



TESTIMONY OF
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PRESENTED TO
Attorney General Letitia James
REGARDING THE
MENTAL HEALTH IN NEW YORK STATE
JUNE 22, 2022

NORTHERNRIVERS

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Reform, Invest and Create a Robust Continuum of Services for Adults and Children**
- **Ensure Access to Services**
- **Invest In Prevention**
- **Grow the Commitment to Housing**
- **Mobilize and Support Workforce Growth and Retention**

Good afternoon. I am William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services headquartered 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 \$88 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:

- Residential and community-based child welfare and mental health programing 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 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 Attorney General Letitia James and members of staff of the Attorney General's office for the opportunity to testify on mental health issues, challenges, and needs across New York State. While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor, Attorney General, and the Legislature have taken over the past few years to address growing mental health needs of children and adults, and help to build a better New York, **more needs to be accomplished to make New York State a great place to live, raise a family, and operate a business. We need to invest in a full continuum of services, from low touch community and tele services to more intensive services that include outpatient and inpatient services. There is no single set of services that will meet the growing needs. We need to build a robust range of interventions that are easy to access and navigate. At the same time we need an infrastructure of professionals, peers, community partners, medical experts, and strong mental health organizations that will deliver the critical services. Without support and opportunity for ALL New Yorkers, we will not be truly successful.**

Growing Needs and COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders. In a recent Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) brief, [53 percent](#) of adults in the United States reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. This is significantly higher than the [32 percent](#) reported in prior months.

Many adults are also reporting specific negative impacts on their [mental health and wellbeing](#), such as difficulty sleeping (36 percent) or eating (32 percent), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12 percent), and worsening chronic conditions (12 percent), due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. We cannot however let the COVID-19 and fiscal stress undermine the critical mental health system across New York State.

Some Basic Facts and Myth Busters about Mental Health

- 1 in 5 adults in the United States experience a mental health challenge in their lifetime. Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide. Mental health conditions do not discriminate – they affect people regardless of age, gender, education, income, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc.
- Even very young children may show early warning signs of mental health concerns. These mental health problems are often clinically diagnosable, and can be a product of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors.
- Half of all mental health disorders show first signs before a person turns 14 years old, and three quarters of mental health disorders begin before age 24. Unfortunately, less than 20% of children and adolescents with diagnosable mental health problems receive the treatment they need. Early mental health support can help a child before problems interfere with other developmental needs.
- The vast majority of people with mental health problems are no more likely to be violent than anyone else. Most people with mental illness are not violent and only 3%-5% of violent acts can be attributed to individuals living with a serious mental

illness. In fact, people with severe mental illnesses are over 10 times more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general population.

- We all know someone with a mental health problem and don't even realize it, because many people with mental health problems are highly active and productive members of our communities.
- With proper treatment and support, people with mental illnesses can lead productive, fulfilling lives. There are many evidence-based treatments (including medication and different types of therapy) that have been shown to be effective in treating mental health problems. 60 – 90% of people who receive treatment have positive outcomes.

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Following are specific recommendations.

1. **Reform, Invest and Create a Robust Continuum of Services for Adults and Children**

Research and practice has confirmed there is no single set of services or interventions that can impact the many mental health needs of children, adolescents and adults. NYS with federal support has created numerous programs to impact mental health and substance abuse needs. These services however are not to scale.

NYS needs to invest and reinvent service delivery that provides a robust set of interventions. NYS must fully endorse and create a continuum of care that includes **an integrated system of care that guides and supports client care over time through**

a comprehensive array of mental health and addiction treatment services. The delivery system must be capable of spanning all the levels of intensity of care; the levels for each client will vary depending on their unique treatment and recovery needs. As part of the design, we must clearly support the provision and value of properly designed and managed inpatient services as they are vital to individual and community safety and care. Again, no single program can meet the complex needs of individuals. In addition, services must be statewide and take into account geography, timely access and cost considerations.

2. Ensure Access to Services

Today, services are too often inaccessible during a prevention and/or a period of crisis phase. Parents, caregivers, government agencies, and providers report long wait lists that can be in excess of 12 months for services and help. Creation of a continuum of local services must be accompanied by startup funding and operational support that meets the cost of care. Government and private insurance currently does not meet the cost of service delivery. Rates and assumptions must be examined and adjusted to meet the need and local patterns of service.

