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TOP STORY

# Could a crisis center in Buffalo improve mental health care, take pressure off ECMC?

Jon Harris

Feb 9, 2023



BestSelf's location at 430 Niagara St., which will be renovated for an intensive crisis stabilization center, is seen in Buffalo, Jan. 5, 2023.

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Jon Harris

**B**y the end of this year, Western New Yorkers experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis could have another 24/7 option to receive care and support.

BestSelf Behavioral Health is developing an intensive crisis stabilization center at its 430 Niagara St. location in Buffalo, a facility the local provider hopes to have renovated and open in the fall. The center will provide evaluation, care and treatment, with the capacity to administer medication.

The center, and others like it being developed across the state, aims to ensure a patient is treated in the most appropriate setting while also diverting them away from unnecessary emergency room visits. BestSelf also plans to prioritize linking patients, once they are stabilized at the center, to community services where their treatment and support can continue.

The center has the potential to improve Western New York's mental health system and alleviate pressure on Erie County Medical Center's Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program, or CPEP. That 24/7 program at ECMC serves as the largest safety-net mental health emergency department in the Buffalo Niagara region, seeing an average of about 9,000 to 10,000 patients annually in recent years.

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But CPEP has often been understaffed, overcrowded and overwhelmed with the increased need for mental health services. During a recent visit to Buffalo, Attorney General Letitia James called ECMC's CPEP the "busiest of its kind in New York," a place where patients can, at times, wait days to be seen by a psychiatrist.

BestSelf President and CEO Elizabeth Woike-Ganga said the organization's intensive crisis stabilization center, which is expected to see about 4,000 patients a year, will fill a "gap in the system."

CPEP has the capability to provide inpatient care and serve patients at risk of harming themselves or others, but it often – by its nature of being a round-the-clock operation – ends up as the landing spot for anyone experiencing a mental health crisis, regardless of whether that's the best place for the patient to be.

"Many people shouldn't be there," Woike-Ganga said. "There's a lot of folks with more serious mental illness who go in there because they're cold or they need a sandwich or they need to talk to someone, maybe they need to talk to a peer just to have a conversation, just to vent and calm down. They don't need to be admitted and they don't need to sit in the emergency room for 48 hours, and they don't need to even talk to a psychiatrist or even a medical provider, because what they're having is a crisis in the sense of, they're upset."

ECMC, in a statement, said it supports the state's intensive crisis stabilization model, which will provide more behavioral health services across the state and in Western New York.

Indeed, the intensive crisis stabilization centers being developed across New York are part of a comprehensive crisis response system the state is forming. In many ways, Gov. Kathy Hochul has doubled down on that plan with her recent plan to pump \$1 billion to fix the state's broken mental health care continuum.

"Working with behavioral health-focused organizations throughout Western New York," ECMC said, "we will continue to advocate for more community services in an effort to meet the needs of our patients, providing them high-quality care, while

reducing the need for psychiatric emergency room visits."

It's clear when talking to BestSelf, ECMC and other behavioral health providers that it will take more than just a few entities to help fix the system. But they agree the BestSelf intensive crisis stabilization center – an official facility name is in the works – will play a key role in that future model of care.

