

Westchester lawmakers consider merging Health and Mental Health departments

By Candice Ferrette • cferrett@lohud.com • May 18, 2010

WHITE PLAINS — As the medical field trends toward the mind-body connection, Westchester lawmakers are considering merging two county departments charged with taking care of your physical and mental health.

County legislators Tuesday will hear from stakeholders on whether the county Department of Health and the Department of Community Mental Health should combine to create one department that could save taxpayer money and better provide [health care](#) to residents.

"We are looking for administrative [savings](#) but we want to do this right. We want to make sure that any budgetary savings doesn't come at the expense of health delivery services," said Legislator Michael Kaplowitz, D-Somers.

Officials from both departments and health and mental health providers will discuss the idea of merging at 3 p.m. in the 800 Michaelian Office Building, 148 Martine Ave.

The concept of government consolidation has gained momentum in recent years and merging these departments is a move in that direction.

Former County Executive Andrew Spano called for a combined county health and mental health department in his 2010-2011 budget. The proposal was to join the departments under one commissioner.

It is unclear how much money the county would save taxpayers by consolidating the two departments and no cost-savings analysis was available Monday, Kaplowitz said.

In 2010, the county Health Department had an operating budget of about \$87.5 million. The Department of Community Mental Health has an operating budget of about \$70 million, which includes various grants from state and federal sources; about \$7.8 million comes from the county government.

"We do know that having the departments work closely together helps [save money](#) but we also do have data that shows it helps promote better health-care," said Department of Community Mental Health Commissioner Grant Mitchell.

The Westchester Care Coordination Program, which helps coordinate the mental and medical care of 48 of the county's highest users of the health-care system, is proof that when the two departments work together they can reduce cost and improve outcomes, Mitchell said.

"It certainly favors looking at health-care and people as a whole. The question is whether we need to merge the departments to do that," Mitchell said.

While some of the services overlap, both departments have very different responsibilities.

The county Health Department monitors and controls the spread of communicable disease, regulates air and water quality, enforces the sanitary code, including inspecting restaurants and other businesses.

It promotes community health through vaccine awareness and other programs like obesity prevention.

The county Community Mental Health department provides prevention, treatment and advocacy for residents and their families affected by mental illness, substance abuse and developmental disabilities.

There have also been several changes in the leadership of the Health Department since Westchester County Executive Robert Astorino came to office. The former Health Commissioner Dr. Joshua Lipsman was replaced with Acting Health Commissioner Dr. Patsy Yang.

After a few weeks, Yang then took a position in [New York](#) City's Health Department.

Deputy Health commissioner Dr. Cheryl Archibald is currently the acting Westchester County Health commissioner.

It is unclear who would be the commissioner should the two departments converge.

Some health providers, however, say they favor consolidation.

"At minimum, consolidating the administrative functions would make sense so you could put more money into caring for the people," said Lindsay Farrell, chief executive of Open Door Medical Centers, which deals with both the Departments of Health and Mental Health. Open Door provides primary care to mostly low-income and uninsured residents in several locations throughout the county.

Susan Wane who heads Family Services of Westchester, a mental health provider, said a consolidation "in theory, makes a lot of sense." She said she hopes that both parties can come to the table and can equally have a role in the health of county residents.