

‘The Need Is So Great’: Mental Health Services a Priority, Ulster Executive Says

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Ulster County Judge Brian Rounds speaks during a hearing for John Arceri Thursday, Feb. 2024. (Tania Barricklo/Daily Freeman)

KINGSTON, N.Y. — During a recent court proceeding, Ulster County Judge Bryan Rounds criticized county leaders for failing to provide adequate services to those who suffer from mental illness.

His remarks — in which he questioned why a county as wealthy as Ulster could lack the services its most vulnerable population desperately needs — came as he sentenced John Arceri, a 29-year-old Kingston man with a long history of mental illness to 18 years in state prison for strangling his father. Arceri, who had a long history of mental illness, had been taken to the Hudson Valley Health Alliance Hospital by Kingston police under New York State Mental Health Law the night before and had been visited by the county’s Mobile Mental Health unit just minutes before he killed his father.

During a recent interview, Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger agreed that there is a need for more mental health services, but she rejected any notion that the county has ignored the problem or been lax in providing

those services, saying that over the past several years, Ulster County has taken giant steps to improve both those services and access to them.

“We have been working very hard to expand our mental health generally because the need is so great,” Metzger said. “We’ve really prioritized our services.”

As part of her 2024 State of the County Address, Metzger announced a series of initiatives designed to ramp up its mental health services in response to what she said was a spike in crisis calls since 2020.

Chief among those initiatives is the creation of the Ulster County Center for Well-Being at 368 Broadway, described as an integrative model of mental health and wellness services in Kingston. The center will house [the county’s Crisis Stabilization Center](#), which, when completed later this year, will provide 24/7 crisis services for both youth and adults as well as provide a space where non-profit partners will provide walk-in mental health care and outpatient substance use disorder treatment. [Two new family and child mental health clinics recently opened in the county](#) and there is also a day program for those seeking mental health services.

Additionally, she said, the county Department of Mental Health oversees a “Single Point of Access” process that links residents to varying levels of case management and peer services for youth and adults.

And recently, Metzger said, the county approved grant funding to enable the Sheriff’s Office to hire a mental health clinician for its [Support and Advocacy through Frontline Engagement \(SAFE\)](#) initiative, to educate law enforcement officials with “crisis intervention team training” and work to connect those with whom deputies come in contact with to the mental health and substance abuse services they need.



Ulster County Sheriff’s Director of Community & Incarcerated Services Juanita Hotchkiss talks about the \$400k Community Orientated Police Services (COPS) grant awarded by the United States Department of Justice to the Sheriff’s department which will establish a behavioral health co-response team fully imbedded in law enforcement. The team will be known as the Support and Advocacy through Frontline Engagement (SAFE) Team. Hotchkiss, along with, from left, U.S. Rep. Pat Ryan, Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger, Ulster County Sheriff Lieutenant Chad Storey, Ulster County Sheriff Juan Figueroa, Ulster County Commissioner of Mental Health Tara McDonald, and

Ulster County Legislator and Deputy Chairwoman of Law Enforcement and Public Safety Gina Hansut. The grant was announced Tuesday, Nov. 21, 2023 at the Ulster County Law Enforcement Center in Kingston.

Key to the success of any of those programs, though, is the willingness of the individual to accept the help offered, she said, adding that sometimes, that can be the most difficult obstacle to overcome.

“People with serious, serious mental health disorders, they don’t necessarily accept treatment and they don’t necessarily want to take their medications,” Metzger said. “Ultimately, it’s often up to the individual to seek the treatment they need.”

“It takes the willing participation of the individual, without getting into a criminal circumstance,” said Ulster County District Attorney Emmanuel Nneji. “It’s a difficult and intractable problem. You can’t just see somebody and take them off the street because they have a mental health problem.”

Nneji said it’s his policy to always consider the mental health of individuals charged with crimes.

"We are looking at each and every case where (mental illness) is a potential issue," Nneji said, adding that they often reach out to an individual's defense attorney to see if they can resolve those cases in a manner that will afford the individual the opportunity for treatment.

"By and large it's understood these people would not have committed the crimes or the conduct they had engaged in had their mental capacity been right," said Nneji. "The crimes are presumed, at least to me, to have been inspired by mental illness."

Still, he said, it is always up to the defense attorney to decide whether to raise a mental illness defense, since under state law a finding of not responsible by reason of mental disease or defect could result in an individual being sent to a secure psychiatric facility until they are deemed no longer dangerously mentally ill, which could be for the rest of the person's life.

If, on the other hand, an individual rejects a mental illness plea and instead pleads guilty to the charge or pleads guilty but under extreme emotional disturbance, they are sentenced to a prison term that has a release date.

Such was the case with Arceri, who pleaded guilty due to extreme emotional disturbance and was sent to state prison for 18 years, where, Rounds said, it is unlikely he will get the psychiatric help he needs. That sentence was in sharp contrast to the one Rounds handed down to Brian Roberts, 26, of Lake Katrine, who was charged with murder for bludgeoning his father to death. Because Roberts, who also had a long history of mental illness, pleaded not responsible by reason of mental disease or defect, Rounds ordered that Roberts be confined to a secure psychiatric facility, where he will receive the treatment he needs but where he will remain unless psychiatrists determine he is no longer dangerously mentally ill, which could be indefinitely.

While there are few options available to the court system for those charged with the most serious of crimes, there is more leeway in dealing with individuals who commit lower-level offenses, and it is there, Nneji said, his office can have an impact.

Administrative Assistant District Attorney Sajaa Ahmed said the county Department of Mental Health has a social worker assigned to Kingston City Court and to Ulster Town Court who works with the District Attorney's Office, defense attorneys and the Department of Probation to connect the individual struggling with mental health needs with available services. Oftentimes, she said, the local judges will require the individual to participate in mental health programs or take their medications as part of the sentence.

"I think they are moving in the direction that we need to go. Is it fast enough? Is it enough? It's a vast county," she said.

"We're doing what we can with the resources we have available," agreed Nneji.