

Editorial: Feds should allocate stimulus funds to build crisis unit for children on Treasure Coast

By Editorial board

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While \$124 million for a proposed bridge for the southern Treasure Coast has taken center stage in the debate over the use of federal stimulus dollars, a dramatically smaller project that would help local children has languished in the background.

It's been in the shadows much like many mental health issues. It's time for that to change.

The issue is New Horizons of the Treasure Coast's plan to build a 20-bed children's crisis stabilization center. The nonprofit, the principal mental health provider in Indian River, Martin, St. Lucie and Okeechobee counties, has planned to build the facility since a crisis center for children in Port St. Lucie closed after being damaged in the 2004 hurricanes. The project, proposed for land near New Horizons headquarters on Midway Road in St. Lucie County, has been stalled by a lack of money.

With only three crisis beds for youngsters available on the Treasure Coast — at Indian River Medical Center's Center for Emotional and Behavioral Health — New Horizons often is forced to ship children at high risk of killing themselves or others to inpatient centers in West Palm Beach or Orlando, according to John Romano, New Horizons' president and chief executive officer.

It's not exactly the best situation for parents seeking help. Serving these families on the Treasure Coast must be a priority. Romano said the Midway Road unit would be full within a matter of weeks.

The problem is that New Horizons, which has had financial operating challenges due to increased case load, clients' loss of health insurance and state funding cutbacks, has raised only about one-third of the \$4.85 million projected to build the 13,000-square-foot center.

It has applied for a \$3.5 million grant with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, but has been rebuffed in a letter from the agency's secretary, Kathleen Sebelius. Why? Because her department has \$18.8 billion in stimulus funding available, much of it limited to Indian and public health centers. Mental health centers are not specifically denoted.

That's unfortunate.

Just as Florida has asked for (and received) a waiver to obtain funding for its K-12 schools, Romano has enlisted the Treasure Coast's federal delegation, including Reps. Alcee Hastings, Tom Rooney and Bill Posey, and the state's U.S. senators, to lobby Sebelius.

Getting funds to build the center is not only essential to area children with critical mental health issues, but construction would create an estimated 100 or more jobs, Romano said. He would have to hire an additional 50 people to run the unit. That kind of job creation, with an estimated annual payroll of \$1.3 million, is something local chambers of commerce should support.

This project fits President Barack Obama's criteria of "shovel-ready." It is ready to be built now to serve the citizens of Florida. Mental health is a key component of health care. Treasure Coast leaders should get front and center to work with New Horizons to help persuade Sebelius to grant a waiver.

