

## 2 mental health centers to merge, create largest in Colorado

The new entity will employ a combined 2,000 people and serve about 50,000 patients.



Gary C. Caskey Photography 2015

The interior of Jefferson Center for Mental Health, one of the organizations planning to merge to create the largest behavioral health center in Colorado.

GARY C. CASKEY



By [Analisa Romano](#) – Reporter, Denver Business Journal  
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Two Front Range mental health centers said they will merge next year, forming what involved parties say would be the largest behavioral health-focused treatment center in Colorado.

Once the merger is complete in July 2024, the centers will employ a combined 2,000 people with the capacity to serve 50,000 patients or more.

The merger is an answer to the **rising need** for services across Colorado and a shortage of behavioral health workers — an issue that has been plaguing providers since the pandemic.

The pinch on resources has pushed Denver-based WellPower and Jefferson Center, a safety-net mental health organization for Jefferson, Clear Creek and Gilpin counties, to form one legal organization under the WellPower name.

"It's a demand fulfillment environment," said Carl Clark, president and CEO of WellPower. "There's more need out there than anybody can meet."



Carl Clark, president and CEO of WellPower.

WELLPOWER

Clark will stay on as president and CEO until he retires at the end of next year, at which point Jefferson Center President and CEO Kiara Kuenzler will step on as head of the new organization.

Leaders for both centers told the Denver Business Journal that they believe the merger will create an economy of scale that allows them to better weather a volatile funding environment and recruit and retain talent.

"We're hoping to build in more opportunities for professional advancement ... In ways that we simply didn't have either the bandwidth or the resources to do as two separate organizations," Kuenzler said.



Kiara Kuenzler, president and CEO of Jefferson Center for Mental Health.

SUNSHINE LUMP

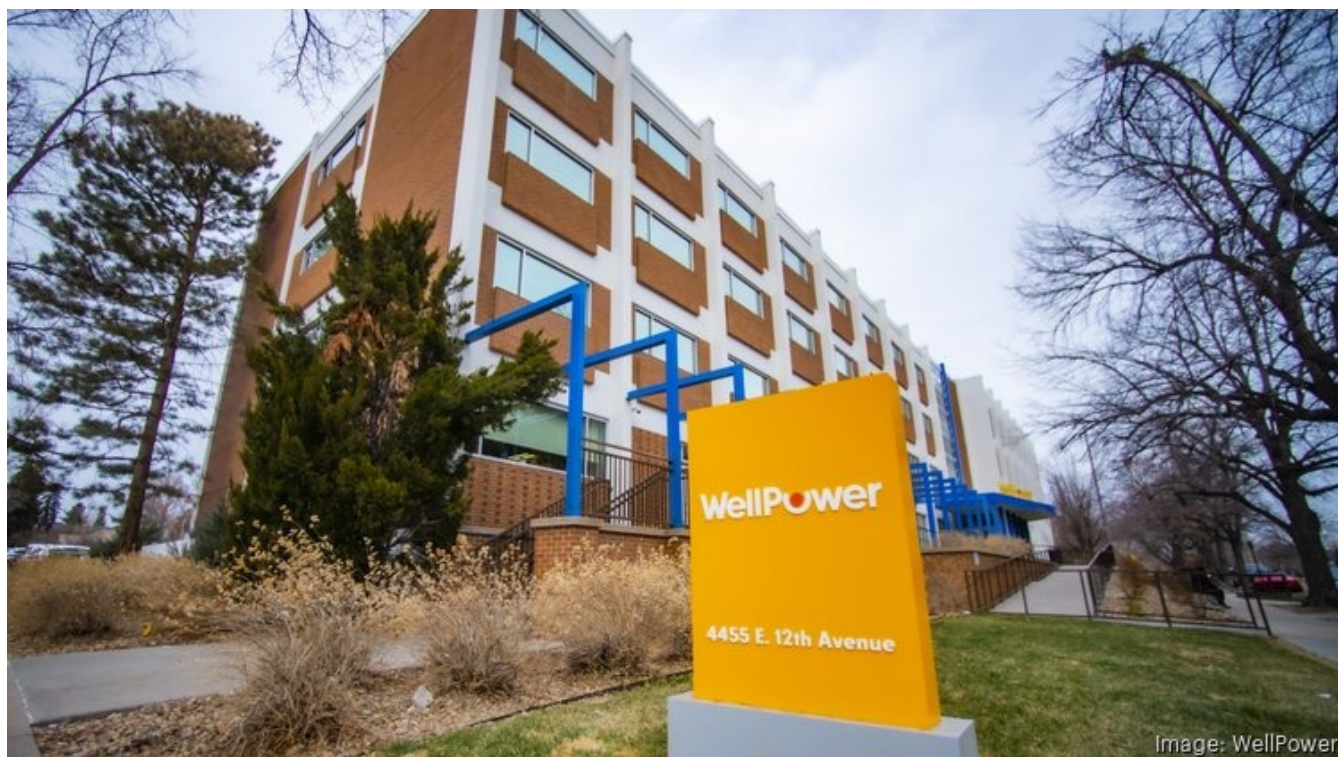
For example, the centers will immediately benefit from sharing one bill for electronic health records while doubling the IT team that services the new organization, she said. That will allow them to focus more on digital support like telehealth and community- based kiosks.

Combining the array of mental health services that the centers offer will also naturally offer employees a variety of new career pathways, Clark said. For example, WellPower has a robust set of services for people who are deaf and hard of hearing, a specialty that Jefferson Center employees previously wouldn't have been able to explore.

Clark said the new entity will build on WellPower's "living wage" initiative, which started employees at \$50,000 per year. To be good stewards of public and donated funds, he said WellPower previously aimed to pay employees within the 60th percentile of wages for each role.

"There were some jobs that you cannot live in the Denver Metro area at 60% of what people make," Clark said. "For many people, our being able to do the living wage initiative made it where they could quit second jobs ... It's been a life-changer for a lot of folks."

Clark and Kuenzler said the new center will prioritize helping clients with stable and affordable housing, as well as finding ways to engage in more diverse communities and expand on the continuum of substance use services that they currently offer.



Exterior of Denver-based WellPower.

EVAN SEMÓN

Right now, each organization does about one major supportive housing project every few years. Together, the two are hoping to significantly boost their support for those kinds of programs, Kuenzler said.

The merger should also put the new organization in a better situation to withstand fluctuations in reimbursement for services based on public policy decisions, she said.

"The investment in our teams to pull forward the best practices from each organization into the combined pull is a thoughtful, complex process that we've decided is worth the investment," Kuenzler said. "We're really excited about the transition and the ability for both of us ... to align those community partnerships, relationships and bring the histories of both organizations together."