3. Invest In Prevention

We are very proud that New York is the first state in the nation to mandate the teaching of mental health in schools. Since implementation of the law, many strides have been made. Of greatest importance—and to the credit of schools—we see a much greater emphasis on changing school climates to make them more conducive to good mental health and wellness.

The New York State Office of Mental Health has been a strong leader, as has the State Education Department, in ensuring that information about mental health is shared

with schools across the state. We also applaud OMH's initiative to encourage school-based mental health services to more than 800 schools across the state.

The impact of the mental health education legislation highlights a growing demand for children's mental services, and to meet the growing need and demand, we must:

- Accelerate and simplify the process for establishing mental health clinics.
- Encourage school districts to develop and implement creative approaches for services within the district.
- Share valuable resources.

4. Grow the Commitment to Housing

The recently enacted State Budget provides need growth and support for existing Community Based Residential Programs. This increase is well deserved but does not meet the need for added support for housing programs that can assist and target veterans, transitional age youth and others. Housing support must be sustained each year.

The harsh reality is the that despite great intentions, reform minded leaders, and ample funding, the growing need for services, treatment and recovery will not be achieved without a robust, growing and well valued workforce. Simply put, we can never fall short when it comes to recruiting, hiring, maintaining and growing our workforce. It is the employees who make our efforts impactful and success a reality.

5. Mobilize and Support Workforce Growth and Retention

New York's families have faced many challenges in past years: the down economy, joblessness, homelessness, opiate/substance abuse, and violence in already plagued communities; for these forgotten New Yorkers, times are still hard. When families are in

crisis and children are at risk, New York's network of not-for-profit human services providers are both the first line of defense and the safety net. **The agencies and the women and men in the not-for-profit human services sector are the first responders for at-risk and vulnerable families, children, and individuals.**

Throughout the state, not-for-profit human services welfare agencies respond to critical family situations 24/7/365, and our fiscal viability is at risk.

Workforce Support Is a Social Justice Issue

Women make up an astonishing 81% of the human services and direct care workforce in New York. This equates to 268,900+ skilled, well-educated workers who are paid significantly less than women in New York's private sector, leading to increased staff turnover and jeopardizing the quality-of-service delivery,

Non-Profit Organizations are an Economic Engine

New York's not-for-profit workforce is not only hard working but also an economic engine. Across New York state, 1 in 7 (1 in 6?) workers are employed by a not-for-profit organization. These workers contribute billions to the state's economic health; including the payment of income, sales, and property tax. Beyond the direct economic impact, the not-for-profit workforce, allow all New Yorkers to stay employed, avert costly medical costs, and educate our young persons. A strong non-profit sector, with a viable direct care staff, creates additional economic growth and allows NYS to attract new business investments and companies.

Non-Profit Sector Operates as an Efficient Business

Our sector understands the need to maximize utilization of our resources and to provide value to our funders. We have worked in partnership with government on countless initiatives to reduce costs, focus on outcomes, use of evidence-based

practices, and improve quality services. These efforts come in a climate where the rates and contracts our agencies receive are frozen or lowered. Not-for-profit agencies have always raised funds from private donors to supplement government resources.

The enacted NYS Budget included a one-time 5.4 percent COLA to human services providers in FY 2023 for eligible programs and services as well as one time retention payments. **We applaud the inclusion of the 5.4% COLA and workforce incentives in the budget!** These funds will flow to front line staff and allow them to make gains after years of underfunding.

As part of the final budget, permanent authority for the COLA expired. We recommend permanent extension of the COLA with annual CPI based and eligibility adjustments to reflect the demands and importance of safety net programs.

As part of a comprehensive workforce support investment, the issues of training, professional development, and student loan debt must be addressed.

We support the investment of funding for scholarship and loan forgiveness program to allow professionals to enter and stay within the public and nonprofit mental health and substance abuse system.

Our staff and agencies are the safety net for New Yorkers in greatest need.

The importance of our organizations cannot be overstated. **Individuals** rely on us to fulfill their dreams of independence. **Families** rely on us to provide their loved ones with the quality care they need to keep them safe and thriving. **Communities** rely on us as economic engines and employers. **Taxpayers** rely on us to support New

Yorkers in their home communities, on the streets, and out of expensive institutional settings and emergency rooms. Every New Yorker is being impacted by this ongoing crisis—even those who don't yet realize it.

Conclusion

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profit and public mental health services organizations and communities that yield positive outcomes for all New Yorkers. We must make New York State a great place to live, a great place to raise a family, and a great place to operate a business.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

For additional information:

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