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Hampstead Hospital acquisition to enhance state's mental health system

By **Catherine Robertson Souter**

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Cynthia Whitaker, Psy.D., NHPA past-president and president and CEO of Greater Nashua Mental Health

No plans in place to expand footprint

Mental health care in New Hampshire has had some major issues. Between long stays in emergency rooms waiting for a psychiatric bed to the second highest rate of opioid deaths in the country to accusations of inadequate funding for community-based services, the state has seen its once highly rated mental health system drop precipitously.

In 1990, New Hampshire was ranked second in the country for mental health care in a report commissioned by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI).

By 2006, NAMI's report gave the state a "D" rating, stating that "NH demonstrates how much funding can be cut in 16 years and how impermanent even exemplary service systems can be."

After a 10-year mental health plan was drafted in 2019, and somewhat sidetracked by the pandemic, New Hampshire is moving forward with of its key several components.

"It is such a delicate balance right now, initiating programs we know are going to have a positive impact while at the same time trying to manage the increased need for services amid staff shortages." -- Cynthia Whitaker, Psy.D, president and CEO of Greater Nashua Mental Health

In the past 10 months, the state has seen an expansion of its mental health mobile crisis teams, greater funding for community mental health centers, and the launch of a mental health crisis response line. In July, 2022, the state will introduce access to the national three-digit access number (9-8-8) for mental health crisis calls.

"Over the past several years, the department has made critical investments in strengthening the mental health system across the state," said Kathy Remillard, public information officer for the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services.

In February, the state announced the decision was made to purchase the 111-bed Hampstead Hospital, and transition all of the current beds exclusively to child and adolescent care.

"The acquisition of Hampstead is a long-term investment that will enhance and expand the state's mental health system," said Remillard.

Some stakeholders feel that, while the programs put into place are steps in the right direction, they will not necessarily solve all the state's mental health care problems.

"National studies recognize that the optimal supply ranges between 40 to 60 inpatient psychiatric beds per 100,000 population," said Cynthia

Whitaker, Psy.D, NHPA past-president and president and CEO of Greater Nashua Mental Health, one of the state's 10 community mental health centers. "Today, NH's average supply is 38 inpatient psychiatric beds per 100,000."

Although there are no plans in place expand the hospital's physical footprint, the purchase should increase available beds because, according to Remillard, the hospital had been operating at less than half of its full capacity.

"Once the state acquires the facility, the department will be working with a service provider to increase capacity," she said.

There is a sense of cautious hope and optimism around the state's response to mental health care, she added.

"There are a number of good things coming out of the 10-year plan that a lot of us did a lot of work on," said Whitaker. "It is great to see some of these things coming to fruition now. We are optimistic that the pieces being put into place are going to be successful,"

She added that there are areas where the state should be focusing to continue to improve the system, addressing workforce shortages, and increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates, for instance.

With pandemic-related demands and a workforce shortage, the timing is a little difficult but the changes are welcome.

"It is such a delicate balance right now, initiating programs we know are going to have a positive impact while at the same time trying to manage the increased need for services amid staff shortages," said Whitaker. "It is too soon to see it but I think it is going to have positive impact. We have a lot of output data right now but what we don't have yet is outcome data to understand if it is making a difference. It is too early to tell."