

Clinic to Start Dispensing Methadone

It's been two months since Catholic Health opened an addictions clinic in Amherst to expand access to counseling and treatment.

What's been missing at the office on John Glenn Drive is methadone, but that will change in mid-October when the clinic begins dispensing the treatment. Methadone caused so much public debate and objection that a previous site plan was scuttled and the clinic was delayed by more than a year.

Blame IT, not community issues, for the delay this time, said John Sperrazza, COO of Sisters of Charity Hospital, which operates Sisters Health Center Amherst.

The hospital has been implementing an electronic medical record system that includes clinical documentation and an electronic dispensing system for methadone, which pumps out the exact dose and concentration of medication for each patient.

"It's a system that reduces human error and ensures that every patient is getting the appropriate dose. It also tracks inventory, right down to the drop," he said.

That's important since controlled substances such as methadone are highly regulated by U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, state Department of Health and the Office for Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services.

It's an expansion officials say is sorely needed. Erie County saw 96 confirmed and 86 suspected opioid overdoses in 2018 through mid-September. When plans for the expanded clinic were announced, the region was reporting a death every day.

Mark Sullivan, CEO of Catholic Health, said the system was determined to get the clinic open and had the support of county officials.

"They said, please don't give up on this. Do what's right for the community at maybe the expense of the ego of the organization," Sullivan said. "We were a little bruised from working with the town, but with the opioid challenge in Western New York, when we open that center it will be an amazing feat."

Methadone only will be provided to a portion of the patients coming to the facility. Most will come for outpatient counseling, substance abuse treatment and recovery services including alcoholism and other non-opiate addictions. About 30 patients receive buprenorphine or suboxone.

Adding methadone will enable about 50 patients to transfer to the John Glenn site from the hospital's clinic on Holden Street in Buffalo. That should reduce volume at the downtown site from about 950.

In Amherst, patient volume is expected to grow to about 150 by mid-2019. The program has a capacity of 500. Another 290 patients receive opiate addiction treatment at a third site in Rochester. Catholic Health sees the most medication-assisted treatment patients outside New York City.

Having a third site expands patient access, Sperrazza said.

"It's based on where people live," he said. "We're not forcing them to move to Amherst if they're comfortable with their counselor and group setting, but there are folks who rely on public transportation. This gives patients a choice."