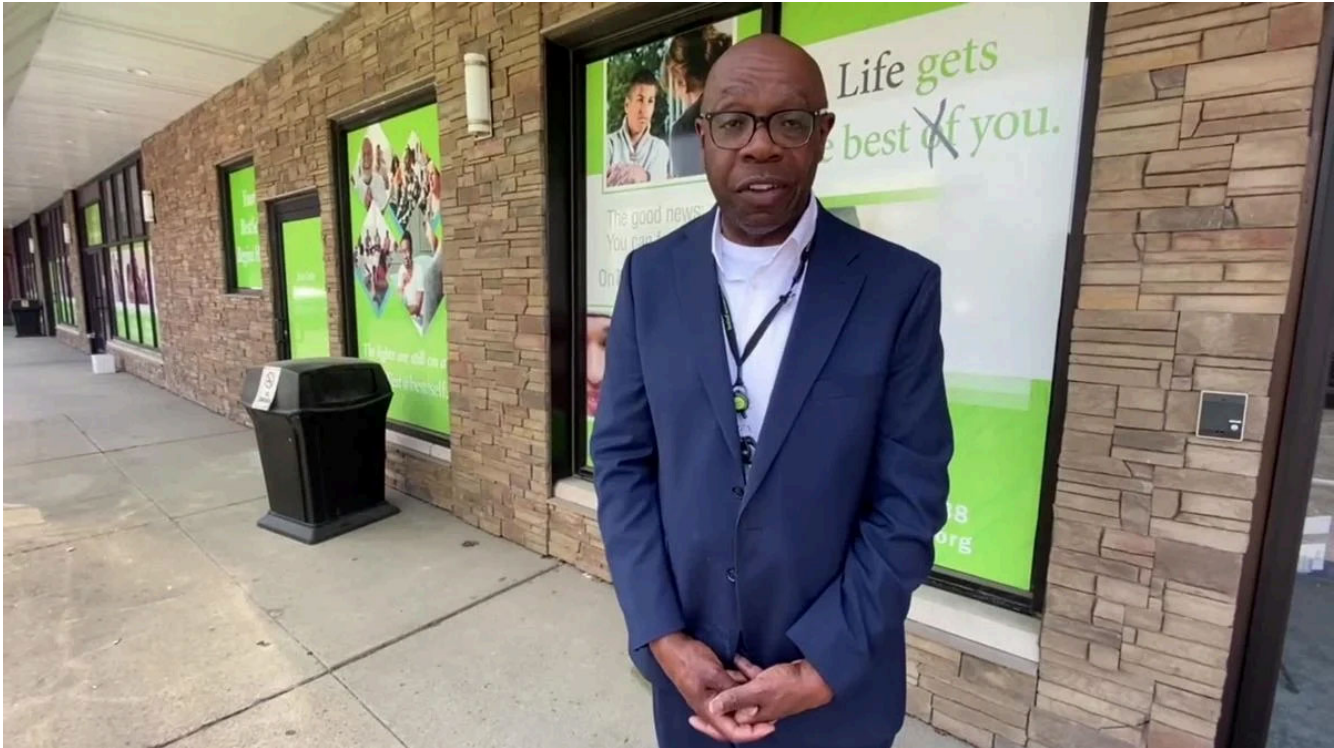


THE BUFFALO NEWS

'We have to get it right': New center to aid Buffalo's mental health crisis response

Jon Harris



Kevin Beckman of BestSelf describes plans for BestResponse, an intensive crisis center under internal construction at BestSelf on Niagara Street.

Kevin Beckman spent his early career working as an after-hours telephone counselor, taking crisis calls well past midnight and offering support to people experiencing mental health or substance-use challenges.

Through those difficult conversations, Beckman saw the opportunities that existed to improve a system that, too often, was falling short for those in need.

“You know what you never forget? The individuals that you couldn’t help,” said Beckman, now vice president of Health Homes and Crisis Interventions at BestSelf Behavioral Health. “It stays with you. It fuels you.”



BestSelf, at 430 Niagara St., will become BestResponse Intensive Crisis Center, slated to open in late fall. Libby March, Buffalo News

Beckman is optimistic fewer people will fall through the cracks when BestSelf's BestResponse Intensive Crisis Center opens in late fall. The center, being constructed within an existing building at 430 Niagara St., will be open 24/7, a place where children and adults experiencing a mental health or substance-use crisis can stay for up to 23 hours and 59 minutes and receive counseling, medication support and connections to follow-up care.

