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Report to Readers: A four-day focus on the state’s troubled mental health system

By FELICE BELMAN

Sometimes it seems like Monitor journalists have been writing about the state of New Hampshire’s mental health system forever. And forever, it seems, patients and their advocates have been trying hard to get the attention of the public and politicians. Their message, year in and year out: The system is failing some of New Hampshire’s most vulnerable residents.

Nonetheless, this year feels dramatically different – which is why our news staff decided to focus renewed attention on the issue in the four-part series called “In Crisis” that begins on this morning’s front page.

What’s new? Three things:

- Conditions have deteriorated significantly, including both a shortage of community-based care that helps keep psychiatric patients out of the hospital and a shortage of beds at the hospital for those who need emergency attention. The impact is felt not only by patients and their loved ones but by institutions such as Concord Hospital, the Merrimack County jail and the state prison.
- New Hampshire is facing potentially costly legal lawsuits filed on behalf of psychiatric patients.
- Newly elected Gov. Maggie Hassan has pledged to begin rebuilding the system.

Today’s story looks at the current state of the mental health system, with a particular focus on how individual patients experiencing psychiatric emergencies – as well as those trying hard to avoid such crises – are treated. Over the next several days, we will trace the system’s trajectory from a national model for mental health care to one which the federal government recently declared “in crisis.” We will explore a new local alternative to jail for criminal suspects whose crimes were provoked by mental illness. And we will investigate the prospects of Hassan’s proposals for improving the system.

The stories in our series were researched and written by Sarah Palermo and Annmarie Timmins. The photographs are by Andrea Morales; the graphics are by Charlotte Thibault. But a project like this also involves the work of many behind-the-scenes actors, in this case editors Hans Schulz, Alexander Cohn, Clay Wirestone and Ric Tracewski. Additionally, in a small newsroom, the decision to give a few journalists significant time away from the demands of the daily newspaper necessarily meant that their colleagues were called upon to pick up the slack. As Hillary Clinton used to say, it takes a village.

I hope you’ll make the time to read the series. Mental health care – how to improve it and how to pay for it – is certain to be among the big topics state lawmakers wrestle with over the next several months. “In Crisis” should give readers the context they need to understand the consequences of their decisions. As always, let us know what you think.

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