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**Lawmakers propose multimillion-dollar plan for DCYF, mental health system**

**By DAVE SOLOMON**

CONCORD - A bill that initially only required the Department of Health and Human Services to develop a 10-year plan for the state's mental health system is about to become the vehicle for a multimillion-dollar overhaul of New Hampshire's mental health and child protection services. Many of the initiatives that have been talked about for the past year regarding increasing beds for mental health patients and revitalizing the Division for Children, Youth and Families will come off the drawing board and into reality if an amendment to be introduced on Tuesday by Sen. Jeb Bradley, R-Wolfeboro, becomes law.

Although final costs have yet to be determined, Bradley says initial estimates for the proposals have come in at around \$6 million in the first year. If the measure passes the House and Senate, the money would be included in the two-year budget for 2018-19 currently being drafted in the Senate Finance Committee, according to Bradley, who attributed the initiative to Senate President Chuck Morse.

Bradley said lawmakers are reacting to seemingly endless reports of mental health patients being warehoused in hospital emergency rooms and dysfunction at the DCYF. "Sen. Morse has said, 'It's time to solve this problem,'" said Bradley on Friday. "It's his leadership, although we've worked with (DHHS) Commissioner (Jeffrey) Meyers and Gov. (Chris) Sununu. Both have been very supportive."

**Mental health initiatives**

On the mental health front, the proposal calls for:

- an additional 20 beds at so-called "designated receiving facilities" for mental health patients, which in the past have often been local hospitals
- up to 40 new transitional and community-based residential beds with "wrap-around services and supports for individuals being discharged from the state psychiatric hospital or designated receiving facilities"
- up to eight new "respite beds" at peer support and recovery agencies throughout the state
- a fourth mobile crisis team with apartments for them to use in crisis conditions, in addition to the three teams already in place or under development
- creation of an "integrated data management system" that will provide real-time information about the availability of involuntary and voluntary inpatient psychiatric beds throughout the state
- an independent evaluation of the capacity of the current mental health system in the state to respond to inpatient, acute care psychiatric needs

## DCYF investments

On the child protection front, the proposal calls for:

- another independent review of the DCYF, with a report completed no later than Nov. 1, 2019
- creation of the Office of Child Advocate, to provide independent oversight of DCYF
- creation of an Oversight Commission on Children's Services and Juvenile Justice
- rewording of the state's Child Protection Act to establish as its primary purpose "protection of children whose life, health or welfare is endangered," while moving protection of parental rights to the secondary purpose of the act (the two goals now share equal prominence)
- allowing "evidence of prior founded or unfounded reports of abuse or neglect" as admissible in child protection legal proceedings.

## Costs to be determined

"The dollar amounts will not be in the amendment that's out on Tuesday," said Bradley. "We're still pricing it out with Health and Human Services and the Legislative Budget Assistant. But the tentative number is about \$6 million in the first year." Bradley said the hope is to provide the funding as an appropriation in the 2018-19 budget. "It's going to have to get scrubbed by the Finance Committee, so we'll have to add it in with all the other priorities in the budget," he said. "This is a proposal. Some pieces may look a little different when the process is done, but we are committed to adding beds and adding capacity."

The concept in the mental health arena is to ease the pressure on New Hampshire Hospital by creating more community-based beds, which are less costly to start up and maintain. The proposal will be presented as an amendment to HB 400, which started as a request for a long-range mental health plan.

Gov. Sununu made passing reference to the proposal after a tour of the Concord Hospital Emergency Room on Friday. "We are looking at ways to get funding out there, and looking at a long-term redesign and engineering of our mental health system to meet 21st century needs," he told a group of reporters gathered after the tour. "I give a lot of credit to senators Morse and Bradley," he said. "They see the issue as seriously as I do."