

# OPINION

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POLITICS | SEN. TOM O'MARA

# Right direction, wrong decision

The Cuomo administration tried to take a step in the right direction last week, but it made the wrong decision.

Before any advocates start making accusations of “stigmatizing” those with mental illnesses, I’ll stress that my concerns here are not a matter of fearing those with emotional challenges but, instead, of fearing for them under this plan.

What I’m referring to is last week’s release of the Cuomo administration’s plan to reorganize and restructure New York State’s system of mental health.

It’s been in the works for some time, but the state Office of Mental Health (OMH) made it final that it intends to close the Elmira Psychiatric Center (Elmira PC) and psychiatric hospitals in eight other communities statewide next year. Services will be consolidated within 15 “regional centers of excellence” OMH plans to open across the state. Under the plan, the Elmira PC will be merged into one regional center known as the Great

Lakes RCE that will be located in Buffalo.

You can read the entire plan online at <http://www.omh.ny.gov/omhweb/excellence/rce/>.

Those of us who closely monitored the plan’s development over the past year can’t say that we’re surprised. We’re not.

But we held out some hope that common sense might still prevail in determining the future of the Elmira PC. We hoped that maybe we had made a strong enough case for the ongoing operation of the Elmira PC as deserving of a central role in carrying out New York’s mental health mission, and vision.

Apparently we didn’t. But it doesn’t mean that the final plan suddenly makes sense just because it’s been made public. Because it doesn’t. Most notably, the plan calls for ZERO children’s beds (public or private) within the 11-county area served by the Elmira PC, and only six private hospital adolescent beds. It also calls for just 1.4 private hospital adult psychiatric beds for



TOM O’ MARA

each 10,000 of the service area’s population. In short, the plan leaves rural New York citizens “out of sight, out of mind.”

Furthermore, the plan clearly impacts upstate New York’s facilities and communities much more heavily than downstate. I’ll highlight one example.

The operation of the Kingsboro PC in Brooklyn has been heavily scrutinized by, among others, federal and state regulators, and watchdog groups. In fact, for four consecutive years the Kingsboro PC has failed to receive a key federal certification, resulting in the loss of \$25 million annually.

Kingsboro cannot match Elmira on many key efficiency and treatment measures – yet Kingsboro stays open, Elmira closes.

In many ways, the Cuomo

administration touts its new plan as one that makes so much more fiscal sense while providing a higher quality of care through a network of “community-based” organizations. But if it’s hard, if not nearly impossible, to improve on the Elmira PC’s tradition of fiscal responsibility, efficiency, innovation and, most of all, accessible, compassionate, high quality care for patients and families, what, exactly, are we going to accomplish?

That’s the point I’m going to keep making together with many other local leaders.

The OMH plan calls for the closing a year from now. That gives us a year to keep making the case that the Elmira PC and its incredible corps of dedicated professionals and staff must remain central to carrying out New York’s short- and long-term vision for mental health care and treatment, because only the Elmira PC can:

■ Continue to offer the best available and most convenient access to mental health care for our rural

communities, patients and regions, many of whom are simply reluctant to seek or undergo care in a more urban and/or suburban setting like Buffalo or Rochester.

■ Continue to stand as the signature inpatient and outpatient provider system throughout the rural-dominated, 11-county catchment area (OMH’s largest service area, by the way) where, in particular, few private providers are located and there simply is no community-based foundation of care.

■ Continue its long-standing commitment to cost effective, efficient, patient-oriented, successful care and treatment – one that you would be hard-pressed to replicate or improve upon in any other way within this service region.

In other words, the Elmira PC has established a fundamentally important network and tradition of care throughout a region where these programs and services have always presented such a challenge to develop and deliver. It’s difficult, if not impossible to envision any

community-based network that could ever be as successful as the Elmira PC has been and would continue to be in the future.

I’ll say it again: it’s the wrong decision. It’s disappointing, and disheartening. The Elmira PC has been an absolute lifeline of care for patients and families. Its programs and services have long stood as the first responder for mental health treatment of all shapes and sizes, as well as the front line of defense against the firearms-related and other tragedies so often associated with the violent mentally ill.

So now we get back to work. I will continue to urge Governor Cuomo and his administration to reconsider the future of the Elmira PC. A group of supporters will continue rallying support through its website, [www.supporttepc.org](http://www.supporttepc.org).

*State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents New York's 58th Senate District, which includes Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler and Yates counties, and part of Tompkins County.*

## The LEADER

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## WINDOW ON THE WEST WITH KIRK HOUSE

### The Crystal Hills Trail



I've all but finished hiking (2.5 miles to go) one of the newest footpaths in our region -- the Crystal Hills Trail.

The CHT rises in Campbell, where it makes a T-intersection (right in the middle of the woods) with the main Finger Lakes Trail. Then it winds its way southward 44 miles through Watson Homestead, Painted

Post, Gang Mills, Addison, Pinnacle State Park, farm fields, and forested hills, past cemeteries large and small, by old one-room schools, and through a Christmas tree farm.

