

Inside Look at VA Electronic Psychiatric Bed Registry

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A series of new mental health bills will become law July 1.

Governor Terry McAuliffe approved several measures Thursday afternoon. They include a bill backed by Albemarle Delegate Rob Bell to ensure the availability of a "bed of last resort" for those in mental crisis.

McAuliffe calls these bills a momentous change, but says more needs to be done.

"This is the first step. We have a long way to go as it relates to what we need to do in Virginia to protect the families and the communities on mental health issues," said Governor McAuliffe.

Coupled with other bills approved in April, this represents the biggest push for mental health reform in the commonwealth since the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007.

Some of those reforms are already taking shape, including the creation of a psychiatric bed registry to make it easier to find treatment for someone in mental crisis.

The psychiatric bed registry went into effect a little over two months ago, but it has been years in the making. It's already changing the way people find mental health treatment, but experts say this is just the beginning.

The electronic psychiatric bed registry enables Buzz Barnett and his team at the Region Ten Community Services Board in Albemarle County to find treatment faster for those in mental crisis.

"It's very simple. If I can use this most anybody can use it," said Barnett.

"It gives them a snapshot of what beds might be available," said William O'Bier, with the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services.

Since rolling it out March 3, O'Bier says the system has not crashed once.

"Overall it's been well-accepted and it's been a useful tool," said O'Bier.

"In terms of the utility and the value of it, I'd say we're still kind of in the B-minus range," said Barnett.

According to Barnett, the system works as designed - but there are some notable issues.

"The main stumbling block is the accuracy," said Barnett.

"The bed registry is only going to be as good as the information going in, but the idea that there isn't the wherewithal or the ability to input accurate information is a little bit of a cop-out," said Mira Signer, of executive director with the Virginia chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

Signer says it is up to hospitals and treatment facilities to keep their information up to date.

"There's potential to eliminate or reduce human error, there's the potential to have the process just go a little more smoothly," said Signer.

A new law approved last month requires "real-time" updating.

"It will be a much tighter system when it's done in real time," said Barnett.

But one big question is why did it take so long to get here?

"It is something that's overdue. There's really no reason in this day and age why we shouldn't have something like that," said Signer.

The state says it worked with community services boards, the Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association, and Virginia Health Information for more than three years on the registry planning and testing before the statewide rollout March 3 - three and a half months after the Deeds family tragedy.

Barnett says despite incorrect phone numbers and human error, a registry may not have made a difference.

"I do not think a bed search registry would have changed the outcome in Bath County," said Barnett.

Instead, he and others see it as a start, a small piece of something much bigger.

"The main thing I'm concerned about is that we keep the momentum, that we not look at this as a quick fix and then we just kind of move on," said Barnett.

Mental health experts are also praising the extension of the emergency custody window - something championed by Virginia Senator Creigh Deeds. They say the extension and the registry will buy them valuable time while trying to help those in crisis.