BestResponse is seen as a critical component to improving the mental health crisis response system across five counties in Western New York. If successful, officials say, BestResponse will be able to divert patients from sometimes unnecessary hospitalizations and instead connect them to the right level of care. By filling a gap, BestResponse could help other parts of the local mental health care continuum function better.



Sarah Bonk, mental health commissioner of Erie County. Libby March/Buffalo News

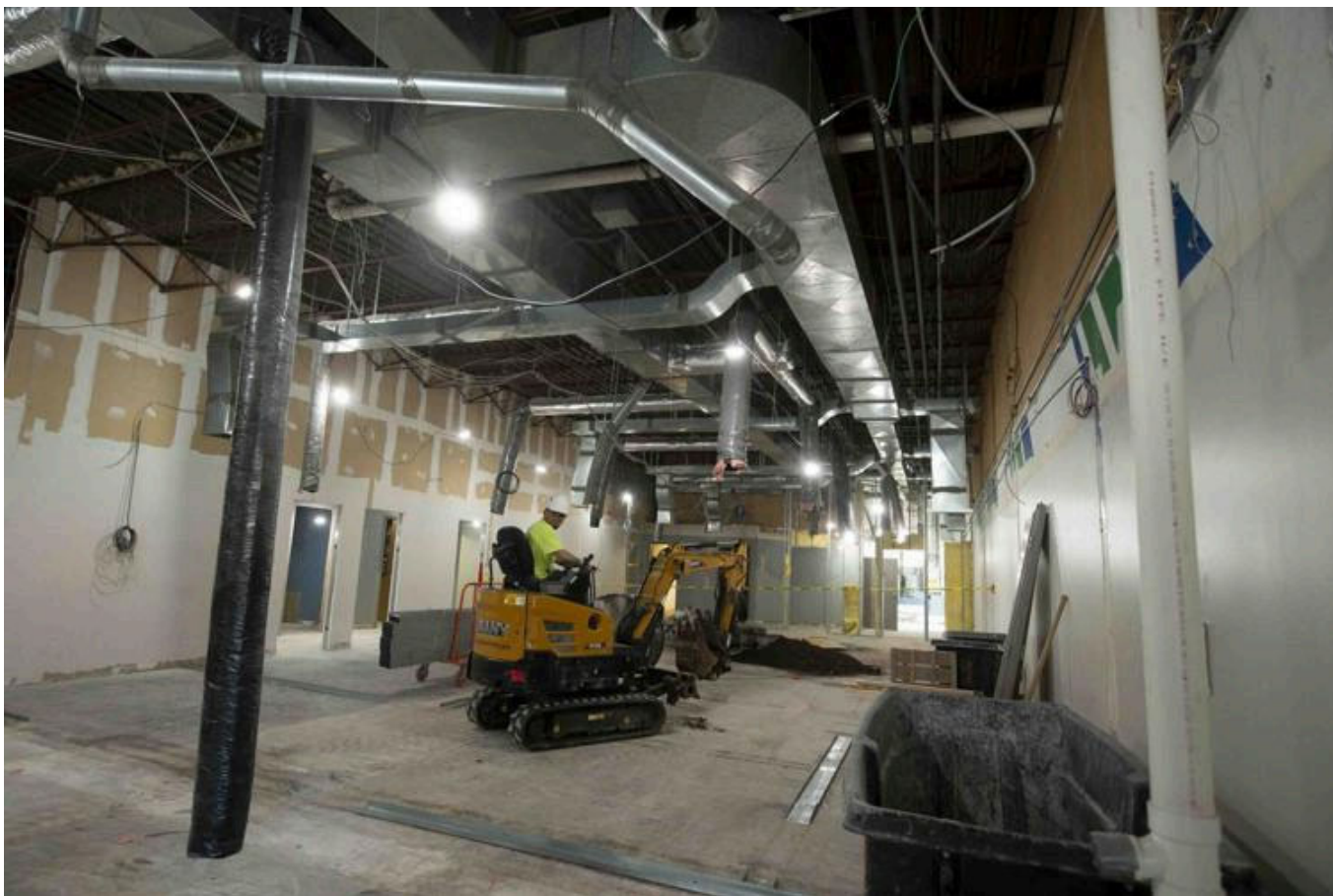
Often, local people in crisis end up at Erie County Medical Center's Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program, a busy 24/7 operation where patients can wait days to be seen by a psychiatrist. CPEP, which sees around 10,000 patients a year, can provide inpatient care and help patients at risk of harming themselves or others. But it often ends up as the landing spot for anyone experiencing a mental health crisis, even if that is not the most appropriate setting for the patient's needs.

