

Governor Reverses Closure of Binghamton, Elmira Psychiatric Centers

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By Glynis Hart |

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On Thursday, December 19, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced at a regional Office of Mental Health meeting in Binghamton that Greater Binghamton Health Center and Elmira Psychiatric Center, will not be closed as stipulated in the Regional Centers of Excellence plan.

The plan, released in July of this year, called for the closure of state mental hospitals and the accelerated movement of mental health services to more outpatient and community based services. However, opponents of the plan, including state senators Tom O'Mara (R,C-Big Flats) Philip Palmesano (R-C, Corning) and Tom Libous (R-Johnson City), assemblywoman Donna Lupardo (D- Binghamton), the Tompkins County Legislature and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, charged that the alternate mental health services were "smoke and mirrors" and that the closures would leave people needing inpatient mental health with nowhere to go in the Southern Tier. The two facilities serve a 15-county area; under the original RCE plan, Southern Tier patients needing more than a seven-day hospital stay would be transported to a hospital in Buffalo.

Upon receiving the news that the closures would not go forward, O'Mara said, "It's very positive, timely and welcome news to begin the new year. From a fiscal and quality-of-service standpoint, we've clearly made a convincing case for a stronger role for Elmira and Binghamton in this state's mental health system... Above all, it's a testament to the outpouring of grassroots support and action that's been underway locally since July. Everyone who took the time to sign a petition or join us at a rally made a difference."

Jean Poland, of NAMI-Finger Lakes, responded to the news: "I am pleased and relieved that the treatment and support needs of people in the Southern Tier have been recognized."

A resolution passed by the Tompkins County legislature Sept. 23 had asked OMH to establish a sixth "Regional Center of Excellence" in the Southern Tier.

Cuomo announced that under the new changes, one adult ward will be closed in each facility and the savings used toward other mental health services. The Greater Binghamton Health Center will be designated a "Children's Behavioral Health Center of Excellence for the Southern Tier" which, O'Mara said, "guarantees a stronger role for the Southern Tier in the state's system of mental health care."

"Today's plan to keep the Greater Binghamton Health Center and Elmira Psychiatric Center open is the culmination of tireless efforts by state and local leaders, mental health advocates and the families of patients," Cuomo said. "Under this new plan, not only is the State keeping beds open for the adults and children who need them in the region, but we are also investing in expanded community services to provide better and more efficient care to patients. By continuing operation of these facilities, we are ensuring that patients do not have to travel far to receive the treatment they need and keeping two major regional employers in business."

The previous plan by OMH called for closing 162 adult beds and 34 children beds in total for the two facilities.

Under the revised plan, the Greater Binghamton Health Center will maintain 16 children beds, and the Elmira Psychiatric Center will maintain 18 beds, for a total of 34 children beds. For adult services, the Greater Binghamton Health Center gradually go from 90 to 60 adult beds in the facility, but add 60 new community residential beds. Instead of eliminating inpatient services at Elmira, that facility will be able to keep 48 adult beds and 18 children beds at the facility, but also will receive 48 new community residential beds. The reduction of one adult ward at each facility save \$6 million, according to the governor's office, which will be reinvested for the combined 108 new residential beds with supported housing and family care.

Cuomo assured stakeholders that no further implementation of the Regional Centers of Excellence plan will take place until OMH, in consultation with community and mental health advocates, evaluates the effectiveness of the expanded community services on the need for inpatient beds.



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