Massachusetts RNs Oppose Proposed Closure of State Mental Hospital, Mental Health Cuts

The Massachusetts Nurses Association/National Nurses United is now engaged in an organization-wide effort to protect mental health services in the state. The effort was kicked off after the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) in January informed members of the MNA/NNU of their plan to close Taunton State Hospital, one of only six state-operated mental health facilities in the state to care for people suffering from acute and chronic mental illness.

The shocking announcement came at a meeting held with senior DMH staff, and could result in the loss of more than 169 beds from a mental health system in Massachusetts that already is overloaded, and unable to provide appropriate mental healthcare as it is currently constituted.

“This is a cold-hearted and dangerous decision that will have devastating consequences for the mentally ill in our state,” said Karen Coughlin, RN, a nurse at Taunton State Hospital and vice president of the MNA/NNU. “We have no mental healthcare safety net in Massachusetts. There are not, and have not been, enough beds or services in the system for years. This decision will only exacerbate a long-standing crisis. People will continue to go without care, crime will increase, homelessness will increase, more people will end up in the corrections system, and many more will commit suicide. This closure, along with other cuts to programs and services, represents the state’s continued abandonment of the mentally ill in our society.”

“Their plan makes no sense,” Coughlin continued. “Our system has been operating well over full capacity for years. We can’t provide the care people need even with our facility open. The other issue is geography. We are now forcing patients and families to travel to Worcester, Tewksbury, or out to Western Mass for their mental healthcare. It’s a travesty.”

To understand the role and value of the state’s inpatient facilities, one needs to have a clear picture of the clients they serve. “At our inpatient facilities, particularly at my facility, Taunton State Hospital, we take care of a significant number of forensic patients, which means they come to us from corrections facilities or the court system, with varying levels of criminal involvement and some with histories of violent behaviors,” explained Coughlin. “At all of our facilities we have many frail, elderly mentally ill patients who can’t be cared for in nursing homes. A large percentage of our patients have a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse, which complicates their placement in community settings. We have a number of women suffering from serious trauma who are self abusive and suicidal and need intensive mental health monitoring and care. These are patients that often have nowhere else to go in the system.”

In fact, Massachusetts is currently experiencing a shortage of psychiatric beds throughout the entire state’s healthcare system, including both the public and private sector. Psychiatric patients are clogging emergency rooms across the state, with some waiting 72 hours or longer for a psychiatric bed placement. According to a recent statement by Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley in a report concerning the disposition of psychiatric beds following sale of hospitals to Cerberus/Steward Health Care, “The need for inpatient psychiatric and detoxification hospital beds is critical. Any further reduction in these services would have a significant negative impact on the ability of the Commonwealth to provide for mental health services.”

The MNA/NNU, which represents nearly 100 RNs and health professionals who work at Taunton State Hospital, and more than 1,800 staff who work throughout the state system, is committed to working with policy makers and elected officials to ensure that Massachusetts, which used to be a national leader in the provision of mental healthcare, maintains its commitment to the most vulnerable residents of the Commonwealth.

Public opposition to the proposed closure of Taunton State Hospital was clear immediately after the announcement.

More than 100 local and state officials, workers, and concerned citizens crowded into a local church meeting opposing the proposal to close the hospital.

The meeting was organized by State Sen. Marc Pacheco, D-Taunton, with the primary message that the proposal is not set in stone. “For those that think [the proposal] is a done deal, please get that out of your mind. It is not a done deal,” said Pacheco.

In addition to Pacheco, a number of politicians and other officials from the region attended the meeting to show their support for Taunton State Hospital, including Rep. Patricia Haddad, D-Somerset; Rep. Keiko Orrall, R-Lakeville; Rep. Shaunna O’Connell, R-Taunton; Mayor Thomas Hoye, Jr., and representatives from Rep. Barney Frank’s office and Sen. Scott Brown’s office.

“For too many people look at this issue as only a Taunton issue, and those of you in mental health know that this could not be further from the truth,” said Pacheco. “The Taunton facility is crucial and a critical component to statewide mental health services.”

“This has gone beyond an issue of funding and finances,” Coughlin concluded. “This is a moral and ethical issue of human rights and common decency.”

—David Schildmeier

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