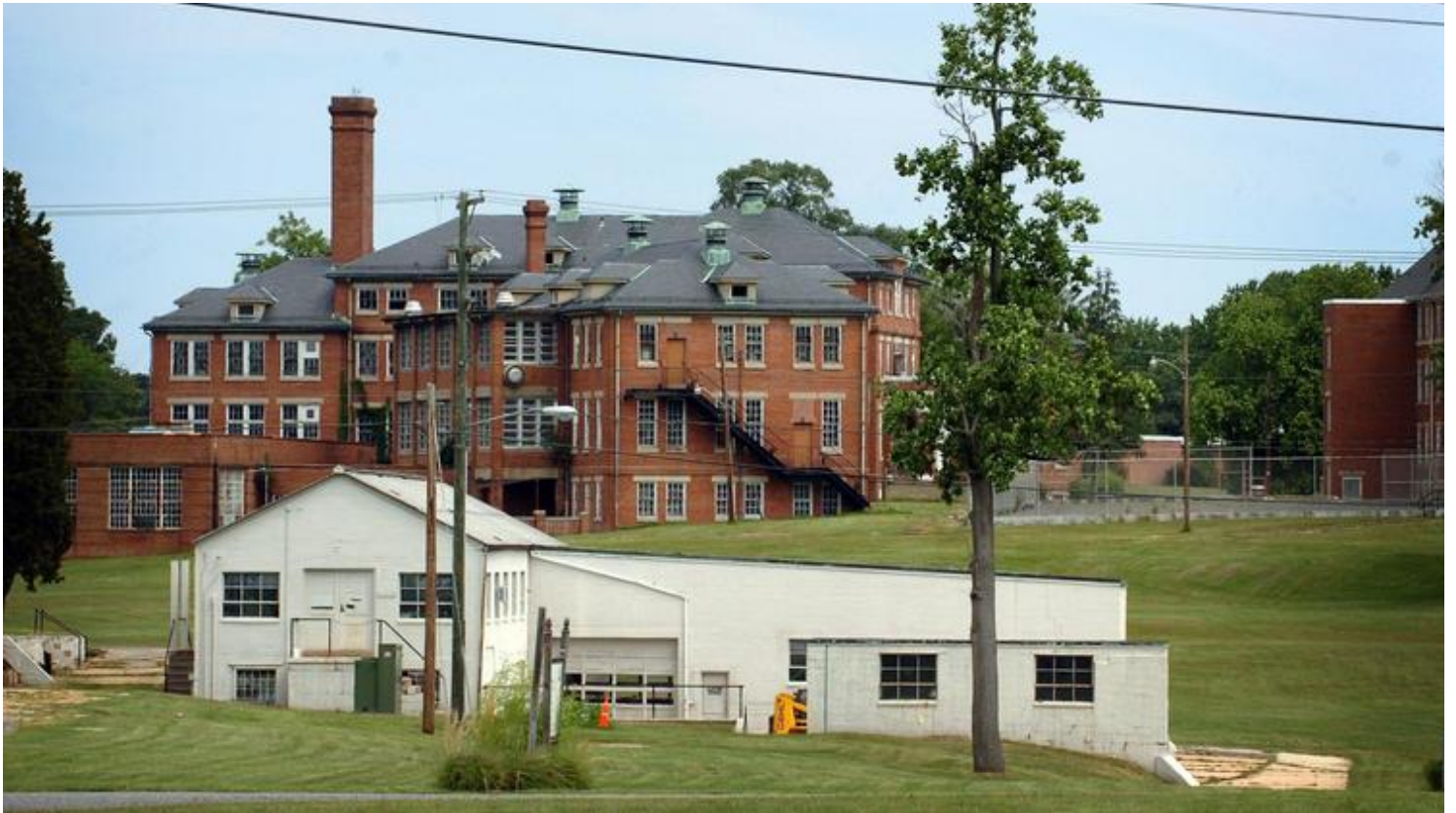


'Stabilization center' looks to innovate how Anne Arundel handles opioid overdoses, addicts



The Crownsville Hospital, where Robert Pascal Youth and Family Services will open a new “stabilization center” to tackle opioid and drug overdoses and addicts. (André F. Chung/The Baltimore Sun)



By **Phil Davis**
pdavis@capgaznews.com

APRIL 9, 2017, 10:53 PM

A new center in Crownsville, years in the making, will look to fundamentally change how law enforcement will handle drug overdose victims and addicts.

