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Ulster County Legislature Approves Children's Mental Health Clinics in Kingston, Ellenville



The Ulster County Center for Well-Being at 368 Broadway in Kingston, NY. Photo taken Thursday, April 4, 2024 (Tania Barricklo/Daily Freeman)

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KINGSTON, N.Y. — Ulster County lawmakers voted 17-5 to approve creating children's mental health clinics in Kingston and Ellenville this week after a motion seeking to delay the vote was narrowly defeated.

County Executive Jen Metzger said the two locations would be at the new Ulster County Center for Well-Being at 368 Broadway and the Trudy Resnick Farber Building at 50 Center St. in Ellenville. The vote authorizes the county to use \$700,000 in American Rescue Plan Act funding to run the program. Metzger has said the program will later be sustained through health insurance payments from Medicaid and private insurers.

Metzger said a request for proposals will be issued to non-profit providers in early May to run the clinic. She expects the RFP process to last about two months. Metzger has said the center could open this year.

"I am thrilled that the Legislature has overwhelmingly approved our proposal to create two new clinics to serve children and families," Metzger said in an email Friday. "It's so important for us to truly recognize and respond to the growing need for mental health supports for our youth, and the addition of these clinics will enable us to help up to 1,200 young people in our county annually."

Planned services include diagnostic assessments, individual and family therapy, medication management and crisis intervention, Metzger said.

While lawmakers agreed about an acute need for children's mental healthcare, the choice of Kingston and Ellenville for the locations divided the legislature and nearly led lawmakers to delay voting on the plan to study alternative locations.

The measure to delay the vote, brought forth by Gina Hansut, R-Marlborough, was narrowly defeated as Deputy Majority Leader Aaron Levine, D-Saugerties, cast the decisive vote that led to an 11-11 tie. Herb Litts, R-Plattekill, was absent from the proceedings.

In calling for the delay in releasing the funds, Hansut said children shouldn't be subjected to people enduring mental health crises and people in active drug situations seeking harm-reduction strategies, citing the presence of adult mental health services and Samadhi's Kingston outpatient clinic at the 368 Broadway location.

"I believe we should take a little more time to find a safer more family-friendly location for our constituents, especially our youth," she said. "I think we can do better and we have the time."

Hansut's concerns were echoed by Legislators Joseph Maloney, D-Saugerties; Eric Kitchen, R-town of Ulster; and Chris Hewitt, D-Rochester, during a lengthy discussion where lawmakers debated on whether to delay the vote.

In her email, Metzger explained the county's decision to locate the Kingston location on the third floor of the Center for Well-Being and what security protocols will be in place.

"The space is available and already configured as a clinic, and using it for this purpose would align with our goals of creating a one-stop location with services spanning the full continuum of behavioral health care needs," Metzger said.

Metzger addressed concerns about locating the Children's Mental Health Clinic in the same building as adult services. She noted that two of the county's partners, ACCESS Supports for Living and Samadhi, have successfully worked in collaboration for two years on the second floor of the Center for Well-Being providing "essential services" to both youngsters and adults.

"It is also important to note that our proposed clinic on the third floor will be state-licensed which means the layout, security measures, and access will need to be approved by State regulators prior to getting a license," Metzger added.

Metzger said security from the Ulster County Sheriff's Office will be onsite 24/7 to "ensure a safe environment for all clients and staff at the Center for Well-being," before the Crisis Stabilization Center opens on the first floor.

Legislator Limina Grace Harmon, D-New Paltz, said she believes the two clinics offer one solution the county can do now with the available money. She emphasized this does not preclude the county from seeking other solutions going forward.

Metzger echoed that stance in her email. "Providers who choose to submit proposals can offer alternative locations elsewhere in the county, and we will consider them," she said.

Metzger has said anxiety and depression are both very common amongst young people and can hurt children's achievement in school. Over the years, teachers have told officials anxiety and depression are the number one challenge they're seeing in the classroom, she added.

The program will build on the county's Mental Health in Schools Program, which provides clinical support to middle school students in every school district in the county. Metzger said that program is also funded by ARPA funding.

Metzger said previously the clinics will operate year-round, not just when school is in session. They will need to have flexible hours to best serve youngsters and their families.

"As I've often stated, it is a major priority of my administration to address the gaps in our system of care for mental health and substance use disorder, and I want to thank the Legislature for recognizing and affirming the importance of mental health for youth and families," Metzger said.