

Commentary: Working together to reach Maine people at risk and in crisis

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By Jeanne Lambrew and Randall Liberty

February 19, 2020

As commissioners of the Maine departments of Health and Human Services and Corrections, we work toward making some of our services unnecessary. We strive to limit how often individuals stay in psychiatric hospitals or return to prison after being released, so they can live their lives safely in our communities.

Under the administration of Gov. Mills, we, along with Public Safety Commissioner Michael Sauschuck and Education Commissioner Pender Makin, took on systems that excel in some areas but also have suffered from logjams, gaps in services and long-term erosion in capacity.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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With dedicated staff across our departments, we have rolled up our sleeves to tackle these challenges. This includes developing comprehensive cross-departmental strategies to improve mental health and substance use disorder treatment for both adults and youth. This begins with community-based prevention and layers in progressively more intensive services for treatment and recovery support. Institutions should serve as the last resort.

As we pursue these fundamental reforms, we are taking concrete steps now. We, working with our partners at the Public Safety, Education and Labor departments, have undertaken over 35 actions related to prevention and diversion, treatment and reintegration.

The most immediate focus has been on crisis services. The decisions made in moments of crisis can determine an individual's fate. This is why the biennial budget included \$1.5 million to support programs that help keep people out of jails and prisons and

connect them with needed services. The budget also provided \$700,000 to create a dedicated team at DHHS to help adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities who are experiencing a crisis, taking some strain off the mental health crisis system.

We are also testing several ideas as part of our effort to build the best system for Maine. For example, we are piloting a crisis center in Cumberland County that aims to stabilize and reintegrate people back into the community. We will be testing in Aroostook and Washington counties an expansion of aftercare and stabilization services for youth who are transitioning home from residential treatment. Recognizing that we also face workforce challenges, we are providing \$750,000 for health providers to hire and train employees to help patients manage their medications, which limits crises and delays in discharges from the hospital.

At the same time, Maine people shouldn't have to experience a crisis and go to the emergency room in order to get treatment. This is part of the reason why Gov. Mills expanded MaineCare on her first day in office, which has provided mental health treatment to nearly 18,000 Maine people and substance use disorder treatment to more than 7,000 Maine people. The number of people served in MaineCare's behavioral health homes, which take a coordinated and comprehensive approach to treatment, has increased more than 10 percent. Participation in opioid health homes has skyrocketed as well.

While treatment helps lessen the severity of behavioral health problems, we hope to prevent them in the first place — starting with youth. The reconstituted Children's Cabinet has adapted nationally recognized practices to deploy, which includes providing Maine's 700 schools with free curricula, developed by the Department of Education, that will better meet the social and emotional needs of young learners; expanding capacity within school-based health centers for behavioral health services, and supporting schools in promoting positive approaches to discipline. We also increased our efforts to support programs for substance-exposed infants and children with adverse childhood experiences.

However, more is needed. A \$2 million federal grant will help Maine expand workforce and treatment sites for substance use disorder and recovery services. We also are comprehensively examining MaineCare payment rates, including in behavioral health, to ensure they support access to care. Lastly, the governor's supplemental budget requests \$1.1 million to restore a forensic crisis team, to divert people with severe mental illness from jails and emergency rooms and transition those already in prison back into the community.

Individuals facing a mental health challenge deserve high-quality, compassionate care. We're working together, across state government and throughout our communities, to make this a reality for more Maine people.

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