

OPINION

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Funding mental health

Mental illness has long been a stepchild in health care coverage and in behavioral counseling, especially of children. That, in turn, has led to shortages of practitioners and of facilities that specialize in this care — deficiencies that again came to the fore after the shootings at Chardon High and Sandy Hook Elementary schools last year.

Columbus amplifies that disparity with a faulty funding formula that gives proportionally more money to rural counties and shorts regions with the greatest mental health care needs, such as Cuyahoga County. In his latest attempt to address that disparity, William Denihan, head of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction & Mental Health Services Board of Cuyahoga County, recently proposed a new levy that would fund only mental health and addiction services.

There is no question that additional money is needed to treat these at-risk populations, but the appearance of another levy on the county ballot risks evoking voter enmity rather than empathy.

It also could be confusing. There already are two health and human services levies in Cuyahoga County that come up on alternate two-year cycles. Together, those levies generate \$28.08 per resident for mental health services, according to board spokesman Scott Osiecki.

That is a pittance compared to Summit County, which, Denihan said, spends \$70.04 per resident.

Rather than another levy, a smarter strategy might be to bump up the millage on the existing levies and designate a larger percentage of the money for mental health and addiction services.

The need is there.