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COUNTY OF ERIE
MARK C. POLONCARZ
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

GALE R. BURSTEIN, MD, MPH
COMMISSIONER OF HEALTH

July 7, 2016

Legislators Dixon & Lorigo
Old County Hall 4th Floor
92 Franklin St.
Buffalo, NY 14202

Re: July 6th 2016 Letter on Crisis Services Hotline

Dear Legislators Lorigo and Dixon,

First of all let me thank you for your support of the Erie County Department of Health and the Erie County Department of Mental Health's efforts to confront the opioid crisis our community is facing. Many important programs are already in place and saving lives including needle exchange and disposal services, prescription drug drop-offs, community wide naloxone distribution and training, buprenorphine training for physicians, local opioid prescribing guidelines, and proper opioid prescribing continuing education classes for physicians. In addition, with funding from Communication 6E-9 "Opioid Crisis Response Plan", two full-time staff members have been hired by my department and have been hard at work on anti-opioid efforts since late May.

The final piece of Communication 6E-9, the Crisis Services hotline, has been in development since before May 12th when funding was finalized. We currently plan for a launch of the hotline in the first week of August. Although we had originally aimed to have the hotline operational within 6-10 weeks of funding being finalized, a slight delay has occurred due to modest staffing challenges and the recent 8 week-long strike by Verizon CWA workers employed in the copper landline division. The strike led to a significant back-log of landline work for Verizon customers.

As you noted in your letter, staffing for the Crisis Services hotline has met with some challenges but these are being worked through. As of today four hotline staff members have been hired and they will be beginning work next week. Incentive pay options for new hires are being reviewed, and existing staff is being cross-trained to support the hotline as well. Crisis Services is combing through many applicants to find the right individuals to do this important work. For example 30 applications were reviewed for the Program Supervisor position.

Significant work has been completed around the hotline. Direct linkage systems have been developed and vetted by Crisis Services legal consul. Specialized call log reporting systems are being developed for case management and follow-up. Development of the phone system is well underway with testing to occur next week. Organizational meetings are being held with outpatient and inpatient service providers, and the peer response network to establish referral systems. In addition, all staff is being trained on hotline operations, resource review, addictions review, and call flow procedure.

While we are all eager to get the hotline up and running as soon as possible, it is important that we have a smooth and successful launch. Through careful collaboration and planning, the goal of everyone involved is to ensure that we provide the best possible service to our community as we confront the opioid epidemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gale", followed by a long, horizontal, wavy line that extends to the right.

Gale R. Burstein MD, MPH, FAAP

Erie County Commissioner of Health

Cc: Michael Ranney, CRC-R, LMHC, Commissioner of Mental Health