



Vermont has made progress in recent years, but can do far better. In 2006, its mental health care system received a C grade. Three years later, the grade is the same. The question today is whether the state will address a complex set of public mental health challenges during hard economic times, and seek to move forward.

Conditions have improved at Vermont State Hospital (VSH), which the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) found to be far short of modern standards of care in 2005. Improvements in community services through the Vermont Futures Plan is a sensible, but unfulfilled, attempt to regionalize operations from the outdated facility in Waterbury and replace it with community-based programs and services.

In 2007, Vermont restored the Department of Mental Health (DMH) to the status of a separate department after four years under the Department of Health. This was a welcomed move that is already having a positive impact on mental health services.

The state has a strong culture of peer-led services, family support, and involvement. Its homegrown Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) is taught across the state. Housing for consumers has increased. Progress also has been made in jail diversion and in universal training of state police and other officers for dealing with individuals in psychiatric crisis.

Because of high National Guard participation, Vermont has a high per capita death rate in the Armed Forces, and returning service members are at psychiatric risk. The state has responded by expanding its “Vet to Vet” peer program. It has also developed two grants for early intervention with at-risk veterans to prevent homelessness and to avoid criminalization. “Trauma-informed care,” an approach that recognizes the centrality of psychological trauma for veterans and other consumers, is improving the state’s sophistication of care.

Yet, challenges remain—particularly, finding and keeping a professional workforce. Recent efforts to increase community mental health budgets—and thereby professional salaries—have come to a halt.

VSH needs to continue on its path of progress. The hospital’s conditions have improved to the point that the DOJ has finally packed its bags, and the state is monitored biannually, showing steady progress. For the first time, the hospital has received institutional accreditation; however,

Innovations

- State police academy training
- WRAP and culture of peer-led crisis services
- Veterans’ services
- Increased crisis beds

Urgent Needs

- Leadership for a comprehensive replacement solution to Vermont State Hospital
- Continue hospital quality of care improvement
- Maintain gains in housing and veterans’ services
- Address mental health workforce shortage

Consumer and Family Comments

- *“The system is devoted to recovery and consumer-run services.”*
- *“Many of my family member’s treatment providers have moved away due to low pay scale and poor support by the agencies employing them.”*
- *“Support services are not available 24/7. The state needs a better ‘step down’ system after hospitalization.”*
- *“Alternatives to restraint and seclusion must be improved statewide.”*

the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has decertified the facility since 2003 and recently reaffirmed that decision, although DMH is appealing. Reversal of the decision could save the state about \$9 million per year.

The larger concern is where Vermont will provide services that once were centralized at VSH. Positive steps have included increased crisis capacity in Brattleboro, Rutland, St. Albans, St. Johnsbury, and a residential treatment facility, “Second Spring,” in Williamstown. A peer-operated crisis alternative program is planned for 2009. The town of Waterbury, the current home of VSH, has signaled its willingness to provide inpatient hospital beds, but that will not achieve the goal of decentralization and improving statewide access. With the exception of Waterbury, no town seems to want to step forward to take responsibility “to own the beds.”

Both state and local leadership—and cooperation—are critical to complete the Vermont Futures Plan. The challenge includes finding the money to solve the state’s problems. The state is doing many of the right things, but the key is to finish the job.