



Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.

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Testimony to
New York State Assembly Committee on Mental Health
Public Hearing

September 8, 2020

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HEALTHY MINDS FOR A HEALTHY NEW YORK

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Thank you for this opportunity to present to the Assembly Mental Hygiene Committee.

The Mental Health Association in New York State (MHANYS) is comprised of twenty-six affiliates in 52 counties across New York. Many of our members provide community based mental health services. Whether or not they provide direct support, all our members are mission driven and vested in the principles of support, recovery and public awareness about mental health.

The Mental Health of all New Yorkers has sadly transitioned into a mental health crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our brave and courageous MHA staff across the State have continued to work closely with individuals with mental health related issues to insure they are safe and secure during this pandemic. Whether working in residential programs, peer programs, family services, diversion programs, care management or in clinical settings, our workforce have been among the true heroes in this crisis.

We first want to thank the Legislature and Governor Cuomo for your leadership during this pandemic. New York has been a national leader in responding to the public health consequences of COVID-19. Lives have been saved because of the State's policy leaders and we are grateful to for all your dedicated efforts.

I also want to acknowledge the members, board and staff of MHANYS as well as Commissioner Sullivan and our community colleagues for working so hard during this crisis to provide mental health services and supports to people across New York State. We know that this crisis continues to grow but our community members, as always, even with diminished resources do everything in their power to support the almost million people served in the public mental health system.

It is not just the public mental health system in which we are engaged. MHANYS mission is about impacting the entire citizenry of New York State as described below.

MHANYS COVID-19 RESPONSE: RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC THROUGH PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION AND SUPPORT

At MHANYS, we have done whatever we can to help support the mental health needs of all New Yorkers. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have held over 75 trainings, webinars and panel discussions about the various aspects of COVID-19 and mental health that have helped informed well over ten thousand individuals.

Our website is full of resources about trauma-informed care, understanding grief during COVID-19, family engagement and much more. The MHANYS staff was able to pivot almost overnight to respond to the mental health needs of the communities across all sectors. Many of the over ten thousand people we provided training and information to had never previously been engaged in mental health services, but current events drove them to these training and I want to personally

thank our dedicated and selfless staff for their leadership during this pandemic to educate and support individuals in this crisis.

For more information about our work and resources, we urge you to visit www.mhanys.org

MHANYS School Mental Health Resource and Training Center

MHANYS School Mental Health Resource and Training Center, initially started through the work of Assemblymember Gunther and others in the Assembly leadership, has been essential during COVID. The transformative role of students, teachers and families during COVID-19 is especially relevant on a day like today, the traditional beginning of the school year.

We do know one thing — there is nothing traditional about this year’s school opening. Trepidation and anxiety borne by students, teachers and families is palpable during the beginning of the school year.

The passage of the law making it mandatory to teach about mental health in schools as well as the funding for the Resource Center have helped over the last two years to prepare students for the mental health aspects of the pandemic. As the school year opens in many parts of the State, we are all aware that there is great anxiety about going back to school. Through the Resource Center we have helped prepare and support the mental health needs of all students. To the credit of the Schools, the Legislation and the Resource Center, New York has been a leader in helping to create mentally healthy schools and that will certainly help during these challenging times.

Because of the funding for the School Resource Center, we have been able to provide an enormous amount of resources about school instruction and mental health. Our role is not to say whether schools should open remotely or in the classroom, our role is to work with educators to insure that there is a greater understanding of mental health in schools at every grade level.

Our Back to School Resources includes almost fifty webinars, panel discussions and trainings, most of which have been recorded for the entire community. Among the highlights includes discussion from teachers and families about the mental health aspects of school openings, self-paced tools that provide teachers and other school personnel with a greater understanding of mental health and a series of webinars and presentations about supporting mental health and wellness of students. Just this week for example, we are rolling out online self-paced Suicide Safety for School Staff as well as an introductory training to Trauma Sensitive Schools. We urge you to visit the school website at www.mentalhealthdnys.org.

Workforce and Public Education During COVID

During COVID, we have also engaged with the general public about all aspects of mental health and wellness. Due to the necessity of in-person engagement of Mental Health First Aid, there was an inability to provide that training at this time.

Instead we pivoted to the MHANYS product line of Mental Health and Wellness 101. This training provides the general public with information about mental health over an hour presentation that can be provided on line and includes basic knowledge of mental health to help reduce stigma and promote wellness, treatment seeking behavior, recovery and self-care and greater understanding of the signs and symptoms of mental health.

Our public education efforts also are essential to the workforce. We have sent a letter to the Legislature and the Governor urging common sense, no cost efforts that will help provide greater understanding about mental health in the workplace including increased signage about mental health similar to the OSHA safety regs as well as the creation of a State portal through the Department of Labor and NYS Office of Mental Health that can provide up to date information about mental health in the workplace.

