

Concord Monitor - April 27, 2017

Plan in the works to build children's wing at N.H. mental hospital

By ALLIE MORRIS

The state's psychiatric hospital in Concord may soon be expanding. The Department of Health and Human Services plans to seek \$3 million this year to begin drawing up designs for a new children's unit at New Hampshire Hospital, which often has a long waitlist for entry.

Shifting adolescent patients into a new building or wing would free up as many as 48 beds for adults, according to department Commissioner Jeffrey Meyers. "It's more appropriate to have kids in a new unit," Meyers told a Senate health committee this week. "If we are going to address long-term the need for inpatient capacity, then we should focus on how we can appropriately move the kids into a new facility and open up the ability to increase capacity at New Hampshire Hospital."

The state is struggling to deal with a mental health crisis, as dozens of patients are often forced to wait days or weeks in hospital emergency rooms for beds to open at the state hospital. Over the last decade, the bed count at New Hampshire Hospital has declined from more than 200 to roughly 160 now. While health professionals suggest states should have at least 40 to 50 psychiatric beds per 100,000 people, New Hampshire has just 11.9 beds per 100,000.

A bill proposed by Republican Sen. Jeb Bradley would vastly expand the number of community mental health beds, but Meyers said an expansion at the state hospital is needed to truly address the problem. Since no more space in the existing building can be converted into treatment beds, Meyers said a new wing or a separate building needs to be constructed. Meyers plans to ask the Senate Capital Budget Committee in May for money to cover engineering and architectural work, he said. Without designs, the construction costs of a new building are unknown. A similar plan floated in 2000 was projected to cost upward of \$12 million, Meyers said.

Children didn't always share the state psychiatric hospital with adults. Before 2010, patients under age 14 were admitted to a separate building on the grounds, the Anna Philbrook Center. But the outdated facility was shuttered seven years ago in a round of state budget cuts. Children were relocated into an existing wing of the main hospital building. The transition resulted in a loss of beds because unlike adults, the children, ranging from age 4 to 18, couldn't share the double rooms.