

## Prince William County officials firm up plans for 'Crisis Receiving Center'

### Mental health facility could open in early 2023

By Jill Palermo Times Staff Writer

Mar 9, 2022 Updated Mar 9, 2022



The Prince William Board of County Supervisors during a recent meeting at the James J. McCoart Administrative Building. (File photo)  
Daniel Berti

It won't be as big as initially hoped, but Prince William County could have a new mental health "crisis receiving center" as soon as early next year.

During the Prince William Board of Supervisors meeting Tuesday, March 8, Lisa Madron, executive director of the county's community services board, laid out the most recent plans for such a facility, which would offer local residents immediate help for serious mental health crises as well as assistance with other mental health challenges, including addiction, depression and anxiety.

The facility would be staffed at all times with nurses and mental health clinicians and – most crucially – serve as a place where police officers could take residents placed under “emergency custody orders” or a “temporary detention orders” – legal designations for those considered a threat to themselves or others who must be placed in a secured environment.

Because of an ongoing shortage of beds at Virginia’s state-run mental hospitals, as well as limited space at privately run hospitals, an increasing number of people under ECOs or TDOs are spending hours or days at local emergency rooms accompanied by local police officers, Madron said.

Such duties have become a drain on police resources. During 2021, Prince William County police dedicated the equivalent of 13 full-time police officers’ time either guarding people experiencing mental health crises or driving them to an available bed in a mental hospital somewhere in the state.

And that problem has only gotten worse in 2022. This year, the police department is on track to expend the equivalent of 17 full-time police officers’ time on such duties, Madron said.

“Individuals are boarding in emergency departments in local hospitals because there are no psychiatric beds,” Madron said. “This creates a lot of stress and chaos in our local hospitals.”

In each of the last two years, the county saw 962 residents placed under TDOs for mental health crises. In about 38% of the cases, residents had to be placed in mental health facilities outside Northern Virginia. The county has the highest out-of-region placement among neighboring jurisdictions, according to county documents.

### **State funding uncertain**

Acknowledging the need for additional mental health services close to home, supervisors have been discussing opening a new crisis receiving center in the county for more than a year. **As recently as last summer, it was hoped that the center could accommodate as many as 48 patients.** The number was to include 16 adult and eight youth inpatient beds and an equal number of “recliners” for short-term psychiatric observation for both adults and juveniles.

In July, the ongoing annual cost of such a facility was estimated to be more than \$17 million. The expense would be offset by Medicaid and insurance payments, but since about 38% of Prince William County residents are uninsured – either because they don’t qualify for Medicaid or can’t afford private insurance – the county or state would have to make up the difference.

Del. Elizabeth Guzman, D-31<sup>st</sup>, had sought \$4 million in state funding to be split between startup and ongoing expenses for the new facility, but her budget amendment was revised down to \$2.5 million for startup costs only. But that money is only in the House of Delegates' budget, not the state Senate budget, Guzman told the *Prince William Times*.

“We have probably the largest waitlist in the state for mental health services,” Guzman said of Prince William County residents. “I wanted to ensure that people could get services. ... In the House budget, the money is specific to Prince William County. We just need to ensure we have conversations with the other legislators, and our federal delegation is helping with that.”

In recent weeks, U.S. Reps. Gerald Connolly, D-11<sup>th</sup>, Jennifer Wexton, D-10<sup>th</sup>, and Rob Wittman, R-1<sup>st</sup>, have all written letters in support of the funding.

But without more money for ongoing expenses, county staff is now recommending that the facility include only 16 beds – eight for inpatients and eight for observation up to 23 hours. All would be for adults only, Madron said.

The smaller facility is expected to cost about \$5.3 million a year to operate. About \$2.6 million is expected to be paid for through Medicaid and private insurance, while the county would have to pick up the remaining \$2.7 million.

Acting County Executive Elijah Johnson has included \$2.7 million for the crisis receiving center in the **budget he presented to the board last month.**

The smaller size represents a “phased” approach for a center that could grow over time. County staff decided to focus initially only on adults because there is greater need among that population, Madron said.

“Even though we do have a high youth population and need [for mental health services], we don’t have enough to justify the full 16 [inpatient beds] and 16 [shorter-term evaluation slots] at this time,” Madron said. “But I think if we build it, they will come over time.”

There are also other complications with combining youth and adult services in one facility. Both need to operate separately – with separate entrances and separate staffs – to comply with state licensing rules, Madron said.

Supervisors expressed regret that the facility would not initially serve juveniles.

“There’s just not very many good options for parents with youth experiencing these crises,” said Supervisor Kenny Boddye, D-Occoquan.

Madron said that Loudoun County is also planning for a new crisis receiving center that will serve juveniles and is hoped to include at least six regional slots that could serve Prince William County youth, although that too has not been finalized, Madron said.

Supervisor Andrea Bailey, D-Potomac, who has spearheaded the effort to fund and open a facility in Prince William, nonetheless called the phased-in approach a “win-win.”

“This has to do with all of us in this county ... with healing minds and making this a better place to live,” Bailey said.

### **Facility search**

County officials are still searching for an appropriate building for the crisis reception center. It is hoped that the facility might be located in the eastern part of the county in an existing building that is appropriately zoned and can be repurposed. The county needs about \$5.3 million in startup costs, money that would be cobbled together from federal American Rescue Plan Act money as well as state and local grants.

The center needs between 38,000 and 41,000 square feet. If all goes according to plan, the facility could be ready to open in early 2023, Madron said.

The facility will use the **“Crisis Now” model**, an approach developed in Arizona that combines a secure facility for those under emergency orders as well as help for those experiencing less severe challenges. Previous county and state-run mental health services centers, such as the now shuttered “Brandon House” that operated in Manassas, could not offer that range of services and thus were underutilized. Brandon House was closed to make way for a new facility with a broader impact, Madron said.

“It is a major shift for our county in crisis services,” Madron said, noting the county could not previously offer help to those with mental health challenges unless their conditions met specific criteria. A crisis receiving center, in contrast, offers a wider range of help.

“This is about saying, ‘Come on in; what’s going on? Can we help you?’” Madron said of the planned center. “And that’s *such* a change.”

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