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Planned Parenthood of Greater New York closing centers, laying off staff

No Capital Region locations cited for closure; organization says telehealth will preserve access

 **Bethany Bump**
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Planned Parenthood of Greater New York has begun laying off and furloughing employees and will temporarily close a dozen of its health centers, citing a strain on resources posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

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NEW YORK — Planned Parenthood of Greater New York has begun laying off and furloughing employees and will temporarily close a dozen of its health centers, citing a strain on resources posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The organization — which formed in January through the merger of five Planned Parenthood affiliates, including the Mohawk Hudson affiliate in the Capital Region — began terminating and furloughing staff on Monday, according to emails obtained by the Times Union. Staff will be reduced by about 28 percent across all

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The temporary closure of health centers will leave some communities, such as Rome and Oneida in Central New York, with no nearby options for sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing or abortion services, according to staff at those centers.

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“Our concern is that there was no effort to keep offices open, even one or two days per week, in those communities,” said one staff member who agreed to speak on condition of anonymity. “Those patients have a very hard time traveling, and don’t have access to care anywhere else.”

Planned Parenthood of Greater New York President and CEO Laura McQuade wrote in a letter to staff Monday that financial modeling showed losses for the affiliate ranging from \$20 million to \$32 million for the remainder of the year, depending on how long the pandemic lasts and its impact on fundraising.

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“Despite our best effort, this pandemic has put an incredible strain on our resources, and unfortunately, though not unexpectedly, the financial effects of this crisis are significant ... Sadly, these losses will be catastrophic for PPGNY if we do not take steps now to reduce the financial impact on our organization,” she wrote.

1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, which represents some of the affiliate’s workers, says it proposed alternative cost-cutting measures such as stopping 401K contributions for all unit members, reducing salaries over \$90,000 by 10 to 30 percent, reducing employment from full time to part time or per-diem, and reducing vacation time, in hopes of avoiding layoffs and furloughs, according to a letter obtained by the Times Union.

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our colleagues’ jobs,” the bargaining committee wrote in a letter to the organization. “Your unwillingness to consider our cost-cutting proposals indicates that you are less concerned with the current economic realities associated with the coronavirus pandemic and more committed to eliminating staff.”

Entire departments and programs such as clinical research, clinical training, government relations, youth educational programs and victim advocacy services have been “decimated” by the furloughing of a majority of their staff, the committee wrote.

In a statement to the Times Union, Planned Parenthood Greater New York spokeswoman Jacquelyn Marrero said a total of 135 staff members were laid off, 111 were furloughed and 35 were given reduced hours. Reductions were not specific to any one location and impacted all departments, she said. The goal, she said, is to bring back furloughed staff once the organization stabilizes.

Employees who were laid off, including 48 who were represented by the union, were provided with severance and full benefits based on tenure, she said. The affiliate offered and will pay for health insurance for laid off staff through June 30, she added.

“We appreciate the solutions that the bargaining unit brought forth, however they would not have allowed us to prevent the reduction in staff we need to make,” she said.

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The organization did not specify which locations had closed, but directed the Times Union to its website, which lists 12 locations as “temporarily closed.” None of those locations are in the Capital Region, where the affiliate operates seven centers. Centers that have closed are located in the Bronx, Glen Cove, Goshen, Hornell, Kingston, Massapequa, Monticello, Oneida, Rome, Staten Island and Watkins Glen. A mobile health center that operates out of Nassau County has also closed.

The facilities will reopen, Marrero said, as the pandemic and risk of infection recedes.

Access to care will not be jeopardized, she said, because patients can still receive services including birth control, emergency contraception, trans/nonbinary hormone therapy, STI screenings, and more through telemedicine.

But some services, such as abortion and STI testing, can not be provided virtually. Community members whose clinic has temporarily shut down will be referred to the next nearest clinic for those services during this time, she said.

In rural areas, with few other providers, that distance may pose obstacles, staff said.

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—ing significant losses before the pandemic hit and said they believe the crisis gave leadership cover to implement layoffs and closures it had already been planning. The organization did not respond to this allegation, and said only that the pandemic had forced its hand.

More than a month before the pandemic took hold in New York, however, McQuade emailed a copy of the affiliate's recently crafted budget to the "PPGNY Team" showing the organization was already projecting a \$6.2 million deficit for the first six months of the year and a \$10 million deficit for the full year.

"If that seems like a lot of money, it is," she wrote. "While it is not uncommon for organizations to experience deficits post-merger as a result of the investments required to integrate, moving forward, we need to break even with enough surplus to invest in staff, ongoing infrastructure needs, services, and programs, so our budget covers our expenses, much like we do in our own households."

The January merger of five New York affiliates — Planned Parenthoods of New York City, Nassau County, the Southern Finger Lakes, mid-Hudson Valley and Mohawk-Hudson — was intended to "strengthen and expand" sexual and reproductive health care across the state, the organization said in a news release last year.

But as the pandemic took hold in March, the newly merged Greater New York affiliate experienced a 50 percent drop in non-abortion visits and was forced to cancel major fundraising events, Marrero said. Philanthropic giving also began to slow down, she said.

"It is with deep regret that PPGNY was forced to make staff reductions across the organization," McQuade said in a statement to the Times Union. "This decision was not easy, but necessary, to get us through this challenging time and preserve the future of PPGNY once this pandemic recedes."

Abortion visits dipped slightly and began to recover around mid-March, Marrero said. Other providers also began referring more patients to PPGNY centers so that

Other Planned Parenthood affiliates in New York have kept their doors open through the pandemic, and insist they will continue to do so as long as they can.

The Upper Hudson affiliate — which serves Albany, Rensselaer, Columbia and Greene counties — said it has no plans to close centers, lay off staff or otherwise reduce hours.

The pandemic has caused financial losses, Upper Hudson Planned Parenthood CEO Chelly Hegan said, due to patients postponing non-essential appointments and the lower rates of reimbursement provided for telehealth visits. The affiliate is trying to raise \$100,000 by the end of April to help offset those losses, she said.

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ues that arise that can't public health crisis of COVID is huge. The public health crisis of HIV and chlamydia was here before the pandemic and will be after, and we want to make sure that anyone who needs to be tested is tested and treated."

The organization has taken efforts to reduce density at its centers by asking patients who might normally bring a friend or loved one to come alone, and by removing chairs from the waiting room to create more distance among those waiting for care.

Planned Parenthood's North Country New York affiliate is also keeping centers open and staffed, according to a message from President and CEO Tess Sacco Barber on the group's website. Some administrative staff are working remotely, she said, and the affiliate's leadership team is meeting virtually each day.

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