

The Editorial Board: Erie County's mental health situation has deep flaws, but work is being done to repair them

BY: BUFFALO NEWS EDITORIAL BOARD

There's an axiom that goes like this: "You can't manage what you don't measure." It applies to many fields of endeavor, from government to business. It's particularly important in mental health outcomes, which is why a report by the Crisis to Care Collaborative is so informative, useful and actionable.

The report's lead author, Mike Hogan, a former commissioner of the state Office of Mental Health, credited Crisis to Care Collaborative and its major supporter, the Patrick P. Lee Foundation, for not just undertaking this project but for bringing so many different agencies and committing to systematic changes.

The result? The key shortcoming of mental health care in Erie County is fragmentation – involving city, county and state agencies, in addition to nonprofits.

As The News' Jon Harris reported, the weaknesses the collaborative outlined run deep, rooted in the way things have been done for decades.

Report: Not enough staff, services available in Erie County for mental health crises

The Crisis to Care Collaborative on Tuesday released a report that analyzed Erie County's mental health crisis response system and will help guide future improvements.

For example, Crisis Services, which began operations in 1968, has a long-operated hotline to serve those experiencing a mental health crisis. In addition, it is the call center handling 988 calls that originate in Erie County. The work being done is invaluable. However, the report found more than 21,500 of calls made in 2024 – nearly 28% – went unanswered. It must be noted that many of these could have been callers who hung up in seconds and perhaps reached out later.

The report also found too few mobile crisis teams, although more resources are expected. Through the work of the Crisis to Care Collaborative, the Patrick P. Lee Foundation plans to provide support that will enable Crisis Services to just about double its number of mobile crisis teams over the next three years.

Another issue is high volume at Erie County Medical Center, which operates one of the state's busiest Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Programs. ECMC anticipates that the opening in late January of BestSelf Behavioral Health's BestResponse Intensive Crisis Center at 430 Niagara St. will ease this situation.

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

BestResponse Intensive Crisis Center, at 430 Niagara St., will be the intensive crisis center for five counties in Western New York and is expected to serve about 4,000 patients a year.

As Harris wrote in a separate story, BestResponse has been three years in the making, but is well worth the time invested, especially in terms of collaboration with other agencies. The center will operate 24/7, and serve as a place where children and adults experiencing a mental health or substance-use crisis can stay for up to 23 hours and 59 minutes and receive counseling, medication support and connections to follow-up care.

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

Careful attention to detail and sensitivity to both the client base of children and adults – separate entrances and separate interior space but with a staff that is cross-trained – should fill a gap in mental health services, while reducing costly emergency department admissions. ECMC's Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program, which is also a 24/7 operation, has been operating, safe to say, at overcapacity. Andy Davis, ECMC president and chief operating officer, who toured BestResponse in late October, was quoted welcoming other services in the community that can take pressure off CPEP. And, of course, ensure that people are getting the care they need in the environment in which they need it.

The report by the Crisis to Care Collaborative offers a much-needed comprehensive evaluation of the mental health services available with a view into what is working and what is not. BestResponse is a much-anticipated project that, when open, should go far toward repairing and strengthening the system.