



# COUNTY OF ERIE

**MARK C. POLONCARZ**

COUNTY EXECUTIVE

February 4, 2015

Hon. Christopher Jacobs  
Erie County Clerk  
92 Franklin Ave.  
Buffalo, New York 14202

Dear County Clerk Jacobs:

*Chris,*

Thank you for your letter to the undersigned dated January 30, 2015 where you proposed merging the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Social Services, using Monroe County as a basis for discussion. While I appreciate any proposal that seeks to improve services, I find your proposal to be a little misguided for the reasons stated herein.

The Monroe County Director of Mental Health, as you indicated in your letter, reports to their Commissioner of Human Services. Consequently, there are just as many officials overseeing the Social Services and Mental Health work as there are in Erie County. The difference is the Director of Mental Health is a lower-level employee in Monroe County.

Individuals suffering mental illness are among the most vulnerable in our community, and they deserve a dedicated leader who will not have to also navigate the multitude of issues that often arise in the Department of Social Services. It is therefore imperative that the official directly overseeing mental disability services to over 48,000 residents report directly to the County Executive so these programs receive the support and attention it deserves. Like the majority of counties in New York State, I believe the significance of mental health services requires it to have a Department dedicated to it.

You state in your letter that combining the two positions would significantly increase the salary for one Commissioner. Implicit in this proposal is that (1) there would be no need for an individual in charge to make decisions below a unified commissioner; and (2) Erie County would be able to attract a higher-caliber candidate that would be able to institute changes that will improve performance. As noted above, Monroe County still has a Director of Mental Health who is paid at a commensurate salary for such a position. If the commissionerships were merged any cost savings would be negligible, because we would still need to have a position of Director of Mental Health, whether it is called Director of Mental Health or First Assistant Commissioner for Mental Health, and the salary and fringe benefit associated with it, as well as a merged Commissioner of Social Services.

However, regardless of the creativity and experience of a Commissioner, no single individual is able to adequately supervise more than 25 programs without a strong team underneath them. Absent from your proposal, however, are suggestions to ensure that other leaders within a merged Department have the skills and talents necessary to follow through on the Commissioner's strategy. Additionally, it

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has been restrictive state regulations and antiquated civil service rules that have stifled progress in these areas, not any one leader's skill.

Moreover, your proposal ignores the realities that the Department of Mental Health plays an instrumental role with the Department of Health in addressing mental health issues of inmates at the Holding Center and Correctional Facility. The Department of Mental Health is a key stakeholder in the discussions and settlements entered into by Erie County with the United States Department of Justice ("DOJ") and the New York State Commission of Correction ("COC"). Any effort to eliminate the Department of Mental Health and merge its operation into the Department of Social Services, a department neither the DOJ nor COC has had any contact with, could be viewed harshly by the DOJ and COC and result in the County not achieving Substantial Compliance with the DOJ Settlement Order.

Because you may not be aware, the County has agreed, through the stipulated settlement order and other decisions rendered by United States District Court Judge William M. Skretny, to have the Department of Mental Health take certain actions on behalf of our inmate community with certain developmental and mental disabilities. Elimination of the Department would be poorly received by the DOJ, and might not even be possible without its concurrence. The County has made much progress in meeting the requirements of both the DOJ and COC since my administration has taken office, and knowing how adverse both agencies are to any change from agreed upon protocols and court orders, I could envision such an action as having a detrimental effect on the positive strides we have taken during the past three years.

You further state in your letter that these two Departments "...logically should be under one organizational structure." However, the Departments of Social Services and Mental Health are already under one organizational structure: Erie County government. The Commissioners of these Departments report to me and the Departments communicate, coordinate and collaborate on a regular basis. These Departments complement one another and are able to provide residents with the appropriate intervention based on their unique needs. When there is a resident with both mental health and social service needs, the Departments work cooperatively together.

Finally, you hypothesized there would be elimination of duplication of services and cost savings through merging these positions. Examining the matter more fully, it is doubtful significant cost savings would materialize. All of the positions in the current Department of Mental Health would have to be retained, as there are no comparable positions in the Department of Social Services to absorb the additional work and level of expertise needed to provide the service mandated to be provided by New York State. Additionally, the Department of Mental Health reports to a number of state agencies that have limited or no contact with the Department of Social Services, whether it be the New York State Office of Mental Health, Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services, or the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services.

In 2002, then-County Executive Joel Giambra presented a similar proposal, commonly known as the Blueprint for Change. That proposal included merging the Departments of Social Services, Mental Health, Health, Probation, and Senior Services. Taxpayers were promised savings through an amorphous integrated service delivery model. However, despite countless hours and money spent on bringing this proposal to fruition, this model could never be made to work and was abandoned. County Executive Christopher Collins charged his staff to examine issues related to the merger of human service

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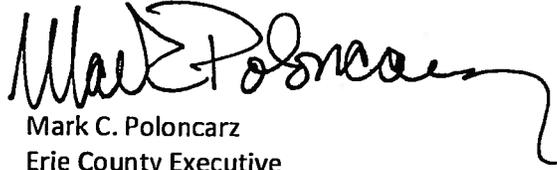
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departments and functions in order to come up with appreciable savings; yet no recommendation to merge the two departments was ever recommended. I expect that savings would be just as difficult to extract today if a merger of the Departments of Social Services and Mental Health were attempted.

While I appreciate any suggestion which could promote real substantive reform and better service delivery, I, as well as the departments that serve the people of Erie County, do not believe a merger of the two departments and commissionerships would achieve such an objective.

Sincerely,



Mark C. Poloncarz  
Erie County Executive

MCP/mt

cc: Erie County Legislature  
Carol Dankert-Maurer, Commissioner of Social Services  
Michael Siragusa, Esq., Erie County Attorney  
Michelle Parker, Esq., First Assistant Erie County Attorney  
David Spadone, Dir. of Fiscal Administration, Dept. of Mental Health  
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