

'Game-changing' crisis center to open its doors in Buffalo

BY: JON HARRIS

A long-awaited facility to serve children, adolescents and adults experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis will open at 9 a.m. Thursday in Buffalo.

The opening of the BestResponse Intensive Crisis Stabilization Center, at 430 Niagara St., took more than three years to come to fruition. Local leaders hope it will be a game-changer for those in Western New York facing a crisis, but who previously had few options to seek the right level of help.

The center, operated by BestSelf Behavioral Health, will be open 24/7 and offer children and adults in crisis the ability to stay for up to 23 hours and 59 minutes and receive counseling, medication support and connections to follow-up care.

Area health officials hope the center will ensure people are getting services in the right setting. Its presence could redirect some patients away from costly and crowded hospital emergency departments and allow hospitals, such as Erie County Medical Center, to focus on patients who its facilities are better designed to help.

"For a long time, leaders across Western New York recognized a critical gap in care," BestSelf CEO Elizabeth Woike said. "When someone is in crisis, there were very few options outside of emergency rooms or inpatient settings, and not enough places specifically designed to meet people in that moment of crisis. The BestResponse crisis stabilization center was created to fill that gap."

Centers like this are being built across the state as part of an effort to overhaul the crisis response system. Robert Moon, deputy commissioner for the state Office of Mental Health, said there will eventually be 26 centers across the state – 13 intensive centers and 13 supportive crisis stabilization centers – and BestResponse is the seventh to open so far.

BestResponse, with 10,000 square feet of space, will serve five counties in Western New York and is expected to see about 4,000 patients a year.

Woike said the state provided startup and ongoing funding for the crisis center, which provides some stability at a time when federal support for mental health and addiction services is flimsy at best. Woike said BestResponse will bill commercial insurance companies and Medicaid, so the crisis center could become self-sustaining down the line.

Deputy Erie County Executive Lisa Chimera called the opening "game-changing."

"For somebody who has had a family member who has experienced mental health crises throughout their entire life, I always yearned for a place like this, a place where they could come and be supported," Chimera said.

The project fits into a larger effort of reimagining how behavioral health emergencies are handled in Western New York. Launched last year, the Crisis to Care Collaborative is a group of leaders trying to improve the crisis response system in Western New York.

"The opening of BestResponse is a meaningful step forward in achieving this vision," said Jane Mogavero, executive director of the Patrick P. Lee Foundation, a major supporter of the Crisis to Care Collaborative that also invested in BestResponse.

Officials from ECMC, which is also involved in the collaborative, said they are glad BestResponse will be an option for patients.

For 2025, ECMC's Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program, or CPEP, reported total arrivals – both outpatient and admitted patients – of 10,041, which included 7,881 adults, 1,641 adolescents and 519 seniors. 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.

"We are overwhelmed with behavioral health patients every single day," ECMC CEO Tom Quatroche said. "And we are very, very supportive of this intensive crisis center."