

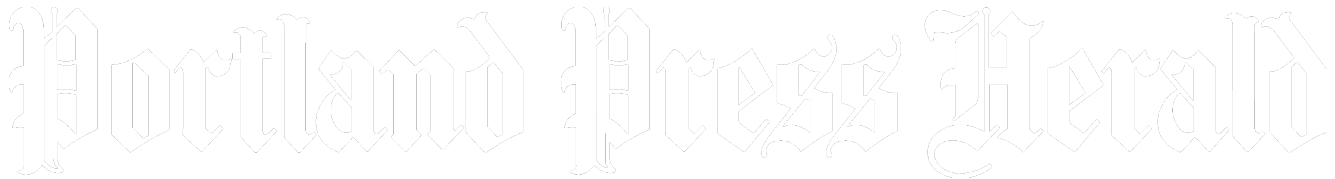
# DHHS commissioner: Maine's mental health system needs work – and it's already begun

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By Jeanne Lambrew Special to the Press Herald

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AUGUSTA — As has been recognized for years, Maine needs a compassionate and competent mental health system.

Rebuilding this system is central to the work of Gov. Mills and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. From Day One, we have worked to improve prevention, the delivery of care in our communities and treatment for those in crisis as well as those with persistent challenges. We are grateful to be part of the Mental Health Working Group, which met for the first time last week, as it discusses these issues. We look forward to bringing to the table the work we began when I first arrived in January.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Jeanne Lambrew** is commissioner of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

That includes a forward-looking project we initiated called “map and match.” The goal is to map our capacity to treat people with mental health conditions at different levels of care and settings. Given that many people who have mental health diagnoses also have a substance use disorder, our project’s boundaries are better described as behavioral health.

The “match” part is identifying the human and technical solutions that will allow individuals to be quickly connected with the appropriate care. Some states do so through apps that track open beds or slots while instantly arranging appointments. Others have teams of people capable of triaging cases and ensuring a “warm handoff” (or personal introduction) to the next care professional. We are looking at all of the above.

But before moving forward in a deliberate yet urgent way, we should reflect on where we started. It is not from scratch, particularly when it comes to our public psychiatric hospitals.

Riverview Psychiatric Center has worked for years to improve its quality and has demonstrated achievements. For the first time since the 1990s, Riverview has a full complement of permanent medical staff, despite national and regional shortages of psychiatrists, which ensures continuity of care. It has implemented evidence-based treatment throughout the hospital. Its admission rate has increased, allowing its team to serve more Mainers in crisis. And Riverview's rate of restraint has plummeted far below national averages, despite the hospital treating severely mentally ill patients who have not been accepted anywhere else in Maine. These quality improvements have translated into patient and staff satisfaction. Patient satisfaction rates are consistently at or above national averages, and a survey earlier this year found that 80 percent of Riverview staff would recommend it as a good place to work.

Riverview's work to improve quality resulted in recertification Jan. 30. This month, Gov. Mills turned the page on the past by paying off the remaining balance of \$55 million owed to the federal government (of an original total of \$80 million) for funds used during Riverview's period of decertification. That bill, including interest, is now fully paid.

We are also building capacity at Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center in Bangor. Gov. Mills announced in February her plan to use a new building on the hospital's campus to create an additional option for inpatient care while we also work to expand outpatient mental health services.

The department is pursuing further federal funds that would support both inpatient care and our goal to expand community-based behavioral health care throughout the state. We are preparing to move beyond the consent decree that has held Maine's mental health system accountable for nearly three decades. This involves greater investment in an array of effective services offered by community agencies that we'd like to scale up. It also entails ensuring that mental health providers promptly accept referrals from hospitals.

It is easy to say the system is broken. Individuals with mental health challenges have undoubtedly been hurt by its shortcomings. However, we cannot get to where the state needs to be without stepping back to assess our current assets, where we have been and where we want to go.

This work is crucial to ensuring that, in the coming years, Maine people trust that our mental health system will provide quality, compassionate care when they need it.