SUFFERING IN SILENCE

Families hope Hochul's $1B plan can fix broken system

NEW YORK'S MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

David Robinson

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An emotional mix of guilt, shame and fear gripped Sara Taylor each time she considered calling police to help resolve her 11-year-old daughter's mental health crisis. As a Black woman, she knew responding officers may hold some form of racial bias and be ill-equipped to handle the high-stakes interaction at their Rochester home.

But Taylor had no choice, she said, because New York's mental health system had failed them.

Cycling in and out of psychiatric emergency rooms, they often spent hours awaiting a doctor's evaluation, only to be dismissed as a behavioral issue and sent home to await the next crisis.

Feeling helpless, Taylor found herself dialing 911 a total of six times for mental hygiene arrests of her daughter in recent years. Instead of a patient, her daughter was treated like a criminal, Taylor said.

"The level of trauma and pressure that puts on the family is devastating," she added.

Sara Taylor's problems getting adequate mental health care for her daughter prompted her to found the BIPOC PEEEEEEK Mental Health project, which seeks to improve mental health care in communities of color in Rochester, Buffalo and Syracuse.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE /ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

These types of stories, however, appeared to reach Gov. Kathy Hochul, who last week revealed a $1 billon plan to fix New York's mental health system.

"The barriers are seemingly endless," Hochul said, detailing mental health care deserts, insurance coverage gaps and long waits for psychiatric hospital beds during her State of the State address.

"As a result, people have been forced to suffer in silence," she said. "Illness grows when it isn't treated. And so, it is no surprise that the number of people suffering from mental illness has continued to grow."

How bad are mental health ER waits in NY?

Taylor's harrowing experience is far from rare, as New York ranks 10th-worst nationally in terms of longest emergency room wait times for mental health patients, a USA TODAY Network analysis of federal data found.

On average, New York psychiatric patients spent five and half hours in emergency rooms per visit in 2021. Some of the longest waits across the Finger Lakes, Hudson Valley, Southern Tier, and Mohawk Valley stretched up to 12 hours, the data show.

Advocates and patients have also reported monthslong waits for access to residential psychiatric programs,

some of them forced to travel hundreds of miles for a bed. They've described spending days in hospital wards without the proper level of mental health care.

One of them is Jenn O'Connor, who spent countless hours sitting in emergency rooms with her teenage daughter, awaiting her psychiatric placement during suicidal episodes that benefited little from the constant medical alarms, glaring lights and chaos of the ER.

At one point, the teen was placed at Four Winds Hospital, an inpatient psychiatric facility in White Plains, about a two-hour drive from the family's home in the Albany region.

Unable to visit her daughter for up to a week at a time due to work and logistical challenges, O'Connor, director of policy at Prevent Child Abuse NY, recounted her sleepless nights and traumatic phone calls during the days apart from her daughter.

"That distance damages a relationship and makes it very, very difficult for everyone," she said.

How will NY officials act on mental health crisis?

Hochul's plan, in part, calls for adding 1,000 inpatient psychiatric beds to the system, as well as other measures aimed at shoring up services, outpatient care and housing for mental health patients.

But the plan, so far, lacks key details about addressing issues such as inequality and racial disparity in mental health, as well as acute bed shortages for children and rural communities, advocates and health leaders say.

Hospital leaders also raised concerns about Hochul's plan to issue $2,000 fines per day for hospitals that fail to re-open psychiatric beds closed during the pandemic, citing the ongoing struggles in some communities to handle rising patient loads, staffing shortages and budget shortfalls.

"I'd like to see more of a carrot approach where funding is provided if there are beds closed," said Kathy Parrinello, chief operating officer at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester.

Debate over Hochul's push to reverse decades of disinvestment in mental health care will be part of the state budget process, which typically ends in early April.

Data on waits for psychiatric beds unclear in NY

Yet, strikingly, specific wait-times for mental health patients to access inpatient psychiatric beds remain unclear because that data is not tracked, according to state officials.

In response to USA TODAY Network questions about the issue, state Office of Mental Health officials said recently that they plan to create a "new reporting system, which will increase accountability and oversight to ensure consistent and accurate hospital reporting" on inpatient psychiatric bed wait times.

The move comes after a prior state system launched with a $150,000 federal grant in 2019 to help reduce psychiatric bed wait times, in fact, did not track wait times. Instead, it required hospitals to report psychiatric bed availability twice daily before being shelved in 2020 due to pandemic demands taking priority, state records and official statements show.

Matthew Shapiro, senior director at National Alliance on Mental Illness-New York State, described accessing psychiatric services as quickly as possible as a "key component to recovery."

"This is especially true when one's condition is serious enough to require hospitalization," he said. "The fact that there does not seem to be sharable data to demonstrate the true enormity of this issue is disappointing."

What we know about NY mental health failures

Still, the systemic failures in New York's approach to mental health, in some ways, are revealed through the information that is publicly available.

The access and affordability gaps, for example, left 911,000 adult New Yorkers who reported unmet need for mental health treatment in 2019, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation analysis.

Put another way, about 6% of adults ages 18 and above lack essential mental health care, which is slightly below the national unmet need average rate of 7.4%.

The pain and suffering caused by untreated mental illness is most acute for parents and caregivers of

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By the numbers

• The

percentage of children who have anxiety or depression

in New York grew from 8.9% in

2016 to 10.9% in 2020, a **22.5% increase.**

• Within the first three months of the pandemic's initial wave, **more than 4,000 New York kids lost a parent** to COVID-19.

• A total of **325,000 kids were pushed into or near poverty** due to the pandemic's economic fallout in New York in early 2020.

• **Death by suicide is the second-leading cause of death**

for New York 15- to 19-year-olds.

• **About 55% of children** in New York with a mental or behavioral condition **had unmet needs for treatment** or counseling. Source: Campaign for Healthy Minds Healthy Kids

Advocates for people with mental illnesses protest New York City Mayor Eric Adams' plan to force people from the streets and into mental health treatment in New York, Dec. 7. JULIA NIKHINSON/AP