

Bizzari: County Legislators Should Tweak Mental Health Oversight Plan



Cayuga County Director of Community Services Ray Bizzari speaks during a graduation for crisis intervention training in 2015.

Ray Bizzari

The Cayuga County Legislature, for its Oct. 26 meeting, will hold a public hearing on a proposed local law related to me leaving my current position as your director of community services in January 2022 to pursue opportunities elsewhere.

The current DCS position oversees the Departments of Social Services and Mental Health. Just four other counties in NYS are structured this way. Part of the proposed local law splits the current position into a Commissioner of Social Services and Director of Community Services. These separate positions, created in statute, are endowed with certain powers that are discharged via operational oversight to staff that work in highly regulated, complex environments. With a combined budget of \$47 million and 200 employees, both departments need and require full-time leadership. Much has changed in those departments since my 2014 appointment to lead both so I support this part of the proposal because it provides for proper full-time leadership which, in the end, best serves our county's residents. Because of various reimbursements, this staffing pattern has little financial impact to taxpayers.

However, there is a part of the proposed local law that is concerning. One part of the proposal is to hire a director of county mental health and a separate DCS. In this proposal, the DCS has no supervision or oversight over department staff which is contrary to past and current practice here and in every other county that operates a clinic. It is unnecessarily expensive as it is an additional position, is unworkable and will be less effective.

DCS's have many statutory responsibilities. Chief among them is advocacy and building, expanding and increasing access to the behavioral health system that serves folks with mental health, substance abuse and developmental disability treatment needs. The county clinic has had years of financial stability (no local tax dollars in operations) and is a leader in providing services in the community. We've had to expand our work into the fields of substance abuse and psychiatric treatment of folks with developmental disabilities to try and meet those ongoing, unmet needs. Working alongside a dedicated leadership team, we've accomplished some good things for the community: same day/walk in appointments, adequate child and adult psychiatry, unprecedented investment in, and oversight to the system and the list goes on. While we've accomplished much, there is still so much more to do.

This proposed uncoupling of the DCS from its role in department oversight, supervision and resource deployment will have a consequential, detrimental impact on services at a time where the pandemic has reminded us of the value of high quality, accessible behavioral health services. There's a good reason why you won't find this staffing pattern in counties that run clinics because it makes no sense that the DCS has no control over the very services and resources they need to deploy to do the job of trying to meet community need. It should be stripped from the proposed local law before it is enacted.

This opinion is informed by over 20 years in behavioral health local, regional and statewide leadership positions. I've enjoyed working to make this community a better place and consider the last 10 years of my career working with staff at both departments to be the high point of my career. My interest is that current efforts are sustained, new opportunities are identified that can make continued improvements to the system and the new DCS has, at their disposal, all the tools they need to succeed. My hope is that the Legislature recognizes this and makes the right decision.

Ray Bizzari is Cayuga County Director of Community Services