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## Sen. Becky Whitley and Cindy Rosenwald: Hold Sununu accountable for mess

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WHITLEY

ONE OF the most challenging impacts of the pandemic has been on the mental health of Granite Staters. Access to care is needed now more than ever.

Governor Chris Sununu frequently speaks about supporting children and implementing the state's 10-year mental health plan, and we applaud the bipartisanship that has increased funding for essential services, particularly in the Senate. It's important, though, to look past words and examine how state government under Sununu's leadership has implemented the policy and funding agreed to more than a year and a half ago.

Sununu signed three bills into law in 2019 to improve the mental health system: HB 4, SB 11, and SB 14. These bills directed DHHS to increase emergency psychiatric beds by nearly 50%, create transitional housing for adults, and create a system to better support children and help them avoid

hospitalization. As important as the policy was, the legislature gave DHHS \$50 million to complete the work.



Yet, under Sununu very little of this essential work has been done. He delayed work on critical resources for children and adults in crisis and allowed \$13 million in mental health funding to lapse unspent.

So what was the work the governor approved, accepted money for and then failed to implement? The first step was to move the children's inpatient unit from New Hampshire Hospital to Hampstead Hospital. This step was accomplished on time, but Hampstead does not have enough beds, nor will they have enough until May 2021. Next, SB 14 funded the development of a state mobile crisis team that would work with children in their communities. Although the funding was in place, this important service has not been brought online, nor have a variety of other services funded in the bill. Additionally, the step-up/step-down services from the bill are not yet in place for children who need a mid-level of care.

Meanwhile, community mental health centers are treating 600 fewer children per month on an outpatient basis to address serious conditions before they become more acute.

The result of Gov. Sununu's inaction are children being held in emergency departments across the state not receiving appropriate treatment. The list of children awaiting inpatient admission has been as high as 50 in recent months. Even one child waiting for emergency mental health care should give us pause.

In response, DHHS temporarily turned 10 beds at N.H. Hospital into pediatric beds. This move lowered the waiting list, but it decreased access for adults. Today, it is not unusual to have 55 adults on a waiting list for an inpatient bed, in addition to 30+ children.

Finally, SB 11 and the state budget contained funding to significantly increase adult inpatient capacity. When the children's unit moved to Hampstead Hospital, the plan was to add 40 adult beds at N.H. Hospital. Only half of that work is complete and 10 adult beds are temporarily being used for children. The department was given funding for 40 transitional housing beds but only 18 beds have been opened and there continues to be a lack of needed beds and a growing waiting list.

Governor Sununu must be held accountable for this unacceptable mess. He talks about his commitment to solving New Hampshire's mental health crisis, but his lack of leadership in standing up the resources shows otherwise. The buck stops with him. People cannot wait any longer.

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Senator Becky Whitley represents Senate District 15 and lives in Hopkinton. Senator Cindy Rosenwald represents Senate District 13 and lives in Nashua. Both are members of the Democratic party.