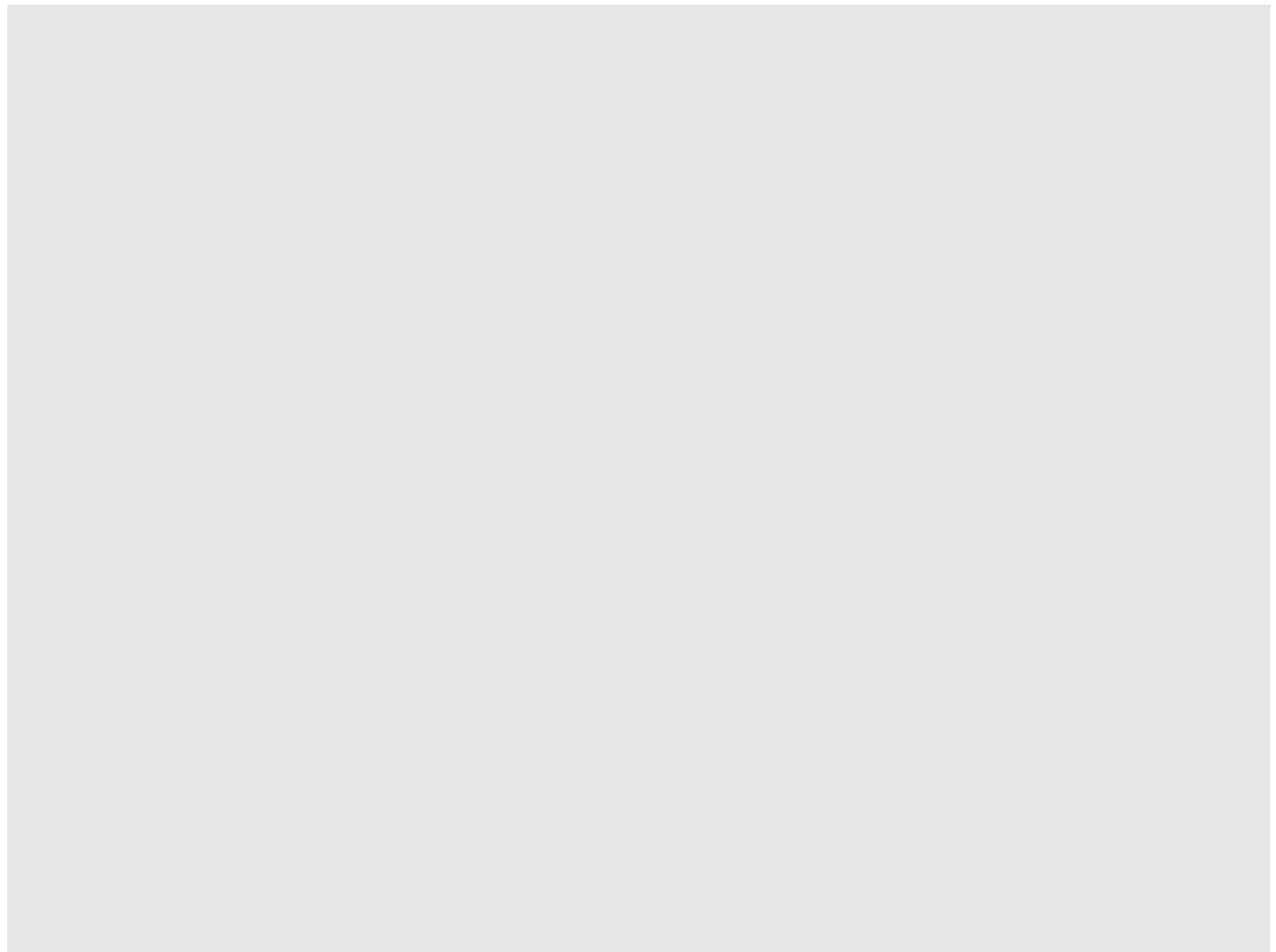
### **'Help anyone who comes through the door'**

Brittany Derry can picture the floor plan they have developed for the center. She calls it "warm and welcoming," far from the sterile feel of a hospital.

The center will have specific spaces for different levels of care and different ages, with minors separated from adults. BestSelf, according to its state application, plans to use a "calming decor" and furniture such as recliners and couches. The plan also calls for spaces for "mindfulness activity," not unlike a sensory room that exists at the location already.

There will be separate entrances for patients who walk in and for those brought to the center by police or ambulance.

"We will help anyone who comes through the door," said Derry, director of the crisis center and clubhouse programs.



Brittany Derry, director of the crisis center and clubhouse programs at BestSelf.

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Since the crisis center will cover the state-defined, five-county Western New York, BestSelf also plans to have dedicated telehealth rooms at the center for those who can't be there in person.

The crisis center will absorb about 10,000 square feet of the building's total 15,500 square feet, with the remaining space for existing BestSelf programs.

To cover renovations, BestSelf is eligible to apply for \$1 million in capital funding from the state.

The center also will be supported by state funding of \$8.7 million over the next five years.

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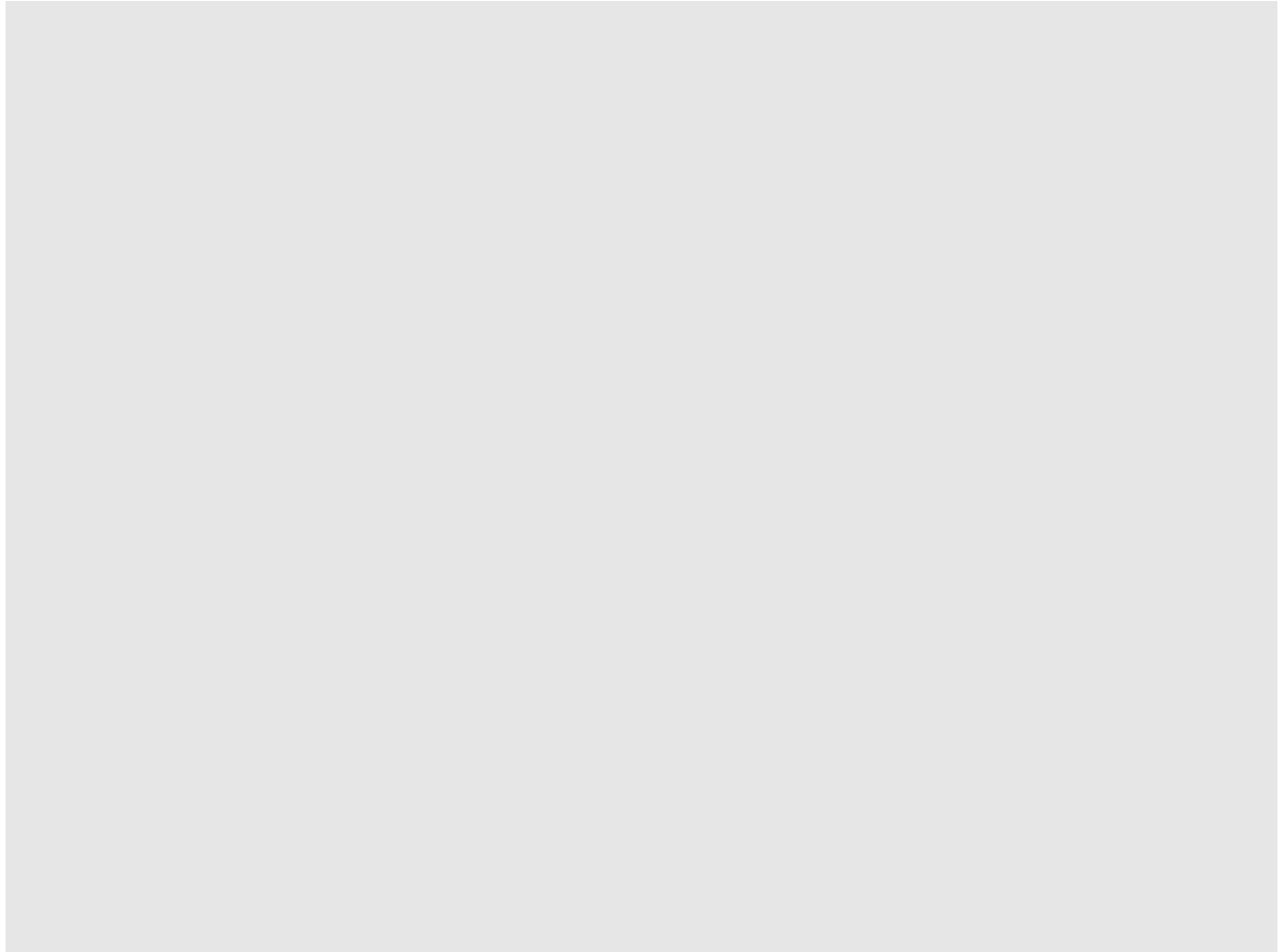
### **BestSelf gets state funding to develop crisis stabilization center in Buffalo**

Once the center is operating and taking patients, the goal is to triage, screen and assess each person who comes in as soon as possible, with information from that process used to develop a specific plan that guides each patient's visit to the center as well as aftercare, according to BestSelf's state application.

