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## LONG ISLAND

# Bellone keeps health centers deal in limbo



### POLITICS & POWER

Rick Brand

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County Executive Steve Bellone so far has balked at putting before county lawmakers a new contract with a nonprofit that runs Suffolk's eight health centers, even though it would cut the county's share of annual costs from \$13.7 million to \$12 million through 2024.

GOP critics said Bellone, a Democrat who faces re-election this year, had put off a vote because his administration originally had promised the health centers would need no more county subsidies after five years, except for the cost of health center leases and property taxes.

What makes the issue awkward is the fact that Bellone negotiated the five-year pact with Hudson River HealthCare late last year.

Bellone already counted \$4 million from past county overpayments that are part of the deal as 2018 revenue, even though HRH has yet to return the money. He also has included the \$1.7 million in savings in his adopted 2019 budget, even though the contract has not been ratified.

Hudson River said the delay had resulted in a major cash squeeze, since contracts for two health centers, in Southampton and Coram, had expired.

The nonprofit says it has fronted \$5 million to cover county contributions for Southampton for two years, and for the larger Coram clinic since January. Both face the permanent closure without a new contract, Hudson River said.

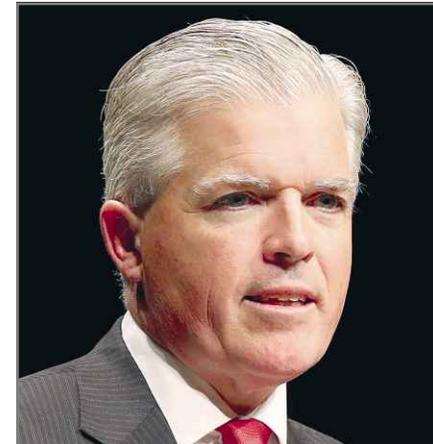
The new contract will cover all eight health centers; now, there are individual agreements for each one.

Meanwhile, the politically powerful SEIU Local 1199, with 275 clinic workers among its 20,000 Suffolk members, has endorsed Bellone.

"We're gathering information on what the fiscal implications are," said Deputy County Executive Jon Kaiman. "We certainly support the health centers and want to keep them open."

Legis. Tom Cilmi (R-Bay Shore), legislative minority leader, acknowledged the value of the health centers. But Cilmi accused the administration of "misrepresenting the facts" to bolster its original case for the Hudson River takeover in 2013.

"My biggest problem ... is that the Bellone administration led us to believe after an initial period of time taxpayers would be relieved of bearing any of the cost associated with health care," Cilmi said. "Obviously, that is not the case."



Steve Bellone

Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory (D-Copiague) filed a resolution last week to force County Attorney Dennis Brown to submit the new contract to the legislature after nearly two dozen HRH health workers had testified about the value of their work.

"I just don't get it; they shook hands and signed a contract in December," Gregory said. "They are actually saving money, it's not rhetoric. It's a great success story which we should be embracing."

Suffolk created health centers in the 1970s as an alternative to building a county hospital.

In 2013, the county hired Hudson River HealthCare, which also operates government health centers in Nassau and the Hudson Valley region, as a federally qualified health center. The designation allows the nonprofit to get more federal funding and ends county exposure to malpractice lawsuits, now covered by the federal government.

All 10 Suffolk town supervisors, seven local hospitals and two local congressmen back renewal of the contract.

Backers say HRH will lower county costs for running the health centers from a high of nearly \$40 million in 2008, to a flat annual payment of \$12 million through 2024.

The number of patients — many of them underinsured or uninsured — also has grown from 55,000 to 70,000, and Hudson River HealthCare expects the count to rise to 95,000 by 2024.

But Suffolk Comptroller John M. Kennedy Jr., Bellone's Republican challenger in November, said any renewal should be limited to 24 months. Kennedy said he would review alternatives for delivering health services if he won office.

"They have had eight years to get this right and like most anything the Bellone administration does they are incapable of delivering on any promise," Kennedy said. "They've run out of time."