

NEWS



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Mayor John F. Street Signs Executive Order Creating New Office of Behavioral Health and Mental Retardation Services

PHILADELPHIA — In a public ceremony, Mayor John F. Street today signed Executive Order No. 2003-10-23, establishing a formal Office of Behavioral Health and Mental Retardation Services within Philadelphia's municipal government.

Joining Mayor Street in the Mayor's Reception Room in City Hall were Pennsylvania Secretary of Public Welfare Estelle Richman, Managing Director Phil Goldsmith, Mike Covone, deputy commissioner of the Office of Mental Health/Mental Retardation, Joseph Rodgers, executive director for the Mental Health Association of Southeastern PA, Mark Bencivengo, executive director of CODAAP, Nancy Lucas, chief executive officer for Community Behavioral Health, Valerie Byrd, deputy director for Consumer Satisfaction Team, Inc., and dozens of individuals representatives advocates and consumers for behavioral.

"Today is a day of celebration and the culmination of many years of reform," Mayor Street observed. "Today, we acknowledge a success story – the continuing revolution in service delivery known as the Philadelphia Behavioral Health System—and we take steps to give this system, along with the Office of Mental Retardation Services, the permanent home and stature that they deserve. This is a step that the advocates, stakeholders, and consumers of behavioral health and mental retardation services have earned, and I congratulate you all."

"Above all," Mayor Street continued, "I congratulate our good friend visiting us from Harrisburg, who in 1997 persuaded two skeptics – Ed Rendell and me – to go forward with her vision of a unified behavioral health system — Estelle Richman. Today, thanks in large part to her leadership, our behavioral health system is recognized as a shining star around the nation, and this Executive Order will give it the opportunity to shine even more brightly for years to come. I am excited about this very significant milestone and the new opportunities it will provide for people who use these vital services. This Executive Order lays the groundwork for continued reform, for further integration of services into an even more effective continuum of care, and for further cost-saving efficiencies."

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Richman, now Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and formerly Mayor Street's Managing Director and Director of Social Services, praised the decision to create the new office. Calling it a dream of hers for the past several years, she said, "I am thrilled that the Mayor is taking this bold action, and I pledge the Commonwealth's support in working in partnership with this new office."

Under the Executive Order, the three major components of Philadelphia's Behavioral Health System—the Philadelphia Office of Mental Health, the Coordinating Office for Drug and Alcohol Abuse Programs, and Community Behavioral Health – will be integrated, along with the Office of Mental Retardation Services, into a single office headed by a department-level official whose sole responsibility will be to direct these programs. Previously, these four components have operated as a part of the Department of Public Health. While they have successfully coordinated their services in recent years, they have done so unsupported by any formal structure within Philadelphia's government. The creation of the new office will provide a permanent place within Philadelphia's government for behavioral and mental retardation services, enabling both the Health Department and the new office to focus on their respective missions more fully than ever before.

Mayor Street and Managing Director Phil Goldsmith also announced that Mike Covone, Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services, will be in charge of implementing the next steps required to establish the new Office. The Executive Order takes effect in 60 days.

"The creation of the new Office will not happen overnight," the Mayor observed, "and will require a sensitivity to all those affected, including our represented workforce. I am delighted that Mike has agreed to serve in this vital capacity. He has the utmost respect of his colleagues, of consumers of behavioral health and mental retardation services, of advocates, and of providers." Further, the Mayor announced that the Managing Director will convene and chair a search committee to find a permanent Director.

"In addition, I want to publicly express my appreciation to two of the finest public servants any city could hope to have," Mayor Street said. "Mark Bencivengo, Executive Director of the Coordinating Office for Drug and Alcohol Abuse Programs (CODAAP); and Nancy Lucas, Chief Executive Officer of Community Behavioral Health, they have collaborated with Mike Covone to operate our behavioral health and mental retardation programs in what I consider to be an exceptional display of collegiality and leadership."

By formally creating a departmental-level Office of Behavioral Health and Mental Retardation Services, the Executive Order will:

- Acknowledge the importance and size of the mission at stake by creating a single agency responsible solely for behavioral health and mental retardation services. Approximately 100,000 adults and children receive services from the Behavioral Health System each year, and Mental Retardation Services supports 12,000 persons annually. The total operating budget for the four components is in excess of one billion dollars in federal, state, and city funding; this amount is greater than that of any City department. The new office will have its own independent representation with the Mayor and Managing Director, its own budget meetings, and its own testimony before City Council—all steps intended to enhance the capacity to function effectively within government.

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- Provides for the appointment of a single official to head the new Office. This official, appointed by the Mayor, will report to the Managing Director. It is essential to have a single individual responsible for governing this billion-dollar endeavor.
- Reflects reality. Since 2000, the City's behavioral health and mental retardation services agencies have operated fairly autonomously as a group under the leadership of the Social Services Director and Managing Director. This arrangement was based on understandings among the Managing Directors, Director of Social Services, Health Commissioner, and heads of the agencies. With the creation of the new Office, the formal structure of government will conform to changes in governance that have already occurred.
- Creates an opportunity for new leadership. To continue to move the office forward in creative, visionary ways, it is essential to have a strong leader with expertise in behavioral health and mental retardation, strong management skills, and a history of advocacy for the people this office will serve.
- Lays the groundwork for further improvement in the integrated delivery of behavioral health and mental retardation services. Opportunities for further integration clearly exist, which the Executive Order will encourage and support. The Behavioral Health System is currently designing and implementing a two-stage strategic plan to serve as a roadmap for further restructuring the system.
- Will not place any additional burden on the City's General Fund. More than 98 percent of the funding for the new office comes from state and federal sources; the City's contribution consists of matching funds.

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