

Ryan establishes 26-member mental health task force for Ulster County

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KINGSTON, N.Y. — Ulster County Executive Pat Ryan has appointed a 26-member task force to identify gaps in the county's existing mental health and substance use disorder services.

The move comes as the county begins to develop plans for spending the roughly \$34.44 million it has been allocated as part of the American Rescue Plan.

Ryan announced the task force in a press release Monday, saying he wants mental health and addiction recovery services to be a top priority in the county's plan for spending the federal stimulus money.

Mental health and addiction services in the county often were at full capacity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the surge in need for mental health and addiction services caused by COVID, plus the removal of inpatient behavioral health beds at HealthAlliance Hospital in Kingston, put an even greater strain on the system, Ryan said.

"At a time when we're seeing more and more of our residents struggling with mental health and addiction, we must step up our investments to meet the moment and take care of each other," Ryan said in the press release. "With much-needed federal relief funds on the way, the Ulster County Behavioral Health Task Force will serve as a crucial mechanism to identify gaps in our existing mental health system and make sure we invest wisely in bolstering our behavioral health programs."

The task force will be charged with creating an action plan based on community needs, which will both highlight existing areas for improvement in the region's behavioral health continuum of care and outline specific recommendations and solutions to address those areas.

The Behavioral Health Task Force will meet monthly from May through September to formulate the strategy, Ryan said.

The task force will comprise:

- Tara McDonald, deputy commissioner, Ulster County Department of Mental Health. McDonald will serve as chairwoman.
- Stephanie Turco, president and chief executive officer, Gateway Community Industries.

- Shannon Kelly, chief executive officer, Catholic Charities of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster.
- Allen Nace, president, Mental Health Association in Ulster County; and Samadhi board member.
- Katrina Williams, LHU program supervisor, Ulster County Department of Mental Health.
- Juanita Hotchkiss, project manager, Ulster County Department of Health, HEALing Communities Division.
- Dr. Michael Doyle, executive director and chief medical officer, HealthAlliance of the Hudson Valley.
- Victoria Reid, executive director, Rural Health Network, Ellenville Regional Hospital.
- Timothy Hunt, research scientist, Columbia University School of Social Work.
- Lt. Chad Storey, head of Ulster County Sheriff's Office Oracle rapid-response team.
- Michael Berg, executive director, Family of Woodstock.
- Kevin O'Connor, chief executive officer, RUPCO.
- Allison Horan, director of strategy and staff for Access: Supports for Living.
- Steve Miccio, chief executive officer, People USA.
- Katie Bierlein, regional director of social support services, Institute for Family Health/Mid-Hudson.
- Chris Dennehy, executive director, Step 1.
- Carole Kelder, RYAN (Raising Your Awareness About Narcotics).
- Michele R. Conner-Shephard, director of outpatient clinics/school-based and budget performance specialist, Astor Services for Children and Families.
- Robin Peritz, LCSWR, vice president for behavioral health, Family Services.
- Bob Gelbach, Community Services board member.
- Peter Criswell, Ulster County legislator and executive director of Hudson Valley LGBTQ Community Center.
- Craig Lopez, Ulster County legislator.

Also, one representative each of the New York State Nurses Association, Local 1199, Citizen Action and Westchester Medical Center.

