



## **Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days Legislative Advocacy Webinars and Lesson Plans**

The following educational resource materials were designed by the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center at the Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (MHANYS) to teach middle and high school students about legislative advocacy at the state level. These webinars and lesson plans were designed to teach students about advocacy and the legislative process in preparation for Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days in Albany this March. The webinars and lessons can be used by educators who teach Health, Government and US History, as well as club advisors. Please feel free to share these webinars and lesson plans with other educators.

Each webinar is taught by MHANYS' Director of Public Policy John Richter. To find the webinars, visit [mhanys.org/mental-health-matters-day/youth-school-groups](https://mhanys.org/mental-health-matters-day/youth-school-groups)

- **Public Policy: What is it?**
- **Advocacy Part 1: The Importance of Your Voice**
- **Advocacy Part 2: How to Be an Advocate**

Lesson plans can be modified for different grade levels. It is highly recommended that educators use the lesson plans in the order presented below as they were developed to correspond with the content of the webinars. It is recommended that students complete Lessons 1-2 after watching the webinar *Public Policy: What is it?* and Lessons 3-4 after viewing the two webinars on advocacy. The four lesson plans are followed by student handouts and answer keys with talking points for educators. The webinars and lesson plans can also be used anytime during the school year when it corresponds with your curriculum, even if you are unable to attend our advocacy days.

## **Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days Lesson Plans**

### **Lesson #1 Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching**

#### **Objective:**

Inform students about common terms used in advocacy in preparation for future lessons about the state legislative process.

#### **Activities/Discussion:**

- In preparation for a unit on legislative advocacy, there are certain vocabulary terms that students should be familiar with to understand future lessons and the webinars.
  
- Students should match the 14 concepts with the correct definition. It is recommended that they use pencil so they can fix any mistakes. It may be helpful for them to work in teams. Review the answers in class and provide examples where necessary.

#### **Handouts:**

*Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching - Worksheet and Answer Key*

## **Lesson #2 Public Policy: When Should the Government Get Involved and at What Level?**

### **Objective:**

Help students distinguish between public issues that may require government attention from private issues of concern and brainstorm important public issues that need government attention. The second part of this lesson instructs students about the different responsibilities of the three levels of government.

### **Activities/Discussion:**

- Remind students about the meaning of the term ‘public policy.’ Emphasize that sometimes the government chooses to pass a law or make a regulation on a public policy matter, but that sometimes they choose not to act at all.
- Review the difference between public problems that require government action versus private problems that have to be addressed by individuals, families, business owners or the free market.
- Read the paragraph with the definition of ‘public policy’ aloud and discuss the examples given. Explain that sometimes what starts out as a private concern becomes a public issue if there is a negative effect on a large number of people.
- Students should then complete the two questions on side 1 of the worksheet. Follow up with feedback from students to assess if they understand the difference between public and private issues and to have a broader discussion about some major public policy issues.
- Explain that in addition to knowing if something is a public issue citizens need to know which level of government handles different issues so they can go to the right person with their concerns.
- Ask students if they know what the three levels of government are (National, State, Local) Briefly describe the 3 levels of government and have a student read the top of side 2 of the worksheet.
- Either have the students complete the exercise and then go over it or discuss one topic at a time, having students explain their answers.

### **Handouts:**

*Public Policy: When Should the Government Get Involved and at What Level?* - Worksheet and Answer Key

### **Lesson #3 Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials**

#### **Objective:**

Search online to find out who your individual elected officials are at the national, state and local level

#### **Activities/Discussion:**

- Students will use Internet sources to search for the names of their elected officials. This can be completed as a homework assignment or in school. Explain that it is helpful to know who your government leaders are so you can contact them about a public issue.

- Review the answers in class.

#### **Handouts:**

*Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials - Worksheet and Answer Key*

#### **Online Resources:**

[www.usa.gov/elected-officials](http://www.usa.gov/elected-officials)

## **Lesson #4 Public Policy Case Study: Excused Absences from School for Mental Health Days**

### **Objective:**

Gain knowledge about a specific public policy issue, examine proposed state legislation on that topic and debate the merits of proposed legislation

