



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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Mental health reform: It's already working

MADISON, Wis. – Despite decades of reports calling for a change, past and current members of the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors sat on their hands and failed the local community by neglecting to fix the county's broken mental health system.

It had become so bad an [award-winning series](#) by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel called it one of the most lopsided mental health systems in the country, and insisted it was draining county budgets by pouring additional money into expensive and inefficient hospital care rather than programs that could actually help more people.

While the community waited for meaningful improvements, thousands of citizens did not receive adequate care and some even died from abuse and neglect. William Knoedler, an independent doctor who was hired to examine six deaths in 2012 at the Milwaukee County Mental Health Complex, found the medical treatment there was so deficient the facility should be shut down. He also said he was “appalled at how the people of Milwaukee have tolerated” the poor quality of care at the complex.

But times have changed, thanks to [2013 Wisconsin Act 203](#), which we both authored.

The much-needed reforms, which the state Legislature passed 122-1 in 2014, have opened the door for the county to issue a request for proposal to secure a private or nonprofit provider to take over the program currently offered by the Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Division through the mental health complex. The group selected would begin providing acute care behavioral health services by early 2018.

By issuing an RFP that will close the aging mental health complex and move the county away from an institutionalized-based setting and more toward a community-based system of care, Act 203 is working exactly as planned. And it's also something that advocates, consumers, family members and health care professionals have requested for decades.

Their call is finally being answered, due in large part to the leadership of the recently-formed Milwaukee County Mental Health Board and County Executive Chris Abele.

But that vital guidance wouldn't have been possible without Act 203. The legislation, also known as [Senate Bill 565](#), transferred the county's primary responsibility of treating and caring for individuals experiencing mental health issues to the mental health board, which is comprised of members who collectively possess the professional credentials, expertise and personal experience required to effectively and efficiently manage the mental health system.

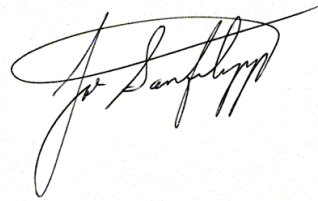
The board has been given the task of conceptualizing, planning, directing and implementing a mental health delivery system that relies on evidence-based best practices to provide high-quality care, and on sound business models to ensure overall costs are manageable.

So, now we have professionals and not politicians making the important decisions when it comes to the mental health of our citizens, and that has already and will continue to drastically improve the overall well-being and finances of Milwaukee County.

And that's precisely what Act 203 was intended to do.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leah Vukmir".

Sen. Leah Vukmir

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joe Sanfelippo".

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