

Changes in Mental Health System Leave Southern Tier in the Cold

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The new plan by New York State's Office of Mental Health (OMH) to shut down mental hospitals and move long-term mental patient care to "Regional Centers of Excellence" (RCE) by 2014 will leave Southern Tier residents at a disadvantage, if the plan goes through unchanged.

"It's a real shock to Southern Tier communities," said Tompkins County Legislator Nathan Shinagawa, who is also an administrator at the Guthrie Robert Packer Hospital in Sayre, Pa. "They were trying to create regional centers to streamline costs, but the centers are only in cities on the New York State Thruway. It leaves the Southern Tier completely out."

Elmira Psychiatric Center and Greater Binghamton Health Center are the two closest long-term inpatient mental health care options for Tompkins County residents. "If they close both Elmira and Binghamton," said Tompkins County Mental Health Director Sue Romanczuk-Smelcer, "there will be a very large impact here."

Cayuga Medical Center's behavioral services unit addresses only acute care needs, not long-term ones.

According to the OMH Regional Centers of Excellence document: "Buffalo Psychiatric Center, Western New York Children's Psychiatric Center and the Elmira Psychiatric Center will be merged into one center known as the Western Lakes RCE. All adult and children's inpatient capacity will be located at the Western Lakes RCE at 400 Forest Ave., Buffalo. The Western Lakes RCE will have 158 adult inpatient beds and 36 child and adolescent beds."

Elmira's outpatient services, such as in-office visits, will continue.

The document further states, "Community services will be targeted to individuals with the most complex mental illness and may include mobile treatment, crisis services, respite, mentoring, employment and specialized housing supports."

Jean Poland of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Finger Lakes, said, "It's hard enough to get to Binghamton or Elmira, much less Buffalo." NAMI serves mainly the families," she said, "and we define family very broadly as the group that ends up caring for the person" and friends of the mentally ill. NAMI also advocates for the mentally ill. The Finger Lakes chapter office is in Ithaca.

"We know strong networks are important to recovery from any illness, not just mental illness," said Poland. "Of course, the patient is the most traumatized by mental illness, but the family is traumatized as well. The Ronald McDonald house concept—which provides overnight accommodations for families of hospitalized children—is wonderful, but so many of our families, they don't get time off to go somewhere."

Poland described the loss of facilities in Elmira and Binghamton as "devastating for our area." Further, there already aren't local beds for children with mental illness. The plan puts the closest beds in Buffalo. Additionally, according to OMH, many insurance companies will not pay for children's care in Hutchings Psychiatric Center in Syracuse "due in part to costs exceeding the norm." Tompkins County Department of Social Services (DSS) sends children needing inpatient mental health care to Elmira.

"Serving children is a challenge," said Poland. "It's heartbreaking to see a child spend their first overnight in the hospital. Imagine if they have to go to Buffalo. (They're saying) parents will be able to Skype with their kids, but we're so rural, a lot of people don't have computers."

"The plan is smoke and mirrors," said Poland. "And, how about transporting the patients? Do we have enough ambulances? Are we sending an ambulance to Buffalo? What happens if we need that ambulance here?"

Locally, the Tompkins County Legislature passed a resolution in September urging the governor to include a Southern Tier RCE: "This would include continued access to child, adolescent and adult inpatient and community services, managed under a locally responsive rural model, as an alternative to the exclusively urban thruway model currently under consideration."

In Elmira, State Senator Tom O'Mara has mounted a petition campaign to keep the psychiatric center open. "It remains impossible to justify, in my view," said O'Mara. "I've strongly made the case, together with many other local leaders, that the Elmira PC is an irreplaceable

cornerstone of this region's and state's mental health system. There simply isn't a network of community-based organizations across this region to take the place of the Elmira PC."

Tompkins County mental health providers are still trying to figure out what the effect here will be.

"The plan isn't completely figured out," says Romanczuk-Smelcer, of the OMH document. "Many discussions will have to happen."

"Our concern," said Poland, "Is that fewer people will be treated, and more will end up in jails or hospitals. Part of mental illness is a lack of awareness of the illness itself. They don't choose to not seek treatment; they're not going to say, 'Oh, I need to go to Buffalo.' They're going to act on their impulse, and end up in jail perhaps."

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