

My name is Bridget McNally and I am a case manager for Erie County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Erie County, a program of Mental Health Advocates of WNY. CASA provides essential advocacy for abused and neglected children in the family courts throughout New York State. We are appointed to Erie County's most severe cases of abuse and neglect by Family Court Judges, and the program acts as an independent "set of eyes and ears" for the children we serve.

I have the privilege of working with some of the most vulnerable children in our community. The children I work with are oftentimes severely mentally ill and/or chronically suicidal. Many have lived experience in local hospitals and residential treatment facilities. I have supported children through the absolute lowest periods of their lives, experiences that were in no way whatsoever any fault of their own.

The specific incident I would like to address today is one I observed on August 2, 2022. I visited a child at ECMC's hospital based CPEP (Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program). This child was abandoned by her foster parent at CPEP, deemed too high a risk to the other children in the household after a suicide attempt. The hospital had declined to admit them, stating they did not meet the criteria. However, since the foster parent refused to pick the child up, there was nowhere for them to go, and they were moved to a "holding area."

This area was ~40x20 feet. There were 8 children in the room and 8 twin beds. The children slept in this same room they spend all their time in. There was no reprieve. The children kept what little personal effects they had underneath their mattresses. There was a small area to the side of the beds with chairs and tables. On the right side of the room is the nurse's station. I noted three staff in the room at that time, all on their phones. The only means of entertainment I noted was a television shared by all children, which was a constant source of arguments, and a deck of cards on a side table.

When I spoke privately to the child, they reported being bored and depressed. They spend all their time confined to that one room, with no opportunity to get fresh air or stretch their legs outside. The child had been there since July 20, 2022 – **THIRTEEN** days. Thirteen days spent in one room with no privacy, no mental health counseling or medication, and not even one opportunity to experience sunshine and fresh air. This was ECMC and Erie County Department

of Social Services' remedy to a child who had been through a mental health crisis and abandoned by the person they called their mother.

The child described a nightmare, completely credibly. There were abusive staff members that threatened to beat up and spit on the child. At times, the child was not served meals. Though the child was not deemed a high enough need to be admitted to the hospital, the use of physical and chemical restraints was employed twice – once because they had to go to the bathroom and were unable to for a long time. Throughout their time spent at ECMC, the child experienced daily vomiting and headaches, massive diarrhea, and worsened tremors of the hands and legs.

Thankfully, with the help of the Attorney For the Child, we were able to see the family court judge on behalf of the child who ordered them to be moved to an RTF (Residential Treatment Facility) as quickly as possible. This process lit a fire under the Erie County Department of Social Services and within days the child was moved to an RTF.

I fear for the other seven children who were in that room, going through similar situations, some who, as it was reported to me, had been stuck there for well over a month. Children who, due to circumstances out of their control, have been abandoned at a hospital – a place known as a “safe haven” for sick children. We need to do better for them. These children deserve a serious chance at rehabilitation and wellness.