The Maryland Community Health Resources Commission awarded \$225,000 in grant money to the Robert A. Pascal Youth and Family Services to open a new "stabilization center" on the grounds of the former state psychiatric hospital in Crownsville.

It's a joint venture between Pascal and Gaudenzia, which operates a drug and alcohol treatment center out of the same location. Pascal's Executive Director Katherine Bonincontri called the center "an innovative service" that's the first of its kind in Maryland.

She said when police handle a potential overdose victim, they are typically left with two options.

"Either the person needs to be left where they are ... or they have to go with the officer to the emergency department or to jail," Bonincontri said.

The 5,000-square-foot, 16-bed facility will take the onus off of a police officer if they aren't sure of how to handle a particular situation.

"It lets a mental health clinician navigate all of that," Bonincontri said.

Emergency and law enforcement officials can drop individuals off at the center, which Bonincontri said will provide "an immediate psychiatric assessment to determine what treatment level they require."

After an initial evaluation, Bonincontri said those brought to the center can spend between 5-10 days as workers determine how to best handle them as a patient.

It's indicative of the revised approach the state has taken to tackle a growing issue with heroin and opioid addiction and overdoses.

Mark Luckner, the executive director of the Community Health Resources Commission, said the opioid "epidemic" was "on the front burner" when the commission was reviewing requests for proposals.

"The value of the services and the program in this building are going to far exceed \$225,000," Luckner said.

In Anne Arundel County, there's been a sharp rise in opioid overdoses over the last three years, with 319 overdoses between Jan. 1 and April 5, 99 more than the same period in 2016, according to data from the Anne Arundel County Police Department.

However, there has been a decrease in fatal overdoses over that same period. So far, 2017 has seen 30 people die due to opioid overdoses, six fewer than 2016 saw during the same period.

Police have attributed that drop to an increase in officers administering naloxone, a drug that counteracts the symptoms of an overdose, when responding to calls of an overdose. Statistics from the department show that both the county and Annapolis police departments have administered more than twice as much naloxone in 2017 as they did during the same period in 2016.

But it also leaves the problem of where to place a still increasing number of overdose victims.

Nelson Sabatini, the former state secretary of Health and Mental Hygiene and current chairman of the state's Health Services Cost Review Commission, lauded the program as one that will cut down on unnecessary hospital visits.

"For most (overdose victims), a hospital emergency room isn't the best source of care," Sabatini said.

The center will provide services to overdose victims regardless of whether they have health care coverage that covers the services or the ability to pay out of pocket, Sabatini said.

He added the \$225,000 will go toward underwriting some of the expected costs as a result.

The partnership with Gaudenzia was fundamental to the commission awarding the grant money as well, Luckner said.

Bonincontri said the idea itself came from when nonprofits were applying for requests for proposals for space at the psychiatric hospital, a process that introduced her to Gaudenzia's regional director, Greg Warren.

She said she and Warren were both applying for the same building and later met to discuss their proposals.

"He said: 'Well, I love this concept that you're talking about. Can't we collaborate?' " Bonincontri said.

She admitted it took a while for the project to come to fruition. She said she first visited a similar center in Texas a decade ago and has been working for the past 3 1/2 years to make it a reality.

She said when its license was approved on March 24, she "literally cried in the foyer" when it was delivered.

With a soft opening scheduled for April 24, state officials will be looking at whether this new approach can make a dent in the region's growing opioid problem.

Statistics from police show it's still grappling with opioid users who repeatedly overdose. When accounting for year-to-date statistics between Jan. 1 and April 4 for 2014 through 2017, 274 of the overdose victims were those who'd overdosed more than once.

Bonincontri said the center will have 16 beds and between eight and 16 chairs, so it can take on a larger number of victims while not needing to meet stricter regulatory standards for medical centers with beds.

As the former head of the county's Crisis System, she said viewing the problem at the county level revealed the region needs to take a new approach to combating the issue.

"We've got to do something different," she said.