

May 10, 2016

The Honorable Jay Inslee
Governor, State of Washington
P.O. Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

RE: Senate Bill 6656 Vetoes

Dear Governor Inslee,

We wish to communicate on behalf of our members our concern over your recent decision to veto significant portions of Senate Bill 6656. Improving care for behavioral health patients continues to be a top priority for the hospital association. Hospitals across the state are struggling with how to handle the increasing need for patient access to inpatient psychiatric services. Our state needs to both expand inpatient capacity as well as stem the need for hospitalization through prevention and better upstream treatment.

Washington's community hospitals are working to add capacity, but the state hospitals play a critical role in the care continuum. Improvements in care at and access to state hospitals is critical to delivering appropriate health care for all Washington residents.

Across the state, patients are waiting in hospitals for needed beds at Western and Eastern State Hospitals and unable to be transferred. This is creating a logjam in treatment and access that affects the entire mental health system. Making improvements and increasing access to state psychiatric hospital care are changes that need to happen now.

Senate Bill 6656 was an important element in delivering the bipartisan support to enable substantial funding for Western and Eastern State Hospitals this session. We know your actions do not threaten the short-term availability of funds, but we are concerned it may be more difficult to obtain bipartisan support for these efforts in the future. In particular, removing legislative direction in Section 7 for expenditures from the behavioral health innovation fund could threaten future investments in the fund.

We also are concerned about the consequences of not allowing changes in state law for staffing. Western State Hospital has not been able to recruit psychiatrists, given the shortage of providers and their willingness to work at the salary levels offered. Sections 9 and 12 would have allowed psychiatric nurses with advanced degrees and physician assistants to fill vacant psychiatrist positions at the hospital. Using these providers is standard practice at community hospitals that provide inpatient mental health services. They are highly competent professionals qualified to do the job. Hiring additional staff would enable the state hospitals to increase bed capacity and alleviate "boarding" issues as our hospitals try to place patients who need to be involuntarily detained for their own or others' safety. We understand you have directed an alternative process, but we are concerned that process will be slower.

Our members were interested in Section 2, which you also vetoed. This section would have allowed state funding to be used at alternative locations for treatment and investment in community services that would divert patients from the need for inpatient care. With the magnitude of the current crisis, we believe the state should be open to exploring all options on how to deliver care for acutely ill patients with mental health needs.

We know issues around the state psychiatric hospitals will be ongoing both in the executive and legislative branches. We would very much appreciate the opportunity to work together moving forward to ensure the stability of our state's psychiatric hospitals.

Sincerely,



Cassie Sauer
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cc: Senator Mark Schoesler
Senator John Braun
Senator Andy Hill
Senator Sharon Nelson
Senator Steve O'Ban
Senator Kevin Ranker
Representative Frank Chopp
Representative Bruce Chandler
Representative Eileen Cody
Representative Hans Dunshee
Representative Mark Hargrove
Representative Laurie Jinkins
Representative Dan Kristiansen
Representative Joe Schmick
Representative J.T. Wilcox