

SUNY forges ahead with SUNY Downstate plans amid critics' concerns

The plan also includes a \$300 million space that would include a center for student and academic services, urgent care, and out-patient services.



BY: KATELYN CORDERO | 02/07/2024 05:00 AM EST



"If everything is dire, if everything is falling apart, come to us and show it to the community," Sen. Zellnor Myrie said in an interview Tuesday. | Katelyn Cordero/POLITICO

ALBANY, New York — In a booming and emotional plea for Downstate Medical Center, which is slated to [lose its central building and relocate services](#), Sen. Zellnor Myrie is calling for a thought-out process rather than rushing a \$300 million transformation fund into the state budget.

The Brooklyn Democrat along with advocates and fellow lawmakers are at odds with the plan by SUNY Chancellor John King and Gov. Kathy Hochul to shutter the Brooklyn teaching hospital's central building and relocate services to Kings County across the street.

The plan also includes a \$300 million space that would include a center for student and academic services, urgent care, and out-patient services.

“If everything is dire, if everything is falling apart, come to us and show it to the community,” Myrie said in an interview Tuesday. “The community is not stupid. We could have a mature conversation. But because we have not seen that information, because they have not been transparent, it is very difficult for us to trust this process.”

In new plans shared with POLITICO, SUNY said it will conduct community outreach over the next month. Mid-March, a report with findings and recommendations will be released.

The overall transformation — if a fund is approved in the state budget — would take place over the next two years. The hospital would be relocated from its current building to a wing exclusively for Downstate across the street at Kings County Hospital. Downstate would need its annual \$100 million deficit to be paid for two years while the transition is made.

A \$300 million fund is being requested to create a center for student and academic services for Downstate Health Sciences University, along with urgent care, out-patient services and a health disparities institute. It would be located nearby on a vacant multi-level parking lot.

King said he is on the same side as his critics who are aiming to save Downstate, but the plan he shared is the “only viable path forward that’s on the table.”

“Staying the status quo means the hospital will close sometime this summer — given the \$100 million deficits. We will no longer have the funds to be able to continue to operate,” King said in an interview with POLITICO. “The building is really at risk of catastrophic failure... So this year, the budget needs to include a path forward on both the deficit and the facilities.”

Senate Higher Education Chair Toby Stavisky said she considers the plans outlined by King to be a closure, not a transformation. She noted the hospital served as a Covid-only safety net during the pandemic and should continue to be provided with funding by the state.

“I’m troubled by the fact that there seems to be such a rush on this when the problem has been there for 15 years,” Stavisky said in an interview. “There’s got to be a way to stem that outflow of cash and, at the same time, take care of the needs of Central Brooklyn. Because the people deserve the same health care as anywhere else, it shouldn’t be determined by a zip code.”

As for the criticism of the plan, King said if the state were to provide funding to cover the deficit but not address the failing infrastructure, it could still lead to a closure. He pushed back on the sentiment that the plan is a closure, emphasizing it is to “save Downstate.”

“We appreciate the passion for Downstate, we see Downstate as the gem of the system ... we want to protect that,” King said.

“In the absence of a commitment to a long-term plan, it would be just kicking the can down the road to the same question a year forward around the \$100 million deficit, assuming that there is no further failure of the building in the interim,” he added.

On Tuesday, lawmakers and advocates expressed emotional pleas for the medical center during a rally at the Capitol.

Many expressed anger at the lack of transparency surrounding SUNY's plan. That sentiment was shared by state Health Commissioner James McDonald during a budget hearing earlier in the month where he said he first heard of the plans through the media.

Stavisky said she learned about the plans for Downstate only the day before it was released to the public. She said the information she's been given is not enough to have a full understanding of what a transformation could look like and believes there should be more than one path forward.

[According to SUNY Downstate](#), replacing the hospital would cost \$3 billion over eight to 10 years and is "not fiscally possible." Stavisky says a rebuild is not something that should be immediately rejected.

"We've got to make sure that we get it right. For the residents of Central Brooklyn, but also for the state of New York — the students have to learn in a decent environment," Stavisky said. "I think one of the answers is to look at the possibility of perhaps rebuilding the hospital and phasing it in. There are ways that they can work with the community. And that has not occurred."

United University Professions President Fred Kowal said the union would like to see transparency and a plan that does not include the elimination of any jobs. The proposal from SUNY includes a 10 percent to 20 percent reduction of UUP employees at the teaching hospital.

"The governor has to make her intentions clear that she supports this hospital and that we need a coherent plan going forward to keep it vital and serving the community," Kowal said.

SUNY's plan going forward

While a significant amount of services would be relocated, SUNY noted that the plan is to prioritize providing primary and specialty care and ambulatory surgery, along with increased access to urgent care.

They are also looking to create the Brooklyn Institute for Health Equity — which King noted would be created through state and federal funding — to focus on research in health disparities.

SUNY outlined plans for five "themed focus groups and stakeholder sessions" to begin this month, which would help inform a report to be released a month from now.

The focus groups would include members of the community, advocates, Downstate staff and students, as well as community organizations and faith leaders.

Here are the topics for each focus group:

- Tackling health disparities in Central Brooklyn
- Training the healthcare workforce of tomorrow
- Building a secure future for Downstate staff
- Investing in an affordable, accessible community
- Envisioning a stronger Downstate for all of us

In addition to the outreach, SUNY said it plans to conduct an analysis of community health needs, hospital usage in the area, the "perilous" condition of the hospital's building and the patterns of its capacity.

"This is a new chapter for Downstate, one filled with challenges and opportunities," SUNY Downstate President Dr. Wayne Riley said in a statement. "Our community's input in shaping the transformation process will help us build a sustainable, vibrant future for this essential institution."

Victoria Blinn

Associate Account Manager, Pro
vblinn@politico.com
