



Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.

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HEALTHY MINDS FOR A HEALTHY NEW YORK

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Thank you very much for this opportunity to testify. I'd like to begin by extending a special thank you to Assemblywoman Nolan for focusing today's hearing on the health, mental health, and physical health needs of our schools and their students. I'd also like to thank the Committee members for being here today and for supporting this topic that is so critical to youth in this day and age.

My name is Glenn Liebman and I am the CEO of the Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (MHANYS). We are comprised of 26 affiliates in 52 counties throughout New York State. Most of our members provide community-based mental health services but all our members work in their communities providing education, support, and advocacy.

Our mission is rooted in the mental hygiene movement, which had its genesis at the start of the 20th century and held as core values advocacy, public awareness, anti-stigma, and educational efforts regarding mental health related issues.

The Passage of Mental Health Education Law

One of the ways that MHANYS has continued to pursue our mission is by focusing on mental health education for young people. After five years of persistent legislative advocacy, New York lawmakers agreed to include mental health instruction in the health curriculum of New York's schools. Legislation sponsored by, and initiated by, Assemblywoman Nolan, and approved by this Committee passed both houses of the Legislature in June of 2016. The legislation was signed into law on September 30, 2016 by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo as Chapter 390 of the Laws of 2016, which, upon its effective date of July, 2018 requires all elementary, middle schools, and high schools in the state of New York to provide instruction about mental health to all students as part of the school health curricula. Your leadership has been integral to the success of the legislation. We would also like to thank Devrah Nussbaum of your staff for her support and commitment to mental health education in schools.

Thank you, Assemblywoman Nolan, for sponsoring and moving this legislation. Because of your commitment to this cause and the support of the entire Legislature and the Governor, New York is the first state in the nation to require schools to teach about mental health. For that we should all be proud.

Why the Law is So Important

There is a growing recognition that people in general, and young people more specifically, are not "mental health literate." Mental health literacy is defined as "knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management, or prevention." The term "mental health literacy" can be credited to the work of Australian researcher Anthony Jorm¹. This same body of research laid the groundwork for Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training, which is

growing in popularity and fast becoming recognized as the gold standard in evidence-based mental health training for the general public.

Mental Health literacy, however, is more than academic. For many, it will be a lifeline. Allow me just a minute or two to convey why this is true. Unrecognized, untreated, and late-treated mental illness elevates the risk of mental health crises such as suicide and self-injury, diminishes prospects for recovery, and contributes to substance abuse and other damaging negative coping behaviors. The first signs and symptoms of mental health problems, some of which develop to the point of becoming diagnosable mental illness, begin, on average, at about 14 years of age. Many adults miss or dismiss these early signs and symptoms and young people are even less likely to recognize or understand what is happening to them. Even when there is some recognition that a young person is struggling, stigma often causes people to ignore, dismiss, or rationalize a child's true need for help. The result is often as tragic as it is unnecessary.

The prevalence rates of anxiety and depression among youth are sobering and, by all accounts, appear to be growing. As many as half of all youth 13 to 18 years of age have experienced a mental health challenge with either mild or moderate impact and most of that is anxiety and/or depression. Untreated, these symptoms can worsen to the point of having significant impact on youth. Currently, about 21 percent of youth in this age range are experiencing significant impact. It's important to recognize that even moderate impact can greatly diminish a child's ability to successfully perform academically, vocationally, and socially. Significant impact can lead to self-injury, addiction, and suicide.

The mental health literacy research is promising because it shows that mental health education of youth increases their willingness to seek professional help, results in significant improvements in their awareness of mental health issues, and significantly increases their knowledge while changing attitudes for the better. In our country today, only about 40 percent of people with a diagnosable mental illness seek professional help, and about half of these people will wait an average of 10 years before seeking help. Mental health literacy (education) bends this curve and results in exactly the type of behavior that saves lives and livelihoods. For these reasons, mental health education is more than academic. It's literally life-saving.

Update on Implementation

Immediately after the Governor signed the law, MHANYS began taking steps to help assure the law's successful implementation. We were committed, and we remain committed, to helping schools succeed in their effort to comply with the new law. Toward this objective, we took the following action steps:

1. MHANYS generated a policy report (attached) that sought to capture for posterity the rationale and justification for the law as well as recommendations on key elements that schools can consider including in their mental health education curricula. These

elements are grounded in the mental health literacy research and serve to answer the question “what does it mean to teach about mental health.” Since being published, the paper has been widely distributed and has been referenced in numerous news articles nationally.

