

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

Health care is often a depressing news topic, in that the news tends to focus on the fact that health care, in America, is a mess. This is true broadly — per person, we spend more on care than any other country but [perform worse](#) on most health outcomes — but it's also true for every specific type of medical care. Abortion care: [A mess](#). Gender-affirming care: [A mess](#). Mental health care: Possibly the biggest mess of all.



The Big Takeaway

Here's a quick statistical snapshot of our mental health care system (or lack thereof). [From 2019 to 2020](#), more than 20% of American adults experienced a mental illness, but fewer than half of them received treatment, according to the nonprofit Mental Health America. Of those, 42% didn't seek care because they could not afford it. Nearly a third said they simply couldn't find the type of treatment they needed.

In one form or another, access is usually the main barrier to behavioral health care, even for people with insurance coverage. [Almost half](#) of Americans live in an area with a shortage of mental health professionals. Nationwide, there are at least 350 individuals for every one licensed provider. In some places, the ratio is twice that.



*A deceptively complex puzzle.
(Photo by Getty Images)*

Even when there are resources allocated specifically for behavioral health care, patients can fall through the cracks. Last September, a 33-year-old man with developmental disabilities and autism was transferred to a West Virginia psychiatric hospital by Westbrook, a behavioral health provider that receives state funding in exchange for providing patients with community placements. The man, identified as JP, was marked for discharge a month later. But he's still there, and his mother has no idea why, [West Virginia Watch reported](#).

The state-run facility — William R. Sharpe, Jr. Hospital — has a long history of [abusing](#) and “warehousing” patients without [plans to treat](#) or [discharge them](#). Patients who do not require long-term hospitalization, including JP, often wind up there anyway, thanks to a shortage of community placement options that persists despite a dedicated state funding stream. The hospital was never designed for long-term housing, and once they're admitted, patients often languish there, spending hours alone or surrounded only by staff members.

Some, like JP, also show signs of physical trauma. In June, a patient advocate found JP with his face bloodied and his body marked with shoe-shaped bruises. A spokesperson for the state Department of Health and Human Resources said

the hospital believed the injuries were “likely the result of a fall.” State inspectors determined that no abuse had occurred, but a separate investigation by Legal Aid concluded that JP had been physically harmed “by an unknown staff member.”



William R. Sharpe, Jr. Hospital, a state-run psychiatric facility in West Virginia that often provides long-term housing for patients even though it was never meant to house patients long-term.

(Photo by Kristian Thacker/West Virginia Watch)

Patient advocates concurred with the Legal Aid findings.

“We believe that JP was kicked repeatedly and held down repeatedly with somebody’s shoe that caused the bruising,” said Mike Folio, legal director for Disability Rights West Virginia, the state’s federally mandated protection and advocacy system for people with disabilities. “We know JP is being abused.”

Little has been done to address it. Last year, lawmakers asked Gov. Jim Justice [to investigate](#) patient abuse at the hospital; nothing came of the request. [Efforts to increase accountability](#) at DHHR [are ongoing](#), but the agency continues to struggle to provide an adequate number of community placements for patients. The state health department is working to address the problem, according to a spokesperson. All the while, JP waits.

This type of bureaucratic failure is a fixture, not a fluke — and it often results in tragedy. Six months before a gunman [killed 18 people](#) in Maine, his family alerted local law enforcement officers that he was in distress and had access to firearms. Four months later, the man’s Army Reserve unit followed up with the Sagadahoc County Sheriff’s office to request a wellness check. But officers failed to locate him, [the Maine Morning Star reported](#).



*A police officer stands beside a roadblock outside Schemengees Bar & Grille in Lewiston, where eight people were killed in a mass shooting last month.
(Photo by Emma Davis/ Maine Morning Star)*

When Robert Card’s family first pinged the sheriff’s office in May, deputies contacted his Army Reserve unit, which “assured” them he would get medical attention. That had changed by September, when the unit asked the sheriff’s office to visit Card’s home for a wellness check. When no one answered the door after two separate visits, the sheriff’s office sent an alert to inform other law enforcement agencies to be on the lookout for Card, who they said should be considered “armed and dangerous,” according to a statement released Monday.

