



**TESTIMONY OF
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**PRESENTED TO THE
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH, DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, LABOR AND
HIGHER EDUCATION**

**REGARDING THE
NEW YORK STATE HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE
STATE FISCAL YEAR 2023–2024**

DECEMBER 19, 2023

NORTHERNRIVERS

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Workforce, workforce, workforce recommendations: Fund the 3.2% COLA for Human Services workforce, including previously denied workers
2. Innovate the funding dynamic and create permanent investments in community-based strategies
3. Invest in retention strategies to keep our best individuals in the field and our state

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 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 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 the respective chairs, members and staff of the committees for this important discussion on the health care workforce.

As a provider of human services for 18,000 children, adults, and families as well as parent of young adult with developmental disabilities, I see every day the positive and challenging impacts of the workforce crisis. When programs are well-staffed, when staff are paid fairly and supported on the policy level, incredible impacts can be achieved. Youth and adults flourish, grow, learn, and get healthy, and our communities thrive. These youth and adults become an important part of the future of New York state. A challenging workforce situation, on the other hand, creates excessive overtime demands; program closures; lack of access; excessive wait times, growing wait lists, and inadequate coverage; negative safety, health, and growth; and life and death are consequences.

While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor and the Legislature have taken over the past few years to stabilize the state's economy 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. Unless the upcoming budget adequately invest and supports the Human Services sector and the children, adults, and families we serve each day, New York state will not reach its goals. Without support and opportunity for ALL New Yorkers, we will not be truly successful.**

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.

As part of this investment, it is critical to include previously denied workers that support community-based services.

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 24 psychiatric hospitals, which house 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 who have the enforcement powers to close mental health hospitals and/or hospital beds.

Savings need to be invested in the workforce of today and of the future.

In that regard, the Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids’ Healthy Minds Study found that an \$195,000,000 investment is needed to raise rates across HCBS,

CFTSS, and Article 31 clinic services for young people to appropriate levels that will allow providers to pay their staff a livable wage.

3. Invest in Retention Strategies to Keep our Best Individuals in the Field and Our State

NYS offers many incredible employment and career opportunities for trained and dedicated staff. We need to keep these individuals in the mental health and human services field. We further need to incentivize these professionals to stay in New York. In that regard:

- Add an additional \$1 million to the OMH Community Mental Health Loan Repayment Program for a total \$15 million investment.
- Increase child welfare and community-based services scholarship and future loan repayment programs.
- Include the mental health workforce in the Healthcare Workforce Development program. The Financial Burden Relief for Healthcare Workers category currently supports elements that our workforce needs, including replacement of lost income while in school, childcare, and transportation. This program is “still being developed” according to the state’s website, so there may be opportunities to add the mental health workforce prior to the RFA prior to release. Specifically, we envision the agency adding our workforce as eligible or carving out a portion of funds specifically for them to apply for.
- Establish a scholarship program for students pursuing mental health practitioner degrees, including master’s in mental health. This would especially help low-income individuals access higher education and would promote diversity in the field. We recommend modeling it after the existing Nurses for Our Future program.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we urge the Legislature to invest resources and establish a commitment to the Human Services workforce during the upcoming state budget that ensures that New York state remains committed to the programs that produce positive outcomes for children, individuals, and families; one that ultimately **saves the state money on more expensive interventions such as foster care, unnecessary medical care, homeless shelters, and the juvenile justice system.** We strongly encourage the Legislature to support the need of the not-for-profit Human Services sector. Failure to fund an increase for not-for-profit Human Services agencies will have a significant negative impact on the ability of individuals and families to receive services and ultimately on the physical, mental, and financial health of New York state as a whole.

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profit human 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.