2. MHANYS convened a School Mental Health Education Summit in Albany in March of 2017. Both mental health and education stakeholders from around the state were in attendance along with leadership from the State Education Department (SED) and the Office of Mental Health (OMH). The summit sparked a growing partnership between the Commissioners of SED and OMH and led to the idea of convening a Mental Health Education Advisory Council. Subsequently, several education organizations including School Boards, School Administrators, and Superintendents have held their own mental health summits. MHANYS continues to work hard to break through the silos of education and mental health by cultivating relationships with schools and their leadership. At MHANYS’ annual conference just last week entitled *Healthy Minds, Healthy Schools, Healthy New York: Advancing Mental Health and Wellness in Schools, Families, and Communities*, hundreds of people attended including teachers, superintendents, and other school personnel in addition to our usual attendees from the mental health community. This relationship building has been an invaluable experience of learning about one another and will serve us all well as we continue to meet the mounting mental health needs of youth in New York state.
3. Working in partnership with SED and OMH, MHANYS helped to establish a Mental Health Education Advisory Council, which is comprised of over 50 stakeholder representatives from education and mental health. The Council was tasked with developing mental health instruction guidelines and resources for schools. They began their work by surveying schools to help determine school readiness and attitudes about the new law. We received over 800 responses from schools which helped to inform the Council’s work including the formation of five workgroups. The five workgroups of the Council met several times between October 2017 and April 2018 and presented their recommendations to the Board of Regents in May, 2018. SED has since published guidelines and resources based on the work of the Advisory Council. We’d like to extend a special thanks to Commissioner Elia for supporting this effort and for recognizing that there is wisdom in many counselors. We also owe a debt to the tireless work of Advisory Council members, who sacrificed their own time and talents to help produce a quality outcome.
4. Our most recent and significant step toward successful implementation has been the creation of a *School Mental Health Resource and Training Center*. To help schools successfully implement the new law, the 2018 Executive Budget included \$1 million in funding for the creation and maintenance of a *School Mental Health Resource and Training Center*. The Center was established and made available to all New York State public and private schools at no cost to schools. We would like to acknowledge the

leadership of Assembly Mental Hygiene Chair, Aileen Gunther, for her strong support and help to secure the funding.

At this time, I'd like to devote the balance of our testimony to acquainting you with the Resource Center including its various functions, the progress we've made to date, and its promise for the future as a mental health resource to all of New York's schools.

Resource Center Services

The core service that the Resource Center is designed to deliver includes assistance with the implementation of Chapter 390 of the Laws 2016. This includes resources for mental health education curriculum development, including sample mental health lesson plans for K-12 health education. The Center also helps school districts and schools to promote a school climate of wellness by identifying and implementing strategies to educate families, support staff wellness and integrate mental health education beyond the health education curricula. The Resource Center staff and members of our local affiliates are available to provide training for teachers and school staff in mental health including topics such as mental health as an integral part of overall health, typical adolescent development as it relates to possible signs and symptoms of an emerging mental health problem, and strategies for supporting student stress management skills, to name a few. Finally, the Center works to facilitate collaboration between schools and community partners (e.g., community-based mental health providers, county government, prevention education providers, hospitals, rehabilitation, etc.) for the purpose of creating linkages between students and their families, and mental health-related services.

Progress Report

MHANYS began work on the Center in June 2018 immediately following the end of the 2018 legislative session. Considerable work was completed on the Center even before allocated funding became available. This allowed MHANYS to launch the Center before school began in September of 2018. This timely launch of the Center was critical as schools were challenged with developing their mental health education curricula in time for the fall semester.

Even in the relatively short time since its launch in the summer of 2018, Resource Center utilization is catching on quickly. To date:

- There have been 4,552 unique visitors to the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center website since July 1;
- 420 school-based professionals have downloaded the Mental Health Lesson Plans since being posted in August;
- 176 school-based professionals downloaded the World Mental Health Day Lesson Plans since it was posted on October 6, and;

- 435 people registered as school-based education professionals

MHANYS has worked hard to promote the availability of the Resource Center through presentations at state-wide, educational stakeholders' annual conferences between July 1, 2018 and December 30, 2018, including:

- NYS Association of School Nurses
- NYS Association of School Psychologists
- NYS Association of Health and Safety Coordinators
- NYS Council of School Superintendents
- NYS Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance
- NYS School Counselor Association
- Rural Schools Association of NYS
- NYS Coalition for Religious and Independent Schools
- NY School-based Health Alliance

In addition, on October 12, Glenn Liebman participated in a Facebook Live event with our LI affiliates; over 600 people attended. In June, Mr. Liebman and MHANYS Board Chair Ellen Pendegar, who is also a member of the Advisory Council, presented at Mental Health America's annual conference.

