

Staten Island launches groundbreaking mobile mental health program for at-risk youth

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — Staten Island children, teenagers and young adults struggling with serious mental health challenges will gain access to intensive community-based care through a new program launched by Richmond University Medical Center.

The hospital's Youth Assertive Community Treatment (Youth ACT) program is designed to help young people ages 10 to 24 with mental health diagnoses remain in their homes and communities while receiving comprehensive behavioral health support.

Officials celebrated the program Wednesday with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new location within the Staten Island Mental Health Society Elizabeth W. Pouch Center for Special People at 657 Castleton Ave. in West Brighton, next door to the hospital.

The initiative targets youth who are at risk of hospitalization or out-of-home placement, as well as those transitioning home after receiving inpatient or residential treatment. The program is licensed to serve 36 individuals at any given time, said Miriam Prat-Mallilo, director of OMH Child and Adolescent Outpatient Mental Health Services at RUMC.

One of 10 in the state

The Staten Island team is one of 10 new Youth ACT teams funded through a \$4.5 million investment announced by New York Gov. Kathy Hochul to expand services for children and young adults living with mental illness across New York state.

“Children and youth living with mental illness sometimes require additional care to remain at home or return back into the community,” Hochul said when announcing the funding. “This expansion of our Youth ACT program will help provide more families with this critical support and the services they can rely on to bring their child home after inpatient care or from a residential facility.”

Mobile treatment vehicle

A key feature of the program is a mobile treatment vehicle that will allow staff to deliver services throughout Staten Island, meeting young people in their homes, schools and neighborhoods rather than requiring them to travel to appointments.

It is the only Youth ACT program in New York state to feature a mobile treatment van, said Prat-Mallilo.

The van features an exam chair, computer bays, televisions, lighting and UV lights in case disinfecting is required.

The program is intended to reduce barriers to care, improve outcomes for young people experiencing severe mental illness or serious emotional disturbance, and provide support before a crisis leads to hospitalization or placement outside the home, she said.

“We have incorporated a mobile treatment van to enhance outreach and engagement, enabling us to deliver dignified, culturally responsive, and accessible services to the young people and families we serve,” Prat-Mallilo said.

For Staten Island families, the expansion means greater access to intensive mental health services delivered where they are needed most, Prat-Mallilo said, helping vulnerable youth stay connected to their schools, families and communities while receiving treatment.

“The children and adolescents that this program serves have often been through more than most of us can imagine,” said Dr. Jonathan Zipkin, executive vice president and chief operating officer at RUMC. “Many have experienced repeated psychiatric hospitalizations. Others have struggled to engage with traditional outpatient care or are returning home after treatment here in our inpatient setting. For many families, the hardest part isn’t wanting help — it’s being able to access it consistently.”

Mental health challenges continue to be a crisis in New York City.

Suicidal ideation, attempts and feelings of sadness and hopelessness increased among high school students between 2013 and 2023, according to the city Department of Health's New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey, released in 2025.

As of 2023, 14% of New York City high school students had attempted suicide, with 18% having seriously considered it, compared with 8% and 13%, respectively, in 2013.

As of 2022, the most recent year for which data is available, 10% of New York City middle school students had attempted suicide, up from 7% in 2018, while 30% had considered it, up from 20% in 2018.

Start-up state funding

The state Office of Mental Health provided \$450,000 in start-up funding to each of the 10 providers, with each team serving up to 36 youth.

Based at the Staten Island Mental Health Society's Elizabeth W. Pouch Center for Special People, a division of RUMC, the new program brings together mental health clinicians, psychiatric providers, peer advocates and support staff who can respond to youth and families around the clock.

Services include therapy, psychiatric evaluations, medication management, peer support, crisis intervention and other intensive behavioral health services, according to a RUMC announcement.

"Instead of asking families to come to us during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives, we go to them," Zipkin said. "Our multidisciplinary team will meet young people where life is actually happening — at home, at school, in shelters, in community residences, and throughout the neighborhoods where they live. They'll receive psychiatric care, such as medication management, individual and family therapy, crisis intervention, and care coordination from one integrated team that knows them, knows their family, and stays with them through the difficult moments. That approach isn't just compassionate — it works."