NH Senate gives initial nod to plan to add mental health beds

The Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — The New Hampshire Senate has given preliminary approval to a plan to significantly increase the number of psychiatric treatment beds in the state. The plan the Senate sent to its Finance Committee on Thursday would require the state to contract with private hospitals and nonprofit facilities to set up 68 new beds. Twenty would be for those subject to involuntary admission, 40 would be community-based beds to help people transition from hospitalization and eight would be peer respite beds.

"Improving our state’s mental health system and reforming DCYF are not options. They are not areas that we have the luxury of putting off for another day. They are absolute necessities that our state must address immediately. This legislation is a critical step forward," Gov. Chris Sununu said. As the number of treatment beds has dropped due to budget cuts, a workforce shortage and other factors, the number of people waiting, sometimes in emergency room corridors, for beds at the state psychiatric hospital has increased. In March, the daily average was 46 adults and four children.

Senate President Chuck Morse (R-Salem), Senate Majority Leader Jeb Bradley (R-Wolfeboro), and Senator Kevin Avard (R-Nashua) issued the following statements: “After visiting a local hospital and seeing the number of people with mental illness who are waiting for a bed at New Hampshire Hospital and receiving twice-daily reports showing a staggering number of people waiting from across the state, we took immediate action to develop a plan that would expand access to critical mental health services,” said Morse. “This legislation is designed to quickly increase community mental health services by adding 68 treatment beds including additional beds at receiving facilities, transitional and community residential services, and peer respite beds. We wanted to address this issue from all sides and including additional mobile crisis teams helps increase access to treatment that those with mental illness need."

“New Hampshire is facing a mental health crisis as people who are our friends and neighbors wait for days and sometimes weeks for treatment of their disease. Passage of HB 400 represents a significant step towards mitigating this unacceptable situation,” said Bradley. “This legislature also recognizes the need to ensure our state’s children are protected. I am grateful that Senator Sharon Carson first introduced steps to restructure the Division of Children Youth and Families [DCYF] to further ensure children are given protections from neglect and abuse. This bill authorizes the creation of the office of the child advocate to provide greater oversight in the DCYF aimed at improving the safety of our children,” said Bradley. “These two issues are critically important to our state and we are pleased that this bill received the Senate’s support today and we look forward to Governor Sununu signing these measures into law."

“I am pleased to support increasing mental health services in this legislation. After hearing compelling testimony from citizens with mental health conditions, it is increasingly clear that our state needs to do more and offer expanded care services in our communities,” said Avard, vice-chair of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. “This legislation is a positive step forward and we will continue to work hard to provide effective care solutions to mental health patients across our state.”