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Board, exec skirmish over closing mental health clinics

WHITE PLAINS County Executive Rob Astorino's push to close mental health clinics is "heartless" and "premature," say some Democratic county legislators.

In the latest battle between branches that continued this week, lawmakers accused Astorino of being overzealous in closing four Westchester clinics, so they have a message for him: cease and desist until they sign off on a budget.

"If someone doesn't get the support they need, that could be dangerous to the people of Westchester," said Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers. "They need to stop until we get through this process." The board this week, by a 10-6 vote with one Democrat (Martin Rogowsky) against it, passed a nonbinding resolution calling on the administration to stop moving on the closure of four mental health clinics until the board passes a budget, scheduled Dec. 13.

Critics say Astorino has no real transition plan and is simply cutting ties with a fragile population, an assertion the administration disputes. Astorino in November proposed a \$1.78 billion budget with deep cuts to programs, services and staffing; shuttering mental health clinics in Peekskill and Mount Kisco by Dec. 31 and two in Yonkers and Mount Vernon by June.

Since then, the administration has sent out letters to 1,600 patients notifying them of the closures and started lining up not-for-profits to take over operations, which include counseling, therapy and caseload management for people with alcohol and substance-abuse problems and developmental disabilities.

In a budget meeting Thursday, legislators again challenged the administration over its decision and railed at leaders over keeping them out of discussions. They also questioned Commissioner Grant Mitchell

over the letter that went out to patients. "I think this letter informs people of the most important thing that your care won't be interrupted," Mitchell said.

The board's resolution has no standing and is not helpful, said Ned McCormack, Astorino's senior adviser and communications **director**. McCormack said the reasons to move quickly on the closures are: costs will skyrocket to \$3.7 million by 2013, up from \$1.2 million, a result of lower state reimbursements; there's an inherent conflict of interest for the county to act as both the watchdog and the provider; and there are plenty of nonprofits that can provide the services. "There's no reason to be competing with not-for-profits that can do this," he said. He said the county is working with patients' best interest in mind and can't shut any clinics without a transition plan in place the state doesn't allow that, he said. By shifting the **responsibility** to the private sector, along with other budget cuts, Astorino included a 1 percent tax-levy decrease.

Legislators say they, too, plan to deliver on that pledge, albeit with spending priorities they haven't yet announced. "None of us disagree with recalibrating the size of government," said Majority Leader Peter Harckham, D-Katonah. "All of these things are honest debates that we should have at the budget table." The county board Astorino have quarreled from the beginning of his term over their respective powers. This year, the board sued Astorino over his cuts to day-care programs without their approval . This latest attempt to stop Astorino is little more than "a game" that is unfair to the people using these facilities, said Legislator Gordon Burrows, R- Yonkers. "It really has no weight behind it," Burrows said of the resolution. "It's unfair not to advise these people."