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Ulster County to Fund New Rehab Center

News By Steve Ellman



Courtesy

KINGSTON - Back in April, the Ulster County legislature was rocked by the shut down of Samadhi, a Saugerties rehab center with county contracts that fell apart in a cloud of ugly financial questions. Now, they've agreed to sign off on a similar project, intending to open a rehab somewhere in Kingston. However, the new one comes with a track record Samadhi lacked.



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Samadhi did not lack for critics, primarily among the legislature's Republican minority caucus, and when the critics were proved right the whole body had to acknowledge they'd been burned. Yet when the proposal to plunk down \$225,000 towards startup costs for Oxford House came to a vote, it passed unanimously with Legislator Gina Hansut, a Republican representing the towns of Lloyd and Marlborough, leading the charge.

Now in its 50th year, Oxford House was born out of necessity when a Maryland halfway house closed and the residents rented the house themselves and organized its program. It has since grown to some 3,500 houses in the United States housing some 24,000 individuals for months or years, as long as they are clean and sober. One strike and you're out.

As Mental Health Commissioner Tara McDonald described it to the legislature's Health, Human Services and Human Rights Committee in June, "Oxford House is completely peer-run. There's no staff. Individuals utilize their own resources in order to live there. It is a democratized type of a setting. So, they run all of the housing decisions."

The \$225,000 comes from the county's share of money from the national class action lawsuit against the Big Pharma companies that made and distributed Oxycontin and other opioid painkiller drugs, fueling the prescription drug abuse crisis.

"This is not paying for the housing itself," McDonald explained. "It's paying for the housing specialist to do the actual site selection, the ramp up for the furniture and everything that's needed, and then it runs on its own.



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...What we're asking them to do is two houses within Ulster County. We're again doing a behavioral health needs assessment. So it all depends on two things. One, where can they find the housing that's large enough, that is affordable to do at the very minimum, eight bedrooms. And then where does our needs assessment say that it would be best to place the houses.”

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The legislature's minority caucus split on the proposal when it came before the Ways and Means Committee later in June. Hansut and Legislator Jason Kovacs (R-Town of Ulster) voted for it, Minority Leader Kevin Roberts (R-Town of Plattekill) opposed, kicking off a brief discussion by asking, “Where’s the money for this coming from?”

Deputy County Executive James Amenta assured Roberts that “once everything is up and running, they won't receive ongoing support” and described the facility as “a model where tenants kind of live collectively. They split rent between themselves... control it themselves. It's like a democratically run space.”

“Sounds like a paradise,” Roberts quipped before voting no.

Roberts had a change of heart, however, when the proposal came before the Legislature June 17 and passed without opposition, including all minority caucus members except Joe Maloney of Saugerties, who was absent. Roberts credited Legislator Hansut for changing his mind on the vote.

“There's a lot of chatter about the Republican caucus whether to support the Oxford House or not,” Roberts said. “We did not want this Oxford House to turn into another Samadhi.

The last thing we need to see is more headlines, needles, maggots... My colleague, Legislator Hansut, took the initiative and reached out to a lot of people. Came up with some answers. She assured all of us that there will be no harm reduction there.”

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Harm reduction is a public health approach based on making addiction safer through interventions like providing safe injection sites. It’s a controversial approach that has been viewed by some as contributing to a culture of drug abuse, but proponents argue it’s been responsible for the 27 percent drop in overdose deaths last year. Samadhi used harm reduction techniques, which they say “saved over 1,400 lives in Ulster County.”

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Republican lawmakers remain skeptical of the approach. Roberts cited the presence of “needles [and] crack pipes” at Samadhi.

“I actually called someone that I knew that had stayed at an Oxford House. Learned that it wasn't just like something local,” Hansut told us. “My concerns were the general rules: Were they using? Did they use harm reduction measures? What happens if somebody falters?”

Hansut, Amenta, and county Department of Mental Health Commissioner Tara McDonald visited an Oxford House in Poughkeepsie earlier this month.

“I got a lot of questions answered, got to speak with some of the residents,” Hansut said. “We asked about being self-governing, but they seem to work. They seem to work. And we do need housing. We need supportive housing in our county.”

They intend to place the facility in Kingston, but haven't yet picked a location.

“We met some of the residents and toured that house, but most importantly talked a lot about the site search in Ulster County with two Oxford House staff members,” Amenta added. “We discussed UCAT, medical facilities, job centers and area housing stock. They are actively searching, but as of that point had not yet gotten into lease negotiations.”

Kingston • 874 words • 1 photo



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