

Originally published Wednesday, February 26, 2014 at 7:10 PM

## State lawmakers propose more money for mental-health care

The budget plans unveiled this week by the Republican-run state Senate and Democrat-controlled state House each proposed new dollars for the mental-health-care system.

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OLYMPIA — After weeks of promising to address mental-health care, state lawmakers appear to be backing up the talk.

The budget plans unveiled this week by the Republican-run Senate and the Democrat-controlled House each proposed new dollars for a mental-health-care system that has been increasingly criticized.

While the proposed additions are relatively small — \$14.8 million in the Senate plan announced Monday and \$25.4 million in the House plan announced Wednesday — they are significant because they come during a legislative session in which little new money is available.

Overall, the Senate wants to increase state spending by roughly \$96 million, and the House wants to raise it some \$240 million.

“We deal with regular problems down here all the time,” House budget-writer Ross Hunter said, “but to me, and I think to a lot of other people, this is a huge problem.

“We’re like last in the country in community mental-health funding,” the Medina Democrat added.

A [recent national report](#) ranked Washington 49th in the country in total number of hospital beds for mentally ill patients.

Hunter and others specifically mentioned the problem of “psychiatric boarding,” when involuntarily committed residents are forced to wait in hospital emergency rooms, often tied down, for hours or days before receiving treatment. Boarding took place more than 4,000 times in 2012, [The Seattle Times reported in October](#).

Hunter’s budget would fund 48 new mental-health treatment beds in King, Thurston and Mason counties, as well as in Eastern Washington; create three new intensive outpatient treatment teams in King, Pierce and Spokane counties; and allocate \$3 million in flexible funding, mostly to King County.

Most of the money would be tied to [House Bill 2725](#), which would expand involuntary commitments by allowing people to appeal to a court if county officials decline to commit a mentally ill family member.

The measure, called Joel's Law, was conceived by [the parents of Joel Reuter](#), a 28-year-old with bipolar disorder who was killed by police last July after firing at officers near his Capitol Hill condo.

Doug and Nancy Reuter had tried unsuccessfully for weeks to get their son committed before the standoff.

The Senate proposal would not directly fund House Bill 2725, but it would add 16 treatment beds immediately and 16 more eventually.

Both budget proposals would also provide new money for staff overtime at state psychiatric hospitals and about \$8 million to provide intensive children's mental-health services to comply with a recent legal settlement. The program is [expected ultimately to cost](#) nearly \$40 million annually.

The competing proposals will be negotiated between the chambers during the session's last two weeks.

Part of the debate will kick off Monday, when House Bill 2725 is expected to get a hearing in the Senate budget committee.

Chairman Andy Hill, R-Redmond, said he would consider the mental-health piece of the House proposal alongside everything else.

House Bill 2725 supporters described the House plan as a huge step for an idea that had been seen as a longshot because of its high cost.

"It's just amazing," said Doug Reuter, speaking by telephone from his home state of Minnesota, where he was working to get a similar bill considered by lawmakers there.

The Minnesota bill is set to be introduced Thursday, he said.

By Monday, he plans to return to the fight in Olympia.

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