

State Government

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Mental-health advocates are elated over plan

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Advocates for a new facility to replace Eastern State Hospital were joyous after Gov. Steve Beshear announced a plan to build a new hospital Friday.

"I've been pushing for this for over four years," said Joseph Toy, president and CEO of the Bluegrass Regional Mental Health-Mental Retardation Board, which runs the psychiatric hospital. "I am very happy that the state recognized this need and this administration does and the General Assembly does and they're willing to, in tough financial times, move forward."

Kelly Gunning, executive director of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Lexington, said that despite the fiscal crisis facing the state, she thought legislators would prioritize replacing the hospital.

"We were at a point in the momentum that we needed to keep going," she said. "They needed to do something with the property at Eastern State; it's unsightly."

She hopes the Bluegrass Regional Mental Health-Mental Retardation Board will continue to run the facility.

The new structure "is going to remove a lot of barriers because of the stigma surrounding Eastern State Hospital," she said. "I think we're going to have a no-miss combination for a state-of-the-art hospital."

Several others waiting for a new hospital said they were shocked at the good news.

"I'm almost speechless," said Valerie Mudd, who has post-traumatic stress and bipolar disorders and runs a support group at Eastern State. "The patients are going to be so thrilled, and the living conditions are going to be so improved, I just can't wait for this to happen."

Carolyn Colliver, a board member of the local NAMI group, said pushing for better facilities was worth the struggle.

"We've all put in our efforts for advocacy," Colliver said. "Never think that your voice doesn't count. I applaud those people that are going to make it happen."

Colliver said NAMI Lexington has also held rallies and hosted a statewide awareness walk about the plight of the mentally ill and the status of the hospital.

"In the past, people with mental illness haven't been listened to, they haven't been supported," she said. "The public is realizing that mental illness is our reality. The doors are open now for an endless amount of moving ahead and progress."