Since the beginning of the school year, Resource Center staff have led four small group, workshops to help educators develop curriculum. Since January 2018, Mental Health and Wellness 101 has been presented 8 times at schools for professional development of school personnel, to a total of approximately 800 educators. There are 15 more presentations scheduled across NYS through the end of November.

Finally, since January 2018, MHANYS staff have facilitated 40 presentations to over 3,700 people, informing them of the mental health education law.

Vision for the Future

MHANYS' original vision for the Resource Center lifespan was a minimum of three years. We recognize that building quality curriculum for K through 12th grade, especially in a new subject area, is not something that will be achieved overnight. Therefore, we are committed to being a resource to schools for at least this time period and we will be working hard in the coming legislative session to secure the necessary funding to sustain this resource that is so vital to school success around mental health literacy.

And our vision is expanding. As we continue to cultivate relationships with schools and educators, we are learning a great deal about the full spectrum of the mental health need in

schools. This has led us to a broader vision for the Resource Center beyond assistance with the new law. With an established foundation in place including central and regional staff and a dynamic interactive web page that includes on-line training for school staff and educational resources, the Center is well positioned to accommodate a broader role as a comprehensive behavioral health resource to all New York schools. This expanded role could include the integration of instruction in mental health with instruction in alcohol, tobacco, and substance use. In addition, the Resource Center can play a vital role as a linkage between schools and behavioral health resources in the community so as to facilitate early intervention and timely access to treatment for at-risk youth.

For decades, Section 804 of the State Education Law has required schools to provide instruction in alcohol, tobacco, and substance use. The passage of the mental health education law presents an opportunity to integrate instruction of both mental health and substance use. MHANYS believes that it is essential to teach students both topics together as they are inextricably linked public health imperatives. As communities struggle to respond to the opioid crisis, it is critical that New York uses every opportunity to prevent addiction starting with early education.

Additionally, MHANYS envisions a role for the Center in strengthening school-mental health linkages that facilitate timely treatment and prevent suicide. The Resource Center is uniquely suited to function as a liaison between schools and community-based behavioral health providers to facilitate timely access to professional help. Untreated and late-treated behavioral health needs impact the lives of youth in myriad ways including, most tragically, self-injurious behavior and suicide. According to the CDC, the suicide rate among youth aged 10-19 years rose 56 percent between 2007 and 2016, making it the second leading cause of death among this age group. At particular increased risk are LGBT youth, Native-American and Hispanic youth, youth who are bullied, and youth in criminal justice and child welfare settings. Through the Resource Center, school personnel can receive special training in the early recognition of behavioral health challenges in at-risk youth and receive assistance in linking them to timely professional help.

Even as we adjust our vision to see more clearly the full mental health needs of schools and the broader role that the Resource Center could play in meeting those needs, we must work hard at the task at hand. For now that includes doing all we can through the Center to give schools and educators the tools, training, and resources they need to successfully teach students about mental health.

Summary

We could not have imagined how much impact the mental health education law would have when we first entered Assemblywoman Nolan's office nearly 8 years ago. Not only will youth in New York benefit far into the future, we as a state are leading the way for the rest of the nation. Since its passage, media coverage about the new law has spread like a brush fire across the U.S. and even beyond that.

I'd like to leave you with one quote from some of that coverage. This is from an Emmy Award-winning nationally syndicated television talk show called *The Doctors*, which airs in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Australia, Ireland, Sweden, and Finland. After covering this topic on a segment of the show this past summer, and after acknowledging that New York is the first state in the nation to pass such a law, this is what they said to the show's one million plus household viewers... *"How this is rolled out is really important because this will be the pilot project. Other states will, I think, adopt it if it's done correctly and that's why I would just wish the state of New York very much success."*

Thank you again Assemblywoman Nolan and members of this Committee. We wanted you to know how much of a difference your collective action is making. With your continued support, together we *will* do this correctly and we will be *that* pilot project that others emulate and it will impact youth nationwide for generations to come.

¹ Jorm, A. F. (2011, October 31). Mental Health Literacy: Empowering the Community to Take Action for Better Mental Health. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication.