Autism Center Is Set to Target Need

A New Mental-Health Campus Is Opening in Westchester Campus

By LAURA KUSISTO

Children and adults with autism will begin arriving this month at a new autism center tucked into a 214-acre mental-health campus in Westchester County, which promises to help provide an answer to the piecemeal care currently available to many.

The center, run by NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital and the medical schools at Cornell and Columbia universities, attempts to address what experts say is a significant challenge: autism rates are rising around the country but access to treatment lags well behind.

One in 88 children—the majority of them boys—have been diagnosed with a disorder on the autism spectrum, according to the Center for Disease Control. The cause of the increase remains undetermined.

Families recount driving around the city to see nutritionists, behavioral therapists, speech therapists or psychologists scattered around the metro area. Some travel to other states, such as Massachusetts, to gain access to certain treatments. That scenario becomes even more difficult once children graduate from school, and even fewer services are readily available.

Additionally, many treatments for autism aren't covered by health insurance. Some therapies can require more than 20 hours a week of one-on-one attention and can cost tens of thousands of dollars a year.

"There are a number of very good child psychiatry programs in New York City, but they provide primarily assessments," said Dr. Catherine Lord, director for the Center for Autism and the Developing Brain. "They're not accessible to people who want to use their insurance or are on Medicaid…it's just not well coordinated."

The new center, which will treat about 150 to 200 patients in the first year, tries to address some of those issues. It will offer diagnoses, as well as a variety of continuing services provided by psychiatrists, speech therapists, behavioral therapists, social workers and occupational therapists. Families could also have access to more cutting edge treatment by participating in research conducted by scientists with the affiliated universities.
University officials also said they would structure services to make it easier for families to get insurance coverage, but said they don't expect it to be profitable.

"As with a lot of things in health care, this isn't something that makes money," said Dr. Steven Corwin, chief executive of NewYork-Presbyterian.

Finding a space for the center, which is the result of some six years of planning and fundraising, posed significant challenges. Ultimately, the founders settled on a former men's gymnasium on a NewYork-Presbyterian campus in White Plains.

The landmarked gym features 30-foot ceilings, so to create a more intimate feel, the center is structured as a "treatment village" with small, brightly colored houses arranged on a grid.

Experts said there is demand for centers such as this that provide comprehensive care.

"There aren't enough quality programs in the public school system, nor are there really enough private programs. It's a huge challenge that families face," said Kim Mack Rosenberg, president of the New York chapter of the National Autism Association.

But Ms. Mack Rosenberg said given the variety of services many patients need, it's unlikely any one place could meet all of them. "I'm not sure that one-stop shopping completely will work," she said.

The new autism center is the result of a push by a group of local parents, known as New York Collaborates for Autism, which helped raised more than $11 million for the project.

Former employment lawyer Ilene Lainer's son Ari was diagnosed with autism 14 years ago, just before he turned 2 years old. Former Wall Street executive Laura Slatkin's son David was diagnosed when he was less than 1, in 2000. The women started the organization 10 years ago initially to create a charter school for children with autism, which opened in 2005. But they said the treatment options for their children were also lacking.

"It's devastating, a life altered. The picture isn't happy, and it's difficult to find help in one place," Ms. Lainer said.

Ultimately, the founders also hope to expand the center to create housing, where autistic adults could live with families who provide continuing support.