

March 8, 2021

Honorable Representatives Lippert, Donahue, Hooper, Emmons, and Senator Lyons,

As medical directors of the state's emergency departments, we write to you today to emphasize the profound necessity of an expanded, locked stepdown psychiatric facility, as proposed by the Department of Mental Health.

It is not news that emergency psychiatric care in Vermont long ago reached a crisis point. As has been noted by VAHHS, in recent years the 3% of emergency visits attributed to mental health have consumed roughly 40% of emergency care hours. A third of all psychiatric patients stay in the ED for longer than a day (no other medical complaint or diagnosis experiences anything like this.) According to recent data from UVMHC, psychiatric visits over the past decade at that institution have increased from 2000 to 3500 per year, while their total hours *in the ED* have increased from 10000 to 60000 - a six-fold increase. This is all but certain to be replicated in hospitals around the state, and crystallizes the breathtaking lack of parity that exists in Vermont for those with severe mental illness. We are simply overwhelmed with psychiatric patients in need of inpatient beds, and the painful irony is that the sickest, most unstable, and – rarely, but significantly – the most violent patients are the ones who remain longest in our departments.

We hope that the ethical implications of warehousing vulnerable patients in emergency departments are clear. Simply put, the environment could not be less therapeutic, and they do not receive anything approaching the level of inpatient psychiatric care. What may be less clear is the stunning cost-shift this de facto state policy creates: not only to the bottom lines of hospitals, not only in the resources siphoned from myriad other emergency care imperatives, but to the hearts and souls of those on the frontline. Our staff suffer higher and higher levels of burnout with each passing year, and face a daily level of personal threat that can and should be shocking to any reasonable person. A technician at CVMC is punched in the face, out for a week; another is shoved to the ground, injuring her back; an emergency physician at Brattleboro Memorial is struck in the face, sustains a terrible concussion, and requires more than six months of recovery; a technician at UVM has his eye socket fractured; a nurse bravely sweet-talks a patient who has manufactured a shiv from a shattered Iphone to give up his weapon, having been told that police are unable to help; a dysregulated patient with a history of violent outbursts roams the halls, destroying locked supply carts, tearing trauma shears from a restraining chain, entering the room of another patient, herself waiting more than 24 hours for psychiatric care, screaming profanities, all of this happening at 4am, just outside the rooms of two pediatric mental health patients, ages 9 and 12, who have been waiting for close to a week each...these are just a few of the stories any of us could share.

As VAHHS has noted, Vermont needs more resources at all levels of mental health, including the community. We are in complete agreement, and support every effort at robust community-based care. We work closely with the community health teams and designated agencies, and are daily inspired by their work. But it is absolutely imperative that our system *include the resources to care for the very small but real population of severely ill patients who consume the majority of inpatient bed days*. Many of these patients *already have* robust, wraparound community

support, and *still* end up in emergency department. Just like a critical cardiac patient, they need a place to go.

DMH has identified the lack of step-down capacity as a key driver of emergency department boarding. VAHHS has described this plan as “the most reasonable and prudent investment for this important population to-date.” We agree. The locked facility proposal is a targeted, straightforward, concrete step that will begin to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in our departments. Please support it.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Smith MD, Medical Director, Emergency Department, Central Vermont Medical Center  
Ryan Sexton MD, Medical Director, Emergency Department, Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital

Alison Kapadia MD, Medical Director, Emergency Department, Brattleboro Memorial Hospital

Ramsey Herrington MD, Chief, Division of Emergency Medicine, UVMMC

Mariah McNamara MD, MPH, Assistant Division Chief, Division of Emergency Medicine, UVMMC

Amanda Young MD, Medical Director, Emergency Department, Porter Hospital

Alison Davis MD, Assistant Medical Director, Emergency Department, Rutland Regional Medical Center

Liam Gannon MD, Medical Director, Emergency Department, Copley Hospital

Doug Nilson MD, Medical Director, Emergency Department, Springfield Hospital

Rick Marasa MD, Springfield Hospital

George Terwilliger MD, CMO and Medical Director, Emergency Department, Grace Cottage Hospital

Marc Bouchard MD, Emergency Department, North Country Hospital