In a follow-up call, Card’s Army Reserve commander told a sheriff’s deputy that Card no longer had access to weapons from the unit. Officials were still trying to get treatment for him, the commander added, but “thought it best to let Card

have time to himself.”

Theoretically, this should have been enough [to trigger Maine’s “yellow-flag law,”](#) which allows police to temporarily confiscate firearms from anyone deemed by a medical provider to be a danger to themselves or others. It appears that the sheriff’s office took steps toward invoking that policy, most notably by contacting Card’s brother, who promised he would “work to secure” Card’s firearms and to call back if the situation escalated. A month later, the sheriff’s office canceled the missing-persons alert despite never locating Card, an apparent violation of state policy. It’s not clear how or why that decision was made, or why there was no additional follow-up.

Experts said the problem is bureaucracy rather than incompetence. Yellow-flag laws are the more complicated cousin of the better-known red-flag laws, which permit family members and friends to directly petition the court to remove firearms from a person in crisis, allowing the process to begin without waiting for a police interaction. Those laws also do not typically require a mental health evaluation, clearing an administrative hurdle that can further delay confiscation. By comparison, Maine’s law is “cumbersome,” “not straightforward” and steeped in “layers of bureaucracy,” said Michael Rocque, an associate professor of sociology at Bates College in Lewiston.

“You’re balancing people’s individual freedoms and rights with the public’s safety,” he said. “And that’s never going to be an easy equation to solve.”

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Also Trending

New Jersey Democrats remained bullish on a transition to renewable energy despite the cancellation of two 1,100-megawatt wind projects off the state's coast. Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, framed the loss as a minor hiccup in his plan to shift to 100% clean energy by 2035, [the New Jersey Monitor reported](#).

“While today is a setback, the future of offshore wind in New Jersey remains strong,” Murphy said in a statement. “In recent weeks we’ve seen a historically high number of bids into New Jersey’s ongoing third offshore wind solicitation.”



A nice breeze!

(Photo by Sarah Vogelsong/Virginia Mercury)

Ørsted, a Danish wind company, [nixed the projects](#) on Tuesday, citing supply chain issues and rising interest rates. The company's CEO said Wednesday he expects to pay between \$1.1 billion and \$1.5 billion in cancellation fees and penalties, most of which will go to vendors outside of New Jersey. But the state will still net around \$300 million, thanks to a clause [in an incentive package](#) approved for the project in July.

Democratic legislative leaders criticized Ørsted for bailing on the projects but reiterated their support for wind energy in general — with a few stipulations.

“We will continue to move forward and create a strong green energy economy that is both manufactured and constructed with union labor,” Senate President Nicholas Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin said in a joint statement. “However, these projects cannot be realized without absolute ratepayer protection.”

A third project remains in the works, at least for now. That development — a 1,510-megawatt windfarm approved in June 2021 — is helmed by Atlantic Shores, which warned in July that it would need public dollars to keep the project viable. Ørsted made a similar proclamation before canceling its contracts.

Greenery: [Arkansas panel approves Buffalo River water-quality project over trail connectivity proposal](#) ... [Iowa town with history of discolored water is cited for lack of certifications](#) ... [EPA restores regular water flow in Kansas creek devastated by 2022 oil pipeline break](#) ... [Spill of plastic pellets in Maryland reveals the polluting potential of ‘nurdles’](#) ... [Rutting deer are wreaking havoc on Minnesota roadways, study finds](#) ... [Bold Nebraska’s Jane Kleeb exchanges pipeline fight for clean energy with \\$3 million award](#) ... [This may be the healthiest building in New Hampshire](#) ... [Water projects in New Mexico to receive \\$235M from Interior for tribal water fund settlements](#) ... [Court blocks Pennsylvania’s entrance into multi-state carbon cap-and-trade program](#) ... [Court case on fate of Washington’s Snake River dams postponed at least 45 more days](#)



From The Newsrooms

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One Last Thing

HBO executives instructed staff members to create “a secret army” of fake social media accounts to troll critics who panned the network’s programming, according to text conversations [reviewed by Rolling Stone](#).



wow wow so sneaky
(via [Giphy](#))

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