



# Stephens Memorial Hospital

MaineHealth

## Testimony of Dr. Ryan Knapp, Vice President of Physician and APP Services Western Maine Healthcare

Monday, February 26, 2024

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, I am Ryan Knapp, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

As a practicing Emergency Medicine Physician and Vice President of Physician Services at Western Maine Healthcare, which includes Stephens Memorial Hospital, I have watched our system of children's mental health services deteriorate since taking my position in 2016. As someone who grew up in Oxford County it has always been apparent that Maine has never had robust children's behavioral health services, but the system is now really broken. Today you are hearing about budget priorities, and I am here to advocate for your consideration of adding additional support to children's behavioral health services, and particularly residential treatment and in-home services for children and adolescents who display aggressive behaviors. These children continue to get brought to our hospital emergency departments as a place of last resort. Hospital EDs are neither the therapeutic nor psychologically safe environment for these children, and these locations certainly are not designed for extended lengths of stay.

I was compelled to come testify today because today marks the 38<sup>th</sup> day in which a young person desperately in need of residential treatment has been stuck in our ED. I want to emphasize - a child has spent 38 continuous days (over a month) in an Emergency Department in our State. This young person was brought in by a family member who could not manage their behavior, and the family member was fearful of the patient's aggression. The child had threatened this family member on multiple occasions and as a result they felt that they had no other option. Like so many others, this patient has been in and out of psychiatric hospitals, but their needs really require long-term, structured and secure residential treatment.

From the beginning, it was clear to our team that despite our collective skill as emergency medicine providers and the resources available to us, our ED was not an environment - nor are we the practitioners - that would be properly equipped to help this child. Now, 38 days later, this young person has decompensated to the point where they may need a more restrictive and higher level of care - an inpatient bed in a psychiatric hospital. This child has required physical restraints and medications on several occasions to ensure the child's safety and the safety of our staff. Having been personally involved in some of these difficult situations I have walked away feeling profoundly saddened. The situation is appalling. Had we been able to secure placement in an appropriate residential facility more expeditiously this patient would not have decompensated this way and avoided the level of suffering she is experiencing currently in this inappropriate care environment.

And I would not be here today if this was a unique case. I'm sorry to say that this scenario is all too frequent. At Stephens Memorial Hospital alone, we had five children in the last year who stayed in our emergency room for extended periods of time due to lack of availability of an appropriate behavioral health placement. In nearly every case, abuse and trauma are part of the child's history.

And in nearly every case, violence or the threat of violence is a critical factor in bringing them to the emergency room. In several cases, members of our team have been violently assaulted. All of those involved in the care of these children are frustrated with our dysfunctional system where solutions are apparent but not accessible for our fellow Mainers. Maine has no appropriate facilities, transitional or residential, to meet the needs of these young people. And families are ill-equipped to manage their behaviors on their own. Without real solutions, which will require adequate funding, this cycle will continue.

I am here today to ask for your help in addressing this crisis NOW. We cannot solve this problem without support from our state government. The next generation of young Mainers deserves it.

I thank you all for your time today listening to my testimony and appreciate your consideration. I would be happy to try and answer any questions you might have.