



Testimony of
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Thank you to Commissioner Sullivan and the OMH Team for convening the Town Hall on November 30, 2023. We appreciate the openness and willingness to hear from the field, consumers, peers, and providers. We offer the following input and testimony for your consideration.

Good afternoon. I am William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services located in the Capital Region with offices throughout New York.

About Northern Rivers Family of Services

Northern Rivers Family of Services was established in 2012 through affiliation with longstanding family services agencies **Northeast Parent & Child Society** and **Parsons Child & Family Center**. In 2019, we affiliated with **Unlimited Potential**, whose operations began in Saratoga Springs. Together, the 1,400-strong workforce of Northern Rivers and member agencies serve more than 18,000 children and families in 41 upstate counties each year, with \$100 million invested through more than 60 social services and mental health programs. Northern Rivers builds a strong, successful, and healthy future for our children, families, and communities through quality services, collaboration, and innovative leadership. Our program areas include:

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- Residential and community-based child welfare programming including foster care, preventive services, postadoption services, and evidence-based home visiting programs;
- Educational services for 400 students including early learning, pre-K, and Early Head Start, as well as accredited 853 schools (elementary, middle, and high school);
- Community-based mental health and crisis services programs for children and adults including youth and adult ACT Teams, mobile crisis, school-based services, vocational rehabilitation, and licensed outpatient clinic programs; and
- Community-based waiver programs for children and adults including Health Home services.

I would like to thank Commissioner Sullivan and the OMH leadership for this opportunity to provide input.

We applaud the commitment of Governor Hochul in raising up the issues of mental health in her policy and budget. The bold commitment of resources and leadership impacts every county, city and neighborhood across NYS.

Below are a series of recommendations:

1. Workforce, Workforce, Workforce Recommendations

Fund this year's human services COLA at 3.2% based on the CPI. Invest \$500 million in behavioral health. Over the last 17 years since the COLA has been in legislation, the Executive for the most part has "withstood" this funding, which essentially means that outside of the last few years under Governor Hochul, the COLA has largely been ignored for 15 years. According to calculations, this has resulted in more than \$500 million lost to our system just for behavioral health. I would like to think that this article would not be written if there had been \$500 million more in the street annualized.

2. Innovate the Funding Dynamic

Policymakers tout that New York's mental health system is one of the best financed system in the world. By dollars this may be true, but the devil is in the details.

According to data, there were 715,000 people in New York's community public mental health system. Of that number, less than 10,000 reside in state psychiatric hospitals. Yet, \$1.3 billion is spent on those individuals while \$4.3 billion is spent on the other 705,000 individuals. This imbalance must be corrected.

In addition, New York, has 24 state hospitals while no other state has more than 8. New York spends one-fifth of its overall mental health budget to maintain these number of psychiatric hospitals, which houses fewer than 4,000 people according to 2023 census findings.

We recommended the creation of a Mental Health Finance Commission comprised of state officials, legislators and stakeholders to review the financing of New York's mental health system and have the enforcement powers to close mental health hospitals and/or hospital beds.

3. Increase Community Mental Health Training and Public Awareness

Schools have been in the frontline of the youth mental health crisis. We have to normalize mental health in schools through teacher instruction, school environments, and school-based mental health clinics. Invest in school programs that use innovative models that support mental health and suicide prevention.

Colleges are also in the forefront of the mental health crisis. Students and other stakeholders should be trained in mental health literacy and have a greater understanding of mental health.

Schools and communities should develop pipeline strategies to ensure young people develop careers in mental health and that there are career ladders in place so that paraprofessionals can have productive careers.

4. Provide Statewide Mental Health First Aid Training

More than 4 million people in the U.S. are trained on mental health first aid. This training is universal in its fidelity to a model that provides basic mental health literacy and also identifies a crisis response to those in need of mental health services.

We recommend the creation of a statewide program that engages all New Yorkers in mental health first aid.

5. Peers and Families

Too often we do not embrace peers and their families as part of our workforce. They are invaluable in helping to mitigate a crisis. Families are often on the frontline, and they can see their loved one deteriorating but they have nowhere to go to send them due to limited funding for community services. Also, it has been well-documented in regard to the role of peers in fostering environments of support and recovery.

We recommend policy changes and funding to ensure that all treatment plans include components of peer support, family engagement (when requested), cultural competence, and trauma-informed care.

6. Advance and Take to Scale 988

Governor Hochul has put funding into the first two years of 988 implementations. In addition, she along with the federal government has provided funding for Stabilization Centers.

We urge the Governor's budget to include a tax enhancement to mobile phones to help support ongoing funding for 988 and the Stabilization Centers. Estimates of increased in phone bills are less than \$1 per phone, certainly worth the cost of having a statewide behavioral health crisis response.

Summary:

- Provide a 3.2% COLA or the Human Service workforce and invest \$500 million in behavioral health;
- Change the state's funding stream for mental health to better align with community support;
- Support and expand Governor Hochuls' investment in Mental Health First Aid, School and college-based services as well as CTI, ACT teams, and community services;
- Support funding in K–12 schools and colleges for mental health, support the voice of families and peers; and
- Support funding for 988.

Thank you for your attention and support..

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