

Mental Health Clinic for Children and Teens Opens In Suffolk



Northwell Health has opened a pediatric mental health clinic in Commack, the first facility in Suffolk County.

By Lisa L. Colangelo

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Prompted by a growing need for mental health services for children and adolescents, Northwell Health has opened a pediatric behavioral urgent care center in conjunction with local school districts, its first in Suffolk County and third on Long Island.

The outpatient facility, located in Commack, will provide evaluations, referrals and short-term treatment including medication for young patients while helping connect them with a longer-term plan for care, officials said.

Services are available to students from Commack, Half Hollow Hills, Hauppauge, Sachem Central, Smithtown Central and South Huntington. Clinicians from the center will also provide support and training for staff at those school districts. Northwell has opened two other pediatric behavioral care centers in Nassau County since 2020.

Parents across the nation have been struggling to find and afford available mental health resources for children and teens, at a time when more and more of them are exhibiting signs of anxiety and depression. Experts have said some of the causes include isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed and activities were suspended.

“Many parents know their child needs help but they haven’t been able to find anybody,” said Dr. Vera Feuer, director of emergency psychiatry at Northwell’s Cohen Children’s Medical Center in New Hyde

Park. "We are a place where they can get started, have a psychiatric assessment and outline what the treatment plan would be and what the needs are."

Feuer said the mental health system is complex and can be daunting for parents to navigate at a time when their child needs help.

"We have care management coordinators and our counselors will help support families to get what they need for their kids," she said.

Feuer said some parents of children in mental health crisis were taking them to hospital emergency rooms because they didn't know where else to go.

"That is not the ideal place for engagement of mental health care," she said, except for cases where the child has a medical need, has consumed drugs or is acting out violently. "Oftentimes it does not really yield a connection to ongoing care."

Northwell opened two behavioral health urgent care centers in Nassau County with local school districts — one in Rockville Centre in early 2020 and a second in Mineola in 2021. The two sites have served over 3,400 students to date, officials said.

Services at all three locations are only available to students in those school districts

School districts will pay between \$69,225 and \$95,850 per year depending on eligible students, according to a contract between Northwell and Western Suffolk BOCES.

Referrals to the center will come from the schools but parents can also seek out services on their own. Those with insurance will be charged but officials said families without insurance will not be turned away.

"Our district is fortunate to have comprehensive pupil personnel teams at each building to intervene and respond to students with varying social, emotional, and behavioral needs," April Propilo, South Huntington's Assistant Superintendent of Student Services said in a statement. "This partnership will complement and enhance our existing continuum of mental health services through a coordinated care approach."