Chief Dana Wingert is working to hire a mental health clinician within 911 dispatch to better assess mental health calls and determine if a mental health professional or police safety response is most appropriate.
- Polk County Health Services is seeking providers to provide community stabilization services for children in mental health crisis. Those in need will be able to call a hotline and speak with a trained mental health professional who can provide support over the phone.
- If necessary, a two-person community stabilization team of mental health professionals can be dispatched to a child in crisis whether that’s at home, school, church, or soccer league.
- If a safety plan cannot be developed on the scene, youth can be taken to a stabilization center for up to five days to receive ongoing support.

To achieve the “thing beyond the easy grasp,” it is the drive of AMOS leaders who shared their own lived experiences, asked hard questions, and resisted the status quo. It is city and county elected officials standing up and working to make these services a reality.

And because of this, starting July 1, Polk County parents will finally have mental health crisis resources to support our children and youth. An arduous good achieved.

*The Rev. Lindsey Braun is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ and serves as minister of vitality and outreach at Plymouth UCC in Des Moines. The Rev. Dr. Benjamin C. Bell Jr. is the outreach director for the Fatherhood Initiative.*

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