Sarah Bonk, Erie County's mental health commissioner, said BestResponse can close "a gap that has never been attempted to be filled in such a comprehensive way." Bonk serves on the steering committee of the just-launched Crisis to Care Collaborative, a team that hopes to strengthen the region's mental health crisis response system. The collaborative, with support from the Patrick P. Lee Foundation, recently analyzed local 911 data, which show the opportunities that exist to improve the system and provide better care for patients.

In Erie County last year, 911 call takers identified 21,000 calls – about 60 a day – that were mental health-related. In addition, an ambulance or police car from Buffalo arrives at least once every three hours to ECMC with someone experiencing a mental health emergency.

Some also can end up in Erie County's holding center, where one out of four people have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. In a statement, Erie County Sheriff John Garcia said "depending on a jail to treat people with untreated mental illness is simply a bad approach."

"We need to find a way to get them the help they need before they get there," Beckman said. "This is true diversion. We are diverting from expensive hospitalizations, from expensive transportations, from jail."



Work is underway on what will become an area for visitors experiencing a mental health crisis to “self-regulate” in the future BestResponse Intensive Crisis Center on Niagara Street. Libby March, Buffalo News

Part of a larger plan

New York State is trying to build a comprehensive crisis response system, though it has taken time to get here.

Since announcing funding awards for crisis stabilization centers in mid-2022, three are open: Family Service League in Suffolk County and Helio Health in Onondaga County are operating intensive crisis stabilization centers, while People USA is running a supportive crisis stabilization center in Dutchess County, said Justin Mason, spokesperson for the state Office of Mental Health.

And another 11 intensive centers, including BestResponse, and 12 supportive centers are under development, Mason said. Once all are open, there will be 13 intensive centers and 13 supportive centers across the state.

(The supportive centers provide support and assistance to those approaching a mental health or substance use crisis, Mason explained, while the intensive centers – which can prescribe and administer medications – are geared toward people already experiencing a crisis.)

While BestSelf originally hoped to have its intensive center open by fall 2023, it took time to free up capital funding for the project and wade through regulations for a program that is co-licensed by the state Office of Mental Health and the Office of Addiction Services and Support, BestSelf President and CEO Elizabeth Woike said.

Construction began in mid-May, and BestSelf is projecting an opening by early November, Woike said.

What to expect

BestResponse, a roughly 10,000-square-foot center that will employ about 45 people, is expected to serve around 4,000 patients a year.

That would relieve pressure on ECMC by rerouting some patients to a more appropriate setting and allowing the hospital to focus on patients who need the level of care CPEP provides, particularly those facing life-threatening situations.

At BestResponse, there will be separate entrances for children and adults. There will be a sally port on the building's side, a dedicated entrance where first responders can bring patients and depart within 10 minutes – a design BestSelf officials observed during a tour of a crisis center in Arizona last year.



Kevin Beckman of BestSelf, center right, leads a tour of BestSelf on Niagara Street. This area in the back will become a sally port, a dedicated receiving area for first responders to deliver patients. Libby March, Buffalo News

Inside the building, there will be a welcoming center, staffed with peer support specialists and targeted case managers. Psychiatrists and nursing staff also will be available.

“What they can expect is a very safe and welcoming environment and to be seen quickly,” Woike said.

Woike said the center will be able to provide immediate help to patients in crisis and has the resources to ensure patients link up to area services upon departure. If staff at the center determine a patient needs a higher level of care, such as what’s offered at CPEP, that also can be coordinated.

To Beckman, one of the keys will be consistency in care, helping to build trust with patients and the community.

“It doesn’t matter if the crisis happens at 2 p.m. or 2 a.m., we have to deliver the same care,” Beckman said.



Kevin Beckman is vice president of Health Homes and Crisis Interventions at BestSelf Behavioral Health. Libby March

Beckman said his passion is driven by memories of the calls he received years ago, at 1 or 2 in the morning while he was doing phone crisis work. He would hear stories from patients who

arrived at the hospital, but didn't get the care they needed. Meanwhile, their suffering went on for weeks longer. Moments like that, when the system failed, can scar a patient, he added.

"Being able to get the help that we need right now cannot be overstated," Beckman said. "We have to do that. We have to get it right."