

**MENTAL HEALTH**

# Derry center’s walk-in crisis care provides a model for ‘Mission Zero’

■ Center for Life Management program is part of state’s initiative to reduce ER boarding for mental health patients.

**By Roberta Baker**  
Union Leader Staff

DERRY — Mission Zero, the state’s campaign to end the boarding of mental health patients in crisis in hospital emergency rooms, is gaining speed. At the front of that advance is the Center for Life Management, a community mental health center in Derry, where people can walk in and get on-the-spot mental health care.

There is no clear-cut definition

of crisis: It can be substance misuse, suicidal thoughts, depression, worry, a panic attack or the emotional burden of life events, including job loss, home loss or divorce.

People who live in the center’s service area “can come in off the street and say, ‘I need someone to talk to,’” said CLM’s executive director, Victor Topo.

“Someone may just be having a bad day. Our goal is to provide whatever support we can. You can call to make an appointment or

just come in,” said Andrew Carlsen, head of CLM’s acute care services and mobile crisis response.

It’s part of the state’s rapid response, statewide mobile crisis team network, launched in January 2022 to bring mental health help to people when and where they need it. It often supplants the need to use emergency rooms, which aren’t designed to provide mental health care for someone in crisis, or those who need follow-up treatment.

“If I’m having a panic attack I’m going to ask, ‘Am I going to handle it myself or go for help?’” Topo said. “The fact that people take the

► See **Mental Health**, Page A12

## Key features of Mission Zero

**By Roberta Baker**  
Union Leader Staff

Mission Zero is the state’s six-pronged approach to end the practice of boarding people in mental health crisis in hospital emergency rooms by May 2024 — the target date negotiated in a lawsuit involving the New Hampshire Hospital Association and the Department of Health and Human Services.

As part of Mission Zero:

- A \$1 million federal grant to DHHS will help nine of the state’s 10 community mental health centers figure out how to

► See **Mission Zero**, Page A12

# Mental Health

From Page A1

initiative, that's all central to the healing process."

CLM's rapid response, which includes a mobile team available 24/7 to go to people in crisis, has served roughly 2,000 patients in one year, including 400 people calling from outside CLM's service area. The center serves residents of Atkinson, Chester, Danville, Derry, Hampstead, Newton, Pelham, Plaistow, Salem, Sandown and Windham.

The on-site walk-in clinic books appointments, but always has one counselor free to serve walk-ins without a wait, and peer-to-peer support is always available. The clinic typically sees five to seven walk-ins a day, sometimes a dozen, and arranges for follow-up services, said Kerry Ali, director of the community mental health center's acute care services and mobile crisis response.

"Sometimes people don't want to talk to their therapist about certain things," Carlsen said. "They may have heavier discussions with us."

Peer-to-peer support from someone with similar mental health or substance use challenges often can unlock the door for someone who is reluctant, fearful or suspicious of mental health care.

"It's easy to talk to someone who has walked the walk, someone who's in recovery and has that hope," said Mario Anderson, a peer support counselor in the acute care center at CLM. "It's that person who can meet you where you're at without judgment or bias. I say, 'I hear you. I see you. This is what helped me.'"

"We frequently have people come in and ask for peer support," said Ali. "Peer support will start it."

## Making headway

Walk-ins and people who make appointments can receive acute care's services for up to 30 days before they are referred to care providers in the community.

Peer-to-peer support, with widely-recognized results, is increasingly used across the country, with the added benefit of easing national shortages of social workers and mental health

## Mission Zero

From Page A1

build out integrated mental health and substance abuse services. Two Certified Community Mental Health Centers, including Center for Life Management (CLM) in Derry, are to have preliminary certification by May 2024.

- Crisis stabilization centers, now in the Lakes Region and at CLM, will provide care for up to 23 hours plus referrals to relevant community services.

- Starting this fall, care "traffic control" will help ensure that adults referred for inpatient mental health treatment are receiving timely care in the right place.

- Roughly \$16 million has been allocated to build Solution Health's 120-bed behavioral health hospital in southern New Hampshire and open five mental health emergency mental health beds at Dartmouth Health. Solution Health expects to admit the hospital's first patients by early 2025. Dartmouth Health's beds will be online by fall 2024.

- Four five-bed residential programs around the state will serve people with co-occurring mental health issues, intellectual disabilities and/or medical complexities, with the goal of helping them transition to the community.

- Modeled on a successful Seacoast program that uses landlord incentives, more permanent supportive housing will be created for people with serious mental illness. Contracts are anticipated this fall.



*"Our goal is to provide whatever support we can. You can call to make an appointment or just come in."*

**ANDREW CARLSEN**

Center for Life Management

counselors, including in rural regions.

"We can make the difference," Anderson said. "People can be afraid of the mental health system."

At a news conference Thursday about Mission Zero, Health and Human Services Commissioner Lori Weaver cited the state's accomplishments in raising Medicare insurance reimbursement rates, which help pay the cost of mental health care, and expanding supportive housing and crisis intervention services.

Weaver said one in four adults grapples with poor mental health, and the need for help "profoundly increased" as substance misuse, suicide risk, and mental health problems escalated during the pandemic.

Mission Zero tackles problems in mental health care access and efficiency that were previously considered "mission impossible" because of the system's intertwined hurdles. Those include ER boarding and longer stays in inpatient psychiatric care because of a lack of community services to support the patients after discharge.

"Ending ER boarding is an important goal," said Steven Ahnen, president of the New Hampshire Hospital Association. It's about "patients getting the right care at the right time in the right setting."

Anyone in New Hampshire experiencing a mental health emergency can contact NH Rapid Response at 833-710-6477.

*rbaker@unionleader.com*