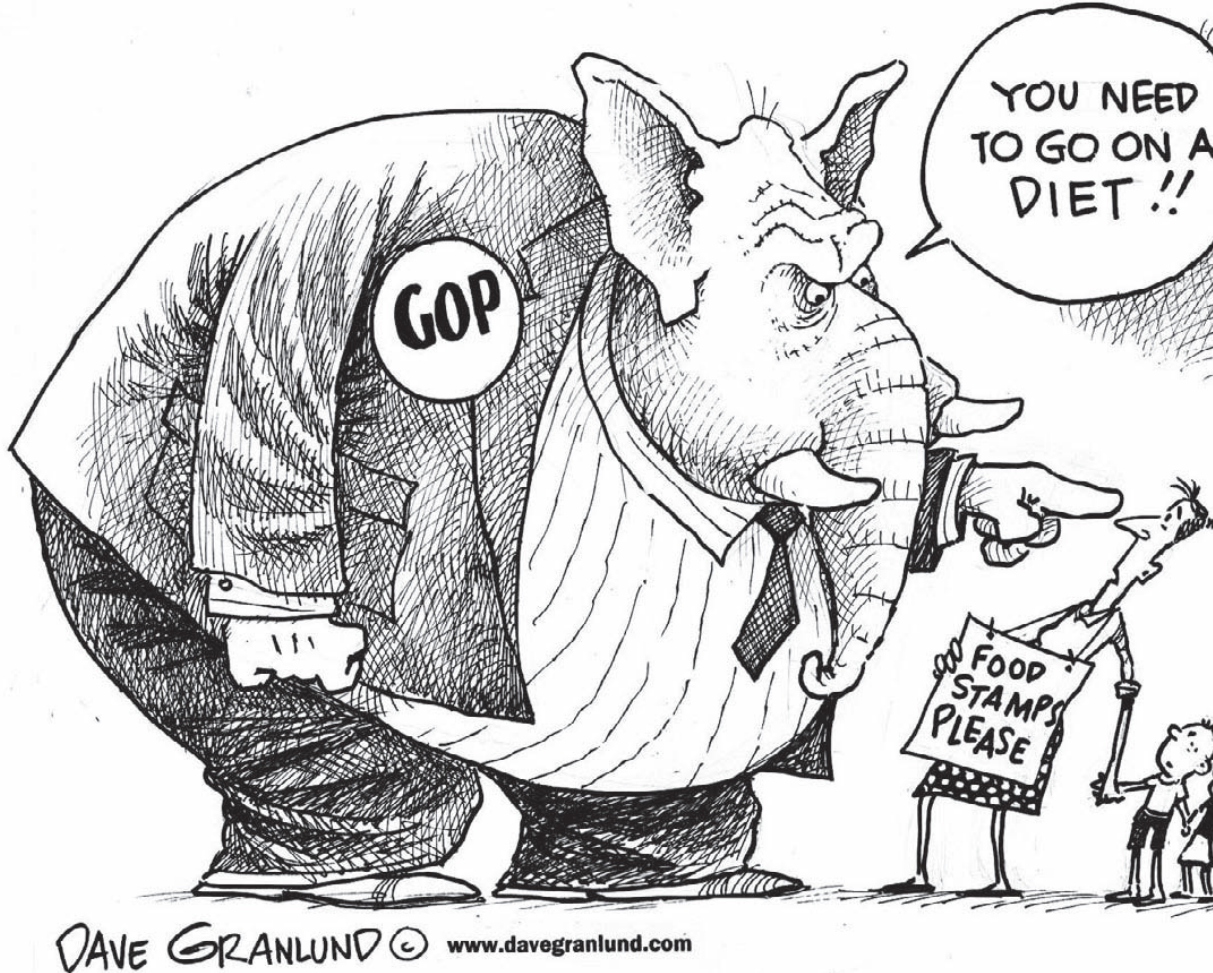
I scared up deer in the wilds of Campbell, and in the suburban tracts of Gang Mills. For more on the Crystal Hills Trail, visit [http://www.the-leader.com/blog\\_window\\_on\\_the\\_west](http://www.the-leader.com/blog_window_on_the_west).



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## ANOTHER VIEW



## OTHER VIEW | LOS ANGELES TIMES

# A curb on charities that really aren't

A Michigan-based charity organization known as the Law Enforcement Education Program has spent a shockingly small amount of its money on programming over the last three years - 2.7 percent to be exact - and a shockingly large amount on fundraising and management.

California’s Shiloh International Ministries did not do much better, spending only 3.2 percent on programs. The same can be said for the American Medical Research Organization in Florida, which spent just 4.2 percent.

Statistics like these, compiled by the Oregon Department of Justice, were the impetus for a new law making Oregon the first state to eliminate tax exemptions for

charities that spend more than 70 percent on non-programming costs.

After all, charities are effectively subsidized by taxpayers, who have a right to make sure that the money is not mis-spent or wasted. Under the law, the affected charities will not receive a local property tax exemption, and donors to 501(c)(3) charities will no longer receive a state tax deduction for contributions.

In an unusual and laudable show of bipartisan support, the measure passed unanimously in both chambers of the Oregon Legislature, with the exception of four abstentions. House Bill 2060, which is expected to affect fewer than 100 of the 17,152 charities registered in Oregon, should be

replicated in statehouses throughout the country.

In general, tax exemptions for charities provide positive incentives. They encourage donations to worthwhile causes, and they allow organizations doing good to worry less about the cost of operations and more about their work. At a time when governments are cutting back, charities often play a key role in filling the gaps.

The Oregon law leaves these incentives untouched. It simply prevents taxpayers from subsidizing charities that do not spend the bulk of their funds on programming that directly benefits the public. The law even includes exceptions if a charity has a legitimate reason to allocate less than 30 percent of its

funds to programming. This might occur if, for example, the organization is undergoing a capital campaign.

In the past, Oregon and other states have prohibited charities with high fundraising and management costs from soliciting donations. In 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court rightly ruled that these laws violated the 1st Amendment rights of charitable organizations.

This time, however, Oregon got it right. Eliminating a mismanaged charity’s tax exemption does not infringe on that organization’s 1st Amendment rights. Instead, the law imposes common-sense regulations that protect the public. Other states should follow Oregon’s lead.