

Arlington Mental Health & Disability Alliance

“Advocating for self-determination and dignity”

January 10, 2021

Dear Sir or Ma'am,

Arlington Mental Health & Disability Alliance (AMH&DA) represents over 300 Arlington residents interested in improved psychiatric services in Arlington and the region. AMH&DA strongly supports increasing the number of psychiatric beds at Virginia Hospital Center (VHC) and the proposed Certificate of Public Need. Below we outline the reasons we support a significant increase in the number of psychiatric beds at VHC.

1. From FY2017 - FY2019 (the last full year for which we had data), 53-62% of Arlington residents involuntarily committed under a Temporary Detention Order were turned away by VHC. This represents 266-374 individuals turned away annually in a typical year for lack of psychiatric beds at VHC.
2. Many of those TDO'd individuals turned away from VHC for lack of beds were placed outside Arlington County, and often outside the region. These patients are most in need of family members to participate in their treatment while hospitalized so they can help adequately care for them following hospitalization. But travel time to hospitals outside the region can be hours, often precluding family participation. For this reason, it is important to treat people as near to home as possible.
3. AMH&DA does not have data on the number of Arlington residents seeking voluntary treatment at VHC who were also turned away for lack of beds. But we were told that the number of such individuals is significant. Since our goal should always be early and effective treatment, voluntary hospitalization should be encouraged for those who require this level of care.
4. Half of Arlington County residents incarcerated in the Arlington County jail are clients with mental illness who were served by the Arlington Community Services Board prior to their incarceration. That means, at any given point in time, 12-15 individuals in the jail are Arlington residents with serious mental illness. Because jails are non-therapeutic it is preferable to treat individuals in need of acute care in a hospital in a timely fashion and prevent the criminal justice involvement that comes from the lack of timely and effective treatment. The lack of psychiatric beds at VHC means some individuals who sought voluntary treatment at VHC were turned away and subsequently arrested.
5. The lack of beds also means there is considerable pressure to discharge patients before they are stable and before the proper medication and dosage is determined. The inability

to keep patients long enough due to the lack of beds leads to a revolving door of hospitalization, crisis and arrest.

6. VHC is a not-for-profit hospital. In exchange for tax-free status, the IRS requires the provision of “community benefit,” such as psychiatric care and charity care. VHC is ranked 9 out of 10 Northern Virginia hospitals in charity care as a percentage of gross revenue. (See <http://www.vhi.org/flyers/20180301%20Charity%20Care%20in%20VA%202015%20data.pdf>) Adding psychiatric beds will help VHC provide more community benefit through both increased psychiatric care and charity care, which many psychiatric patients require.
7. VHC does not meet the current psychiatric needs of Arlington County, let alone the needs for the next 5-10 years, based on projected population growth. According to data from the Treatment Advocacy Center, Arlington has approximately 2000 adults with schizophrenia and 4000 adults with severe bipolar disorder. Of this number almost half are not in regular treatment and are therefore likely to need emergency hospitalization. To reach the approved norm for beds (50 beds/100,000 people), Arlington would need to have 94 adult psychiatric beds. VHC currently offers only 16 beds which leaves Arlington far below these national norms. Shortages of hospital beds and other treatment facilities are linked to increases in suicides, victimization, homelessness, and incarceration of individuals with serious mental illness, among other problems. These are serious social problems which can be reduced by adding more psychioatric beds at VHC.
8. Finally, we recall during the last COPN process, bed occupancy rate was calculated based on the number of beds that VHC had been permitted to offer, which was more than the actual number of beds. Please ensure occupancy rates are calculated using the actual number of psychiatric beds at VHC. Also be aware that because the psychiatric beds are in double occupancy rooms, patients may be turned away (leaving a bed unoccupied) due to gender or safety issues. Please ensure that statistics do not obscure the actual need.

We do not anticipate a future opportunity to add psychiatric beds at VHC in any significant number over the next several decades. The current construction represents the best and only time to add much needed psychiatric beds at VHC to serve Arlington County and the Northern Virginia region for the foreseeable future. We request that you approve VHC’s Certificate of Public Need.

Respectfully,

Naomi Verdugo, Founder
AMH&DA