Recommendations

The School Mental Health Resource and Training Center has been integral in helping provide students, teachers and families about all aspects of mental health during COVID-19 pandemic. Funding for the Center will be ending in 2021 unless there was additional funding in the budget to help provide support. We urge a million dollars in new funding to support the Center

Work with the Legislature and Executive to support MHANYS initiative to educate the workplace about mental health. These low-cost initiatives will help spread the word about the importance of mental health during this pandemic at minimal cost to the State.

Impact of COVID-19 to Community Mental Health Funding

As much as we have all done collectively, it does not come close to the tidal wave of need during this pandemic. The numbers are staggering. According to a CDC report from August, over 40 percent of people have reported serious mental health issues including anxiety, depression, trauma related issues and substance use increases. The normal percentage is around twenty percent of Americans. This means we have seen over a hundred percent increase in the percentage of people with unmet mental health needs due to current events.

Even more alarmingly, twenty-five percent of young people between the ages of 18—24 have seriously considered suicide. The number of people of color who have considered suicide has also increased dramatically. Also, sadly, the people who constituted our essential workforce have reported an increase of 24 percent in regard to seriously considering suicide.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has also had an economic impact as we all know. New York State is facing a \$15 billion budget deficit that is impacting mental health.

While we are facing the worst mental health crisis in our history because of the pandemic, we are also facing the possibility of twenty percent withholds in funding to mental health providers.

This is the perfect storm of need. While in crisis, we are also facing cuts that can devastate the community and ultimately result in limited housing and services for our loved ones.

For our loved ones, it is particularly hard hitting in housing. If housing agencies are to take a twenty percent withhold that becomes a cut, programs that are already working on the margins will have to make impossible decisions about supporting the safety of all the residents. Already long waiting list will dramatically increase and no new housing options will be available. Sadly, many people will end up either homeless, in emergency rooms or incarcerated. Fear of drug overdose and self-harm will also dramatically increase.

If New York is unable to get federal relief from the next stimulus package, we urge the Legislature to support any measures necessary including revenue enhancements to make funding whole for mental health providers. The stakes are enormous for those individuals we serve.

Recommendation

Support keeping behavioral health providers whole if there is limited funding from the federal stimulus package. All options should be on the table including revenue enhancements.

Impact of Trauma-informed Care during COVID-19

Thanks to the leadership of Assemblymember Gunther and support of the other members of the Assembly, a bill was passed that would create a Trauma-informed Advisory Task Force.

This bill also passed the Senate and is awaiting the Governor's signature.

This is the first legislation in New York State that addresses the trauma-informed need of our dedicated workforce during COVID-19. The demands to our essential workers throughout this crisis have been challenging. Despite all the obstacles, they have remarkably and courageously borne witness to the deadly effects of the pandemic to thousands of New Yorkers.

They have witnessed trauma well beyond what most people can imagine. The mental health and traumatic aspects of their work could well stay with them for many years.

The legislation that would create an advisory committee comprised of stakeholders and state agencies will provide recommendations that will inform the Legislature and the Executive on how New York State can develop a strategic COVID-19 work plan that will address the long-term needs of our essential workers.

They have given so much to us during this crisis and we have to be there for them to help deal with any long-term emotional repercussions of the pandemic.

Recommendations

Whether or not the Governor signs this legislation, MHANYS recommends the implementation of several different initiatives in regard to the trauma-informed needs of this workforce.

- *A Public Awareness Campaign dedicated to informing essential workers about the impact of trauma and how to get help and support*
- *Development of a COVID-19/Trauma specific screen that would be able to lead to an assessment if necessary*
- *All individuals who work for the State's Emotional Support Line must be trained in trauma-informed care.*
- *All essential staff should have mandatory trauma-informed care training as well as training in MHANYS CarePath™ Program, a trauma-informed tool designed to support individuals and families living with pre-existing behavioral health conditions. For more information about the CarePath™ Program, you can link to <https://mhanys.org/products/carepath/>*

FIDELITY TO A VISION OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Undergirding all these recommendations is that this all must be done with fidelity to trauma-informed care. We have a series of initiatives listed below that emphasize good practice around trauma-informed care.

Trauma-Informed Care

Supporting service settings and frontline workers in the uncharted territory associated with COVID-19 will involve becoming familiar with the principles of a trauma-informed approach. The research tells us that there are proven strategies and therapies – collectively grouped as “trauma-informed care” that can help children and adults cope and heal from traumatic experiences and collective trauma particularly when delivered soon after the traumatic event.

Family Engagement

Supporting families around the state involves engagement - before COVID 19 - only 43% of all people with any mental illness received mental health treatment. Alleviating the impact of collective trauma will involve engagement as a primary focus. MHANYS developed five principles for successful engagement and offers service settings training that advances their capacity for continuous engagement of those impacted by trauma.