If it becomes clear that an increased level of care, such as inpatient services, will be needed for a patient, that's where collaboration comes in, with the center contacting local CPEP units to arrange a transfer, if necessary.

At the BestSelf crisis center, where all services will be voluntary, there are no inpatient beds and patients can stay up to 24 hours.

In its state application, BestSelf said it anticipates that 50% of patients will have a short visit at the center, while the other half are anticipated to stay for more than three hours.



A "sensory room" featuring calming lighting, a noise machine, a water machine and other soothing features, currently available for use at BestSelf, serves as a preview of more sensory rooms that will be available for use at the provider's intensive crisis stabilization center, which will be located at 430 Niagara St.

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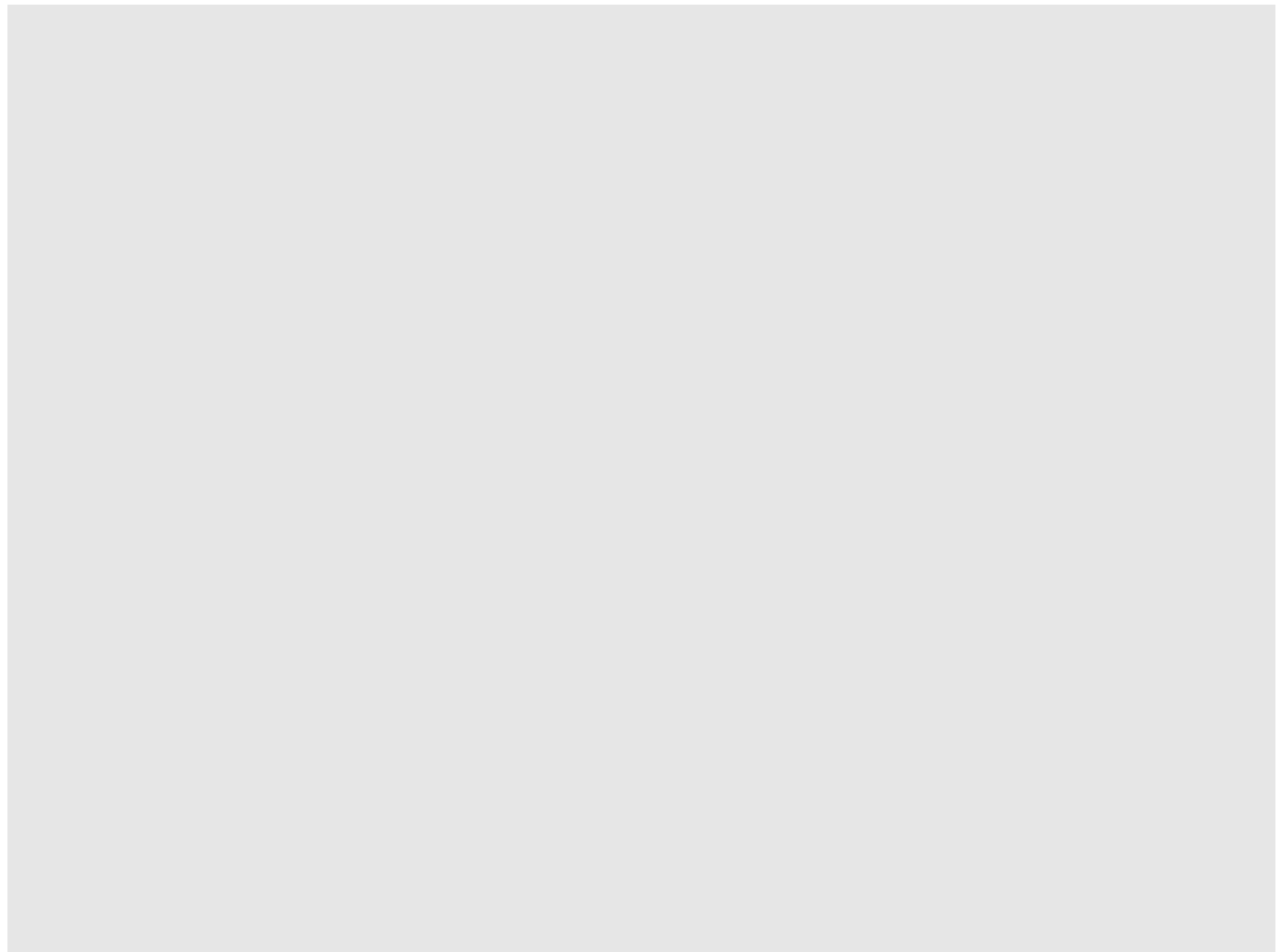
In terms of staffing, BestSelf's state application notes a minimum of a nurse, peer and credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselor would be on site at all times. A psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse practitioner also would be on-call 24/7, with scheduled time to be on site during peak hours.

Adequate staffing will be among the main barriers to providing 24/7 care, BestSelf admits in its application. But BestSelf, which has more than 1,300 employees, said it's well-suited to meet the challenge, confident it can hire the 43 to 50 people needed for the crisis center.

And just as important as the services provided at the center will be the handoff.

The crisis center plans to conduct follow-up with all clients within 24 hours after they are discharged to check in, verify appointments and encourage patients to attend appointments.

"One of the things that Brittany and her team will be doing will be forging those relationships, so that the individuals who are coming here have somewhere to link to, so that we can continue the diversion process," said Kevin Beckman, BestSelf's vice president of health home program and crisis intervention.





Kevin Beckman, BestSelf's vice president of health home program and crisis intervention.

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### 'Fewer people will fall through the cracks'

For the crisis center to succeed, BestSelf will no doubt have to collaborate with other Western New York providers, including ECMC.

If it helps allow patients to be seen in the right setting, that could take some pressure off ECMC's CPEP and allow the hospital program to care for those in need of high-level, inpatient psychiatric services.

"ECMC knows themselves that they have too much business, and they don't have the right level – you know, people come there for a myriad of reasons," said Margery Stanton, BestSelf's senior vice president of adult services. "And many times they agree, like, 'They're walking in our door and that clogs the system for us to deal with the highest-need, highest-intensity consumers.' But they still have to do it."

Melinda DuBois just wishes the BestSelf crisis center could open sooner.

DuBois, the executive director of Mental Health Advocates of WNY, said the crisis center could be an "incredibly important addition to mental health response in our community," especially as the need for mental health services has skyrocketed during the pandemic. Beyond Covid-19, Buffalo has been hit by its own traumas over the last nine months.

### BestSelf sees increase in demand for services

BestSelf has seen a large increase in recent years in the provision of services to individuals with serious menta

	Serious Mental Illness	Serious Emotional Disturbance
2019	4,796	2,173
2020	5,637	2,473
2021	7,026	3,106

Chart: Jon Harris • Source: BestSelf's application to NYS • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datavrapper](#)

"CPEP is at capacity or beyond capacity quite often," DuBois said. "And for many people who are in a mental health crisis or need immediate response, CPEP often isn't the best solution for them. But it's the only one right now in our community."

The BestSelf crisis center, she noted, could give people another 24/7 option locally, where they can be assessed, stabilized, provided medication and linked to follow-ups with providers.

DuBois is hopeful the crisis center, along with an influx of more state dollars, can help meet the community's needs.

"We see people falling through the cracks every day," she said, "so I'm really hopeful with all these systems and resources put in place that fewer people will fall through the cracks."

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**By Jon Harris**

**Reporter**

I'm a Genesee County native and Syracuse University grad who covered business at the (Binghamton) Press & Sun-Bulletin and at The Morning Call in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I joined The Buffalo News in September 2021, covering the business of health care.

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