

BestSelf prepares to open crisis center that 'community has been missing for quite some time'

BY: JON HARRIS

Brittany Derry has been waiting to open the BestResponse Intensive Crisis Center for three years. Three years of design, planning and then construction. Three years of state paperwork.

The waiting gave Derry and BestSelf Behavioral Health time to collaborate with area agencies to ensure that the crisis center fills a gap and is exactly what it needs to be for the community. But the waiting also was difficult, because Derry, who has worked in the mental health field for a decade, knows the need for this type of center is immediate.

"I think this center is something that our community has been missing for quite some time," said Derry, a licensed mental health counselor and director of BestResponse.

It is one of 13 intensive crisis stabilization centers being developed across New York, part of a larger state plan to overhaul the crisis response system. BestResponse, at 10,000 square feet, will be the intensive crisis center for five counties in Western New York and is expected to serve about 4,000 patients a year.

If successful, it will help ensure that people are getting services in the appropriate setting. It could redirect some patients away from costly emergency department admissions and allow hospitals, such as Erie County Medical Center, to focus on patients who need that level of care.

"It's really made for everyone and anyone who is experiencing a mental health and/or substance use crisis," Derry said. "There's a lot of programs within our area that are designed specifically for one or the other, but we're really focused on treating the individual, as a whole."

From the front of the building facing Niagara Street, the crisis center has separate entrances for children and for adults. Once inside, the two sides remain separated, but the layouts of the adult and children sides mirror one another.

Both sides have a general observation area, multi-purpose rooms and private consultation rooms.

On the side of the building, accessible by Seventh Street, there is a sally port, a dedicated entrance where first responders can bring patients and depart within 10 minutes – a design BestSelf officials observed during a tour of a crisis center in Arizona last year.

While the adult and children sides are separated, the BestResponse team of about 40 employees – including peer support specialists, targeted case managers, nursing staff and counselors – will be cross-trained to work with kids and adults, meaning staff will be able to pivot between both populations.

"One day, we might see primarily adults, and then the next day is kids, and we don't want to have just one team designated for either," Derry explained. "Everyone's going to be able to work with anyone that presents to the center."

When someone arrives at BestResponse, staff will assess the person's current mental health status, their immediate needs and personal goals.

"We anticipate individuals coming to the crisis center at various levels of need," said Kevin Beckman, vice president of Health Homes and Crisis Interventions at BestSelf. "Some will need individual monitoring. Some may need more supportive services."

The center will offer a range of services. That includes working with a person to identify short- and long-term recovery goals, engaging in cognitive behavioral therapy to help a person identify and modify negative thought patterns and behaviors, and participating in therapeutic peer activities such as games, coloring, journaling or small group sessions. As an intensive center, BestResponse also can prescribe and administer medications.

When a person is ready to be discharged, staff will collaborate with the person to plan activities and goals for the next day and will link them to community resources, support groups and outpatient services.

"As soon as the recipient walks through the door, we're really thinking about, 'What aftercare can we link this individual with to support them beyond the four walls of BestResponse?'" Derry said.

Working in the field since 2014, Derry has seen the gaps in the mental health system. A major challenge for years has been linking people to the appropriate care that matches the crisis they are experiencing.

"Too many individuals present to the hospital who do not need that level of care," said Derry, noting she has worked with many people who went to ECMC because there was no other option for them.

ECMC isn't complaining about the addition of another 24/7 mental health option in Western New York.

ECMC's Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program, or CPEP, can provide inpatient care and help patients at risk of harming themselves or others. But by virtue of its 24/7 operation, it often ends up as the landing spot for anyone experiencing a mental health crisis, even if a hospital is not the most appropriate setting for the patient's needs. Because it is busy, there are instances where it can take days for a patient to be seen by a psychiatrist.

Last year, CPEP reported total arrivals – both outpatient and admitted patients – of 10,041, which included 7,881 adults, 1,641 adolescents and 519 seniors, ECMC spokesperson Peter Cutler said. That was up from 9,698 patients in 2023 and 9,843 patients in 2022. For 2025, ECMC is expecting CPEP volume of 10,196 patients, Cutler added.

Andy Davis, ECMC president and chief operating officer, toured BestResponse in late October and said ECMC welcomes other services in the community that can take pressure off CPEP and also ensure that people are getting the care they need when and where they need it.

"We always push for us to be the last resort and that we can continue to have more services out in the community to take care of folks who are going through tough times, and that's what we want to advocate for," he said.

In her career, crisis has always piqued Derry's interest. She has always been one of the first people responding to help someone in crisis, willing to jump in, de-escalate a situation and stabilize a person to get them connected to appropriate services.

She was working as a clinical director at Spectrum Health & Human Services, overseeing counseling centers in South Buffalo and Springville, in summer 2022, when she heard that BestSelf was awarded millions of dollars in state funding to develop the intensive center.

She immediately knew she wanted to be a part of it. And when she found out her old supervisor at Spectrum, Beckman, was overseeing the project, she reached out to him to hear more about it.

"And so now we're here," said Derry, who started at BestSelf on Nov. 7, 2022.

More than three years later, Derry is ready to open BestResponse, and she believes there will be a lot of interest in the community in what the center is able to do, and not do.

Moving forward, Derry sees communication as key. That includes communicating with the state as BestResponse gets a feel for how people are presenting to the center and also regularly talking to first responders and outpatient providers on how they can all support each other.

What keeps Derry doing this kind of work is the opportunity to help people and let them know they're not alone. She wants to help them establish a voice and understand that asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

"I actually think asking for help is a sign of strength," she said, "because it's not easy to walk through a clinic door to say, 'Hey, this is what I'm struggling with,' and really open up to a stranger."