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Bradley: New price tag on mental health, DCYF initiatives is \$20M

Weighing in: "Problems in our mental health system can't be ignored any longer," said Gov. Chris Sununu.

By DAVE SOLOMON State House Bureau

CONCORD — A wide-ranging proposal to increase the number of mental health beds and improve services at the Division for Children, Youth and Families was presented at a public hearing Tuesday by state Sen. Jeb Bradley with an estimated price tag of nearly \$20 million over a two-year period. Gov. Chris Sununu and Senate President Chuck Morse made a joint appearance to testify on behalf of the measure, which was first revealed on Friday after Sununu toured Concord Hospital to see first-hand the conditions in emergency rooms where patients often line the hallways waiting for admission to the state psychiatric hospital. Sununu said the situation has grown so severe that the ideas presented "are not options, they are mandates."

"Problems in our mental health system can't be ignored any longer," he said. In the mental health area, the proposal calls for an additional 20 mental health beds outside of New Hampshire Hospital; up to 40 community-based residential beds; eight new "respite beds" at peer support and recovery agencies and a fourth mobile crisis team.

Regarding DCYF, the plan calls for creating the Office of Child Advocate and an Oversight Commission on Children's Services and Juvenile Justice, along with changes to the state's child protection statutes. Bradley presented estimated costs for each initiative, adding up to \$9.4 million in the first year of the next biennial budget, and \$10.2 million in the second year, and that does not include the cost of a child advocate office or a new data management system proposed for DCYF. Bradley on Friday said preliminary estimates put the price tag at about \$6 million a year, but presented the new numbers based on more research by DHHS Commissioner Jeffrey Meyers, who said he would also submit a capital budget request for more mental health beds to serve children at New Hampshire Hospital.

Additional caseworkers and supervisors at DCYF are not included in the Bradley-Morse amendment, but are included in Sununu's budget now working its way through the Senate. It all adds up to a heavy investment in mental health and child protective services that speaker after speaker at Tuesday's hearing said is long overdue given the ongoing crisis at DCYF and the backlog of mental health patients occupying emergency room beds. "A wait list at New Hampshire Hospital is not new, in fact it is something we have seen for the past several years," said Steve Ahnen, president of the New Hampshire Hospital Association. "It's not been uncommon over the past several months for 40-60 patients waiting on the list for a bed at New Hampshire Hospital."

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Senate panel considers plan to add mental health beds

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

Supporters of a plan to significantly increase the number of psychiatric treatment beds in the state called it a giant leap forward in addressing a growing crisis. As the number of mental health treatment beds has dropped over the last decade due to budget cuts, a workforce shortage and other factors, the number of people waiting, sometimes in emergency room corridors, for beds at the state psychiatric

hospital has increased. On Tuesday, that number was 19 adults and two children, but in March, the daily average was 46 adults and four children, said Ken Norton, executive director of the New Hampshire chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

“In a word, I would say it’s dehumanizing, for the individuals who go through that as well as for their families and for the staff that are forced into situations where they’re not able to provide effective treatment,” he said. “It’s wrong medically, it’s wrong legally, it’s wrong ethically, it’s wrong morally, it’s wrong economically and it’s time we move forward to do something about it.” The plan before the Senate Health and Human Services Committee on Tuesday would require the state to contract with private hospitals and nonprofit facilities to set up 68 new beds. Twenty of them would be for those subject to involuntary admission, 40 would be community-based beds to help people transition from New Hampshire Hospital and eight would be peer respite beds for those caring for patients.

Sen. Jeb Bradley, R-Wolfeboro, estimated the total cost at \$9.2 million. The plan has the backing of state health officials and Republican Gov. Chris Sununu, who toured the Concord Hospital emergency department last week. “They’re not options – what we have before us today are mandates,” Sununu told the Senate committee on Tuesday. “Being able to go to the front lines ... and seeing the severity of this issue has been eye-opening.”

Department of Health and Human Services Commissioner Jeffrey Meyers said the transitional beds included in the plan are particularly important because at any given time there are more than a dozen long-term patients at New Hampshire Hospital who could be discharged but lack housing and the supportive services. While supportive of the plan, Meyers said capacity at the state hospital also should be increased. The department will be seeking funding to draw up plans for a separate facility for children, who are now treated in units that were designed for adults. Moving the children to a stand-alone facility would free up 24 adult beds. “We are built out at New Hampshire Hospital,” Meyers said. “There is no other space that could be used for inpatient treatment.” The state had been working to improve its mental health services since settling a federal lawsuit over inadequate care in late 2013.