MHANYS CarePath™ Program

MHANYS developed a trauma-informed support tool called CarePath™ designed to support individuals and families living with pre-existing behavioral health conditions and those currently

impacted by the collective trauma associated with COVID-19. MHANYS CarePath™ program follows in the tradition of mental health education as youth, adults and their family members are offered assistance in designing their own comprehensive path to better overall health and wellness. <https://mhanys.org/products/carepath/>

ACCESS TO SERVICES

Telehealth

MHA members and many of our colleagues, out of necessity have moved to telehealth for individual therapy and services. For many people, this has been very positive especially for those individuals who have not been consistently engaged with services or where transportation is an issue.

We recognize that telehealth is not a panacea and that people best recover when they are engaged in a positive therapeutic relationship that is not always conducive in a telehealth platform. One of MHANYS largest concerns in this area is the time frames around the rolling back of certain regulations around telehealth.

For example, we strongly support the loosening of regulations around telehealth but the concern is that the waiver has to be approved on a monthly basis leaving providers in a very difficult situation if the regulations around telehealth are no longer valid. They will have to scramble on a moment's notice to meet individual needs.

The State approved the extension of the waiver through early October. We should not have to do this in a piecemeal fashion. We need a commitment from the State to continue providing flexibility around telehealth regulations for six months at a time as opposed to a monthly basis.

Recommendation

The Legislature should work with the Department of Health and Office of Mental Health to insure that the flexibility around telehealth regulations stay in place over six month increments and not have to rely on a month to month time frame.

Behavioral Health Parity

Access to care is more important than ever during COVID. We are very appreciative of the work of the Executive in insuring greater access to behavioral health services. We also thank the Legislature for your strong support of these measures.

This is especially relevant during COVID-19 because of the huge increase in the number of people who have a mental health related concern. Many of these individuals have never been part of the

mental health system and they should be able to access services without fear that their insurance plan will reject their proposed benefit package.

The State has been taking some strong measures including reviewing the medical necessity definition in plans. These definitions have been used in some cases to reject individuals from necessary services. The State is doing a review of all the medical necessity plans and ensuring that the definition is consistent with best practices in the field. It will be utilized in such a way that individuals will not be rejected from services because of clinical issues around medical necessity.

In addition, the State has eliminated barriers around prior authorization around inpatient substance use stays for first 28 days as well as insuring access to life saving medication. The broadening of this definition in substance use around medical necessity should also be utilized in mental health with their current review of medical necessity.

The CHAMP Ombuds program has been highly effective in supporting individuals who have been rejected from receiving addiction or mental health services. They have a helpline in place to help those in great need of services. We strongly support their work.

Recommendation:

Continue to work and support the work of the State and advocates in support of behavioral health parity.

Medication Access

Access to appropriate medications has been an issue to all New Yorkers. We strongly support the Assembly and Senate in helping to lead the fight against restricting access to medication. This is an especially relevant issue during COVID-19 when access to appropriate medication is so integral to patient support.

Consumer protections around Prescriber Prevails are essential to ensuring that individuals in consultation with their prescriber get the medication that is most effective for their recovery. Plan formularies shouldn't determine the right medication for individuals. The prescriber should be leading that conversation. We are very appreciative that you continue to support Prescriber Prevails as a protection.

An important part of access to medication is also the need for a long acting injectable especially during COVID-19 when clinics are forced to reduce hours or even in some cases close their programs. Our goal is always to support individuals in their recovery and if having pharmacists have the ability to administer long acting injectables helps people recover than it seems to be a common sense response to that need

Recommendations

We thank the Legislature for your whole hearted support of medication access and prescriber prevails. We urge you to continue your support and vigilance on this issue.

We support Assemblymember McDonald's bill that would authorize pharmacists to administer a long acting injectable.

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the fabric of the behavioral health system. The need for mental health care has never been greater yet when the need is greatest, there are proposed withholds to mental health services.

We urge support of all the recommendations we provided but the most significant to address during this time are:

- **KEEPING NEW YORK STATE FUNDING WHOLE FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**
Support all funding options including revenue enhancements to insure that county and community based services are not cut by twenty percent. This would create devastation for loved ones, families and the not profits that work with these individuals in great need.
- **URGE THE GOVERNOR TO SIGN THE TRAUMA-INFORMED ADVISORY COMMITTEE BILL**
If the Governor vetoes the bill, insure that there are provisions in place to support a trauma-informed public awareness campaign, a COVID-19 trauma tool and assessment, supporting that the State's emotional support line staff is trauma-informed and an assurance that the essential workforce for who this bill is dedicated will be trained in trauma-informed care and the MHANYS CarePath™ Program.
- **FUNDING SUPPORT FOR THE SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE AND TRAINING CENTER**
Increased funding of one million dollars is necessary to continue the good work of the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center. Right now, the funding for the Center is set to expire in 2021. Legislative support would help to keep the Center running and fully support the mental health needs of students, teachers and families during this pandemic.

We thank you very much for your time and your support.