### **Activities/Discussion:**

- Tell students you will be using a case study on a topic related to mental health and schools to teach them how to learn about public policy issues at the state level and how they can become advocates for change.
- Using the Educator Background Information/Talking Points handout, discuss how some states have changed the law to allow students to take days off for mental health reasons and have it be considered a legal absence. Review the information about the difference between excused and unexcused absences and why it's important.
- Have students read the 2 articles on their handouts to learn more about what is happening in other states and why the law has been changed in states like Utah and Oregon.
- Either together or independently, have students look at the change in the Utah and Oregon laws using the links on their handouts. Then show students the link to the legislation proposed in NYS on this topic last year using the instructions on the handout.
- Work independently to answer questions on the student handout and then discuss/debate this issue as a class.
- As a follow-up activity, have students brainstorm ways that students could learn more or advocate for change on this issue (find out what your school policy is on attendance and excused absences, send a letter to or meet with your Superintendent, principal, school board members, and Senator or Assembly member on this topic
- Brainstorm other legislative changes in the area of mental health and wellness that could impact students/schools favorably (funding for wellness programs, more counseling services, education resources) and how to go about advocating for these changes.

### **Handouts:**

- Educator Background Information/Talking Points
- *Public Policy Case Study: Excused Absences from School for Mental Health Days* - Worksheet with links to readings, legislation, discussion questions

## **Online Resources:**

### **Articles**

New York Times

[Need a Mental Health Day? Some States give Students the Option](#)

National Education Association

[Stigma Buster: Schools Look at Mental Health Days for Students](#)

### **State Laws**

[Utah law](#)

[Oregon law](#)

[New York proposed law](#)

## Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days Lesson #1

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching***

Match each term with its definition. Write the correct letter in the space provided.

A. Public Policy	H. Advocate
B. Legislation	I. Advocacy
C. Elected Official	J. Lobbyist
D. Legislator	K. Special Interest Group
E. New York State Legislature	L. Politics
F. Constituent	M. Political Environment
G. Constituency	N. Public Policy Issue Brief

1. \_\_\_\_\_ a body of citizens represented by an elected official, especially those entitled to elect a representative.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ a person who is a government official because they are elected by the people. These may include school board members, local leaders and state and federal legislators.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ the process of making government decisions that apply to members of a group. This word comes from the Greek and means “affairs of the cities.”
4. \_\_\_\_\_ what government does or does not do about a problem that comes before them for consideration and possible action.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ a person who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ the preparation and enactment of laws by a legislative body through its lawmaking process.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ the government and its institutions interacting with the public and private people and organizations to influence the system.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ any action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for a cause, supports or defends, or pleads on behalf of others.

9. \_\_\_\_\_ a person who is represented politically by a designated government official or officeholder, especially, but not exclusively, a citizen entitled to elect a representative. Even though you may not be old enough to vote today, some day you will be a voter and elected officials care about you too.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ an elected official who makes laws and is a member of a legislative body.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ an organization of people who share a common interest and work together to protect and promote that interest by influencing the government.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ a person who tries to influence legislation on behalf of a special interest or cause. These people are regulated by the government and must be registered.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ consists of the two houses. In our state, these include the senate and assembly. New York has 63 Senators and 150 assembly members.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ a concise, written summary of a particular issue, that explains policy options and proposed recommendations on the best solution to a problem to inform government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.



**Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days**  
**Lesson #1**

ANSWER KEY

***Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching***

Match each term with its definition. Write the correct letter in the space provided.

A. Public Policy	H. Advocate
B. Legislation	I. Advocacy
C. Elected Official	J. Lobbyist
D. Legislator	K. Special Interest Group
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F. Constituent	M. Political Environment
G. Constituency	N. Public Policy Issue Brief

1. G a body of citizens represented by an elected official, especially those entitled to elect a representative.
2. C a person who is a government official because they are elected by the people. These may include school board members, local leaders and state and federal legislators.
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9. **F** a person who is represented politically by a designated government official or officeholder, especially, but not exclusively, a citizen entitled to elect a representative. Even though you may not be old enough to vote today, some day you will be a voter and elected officials care about you too.
10. **D** an elected official who makes laws and is a member of a legislative body.
11. **K** an organization of people who share a common interest and work together to protect and promote that interest by influencing the government.
12. **J** a person who tries to influence legislation on behalf of a special interest or cause. These people are regulated by the government and must be registered.
13. **E** consists of the two houses. In our state, these include the Senate and Assembly. New York has 63 Senators and 150 Assembly members.
14. **N** a concise, written summary of a particular issue, that explains policy options and proposed recommendations on the best solution to a problem to inform government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.

**Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days  
Lesson #2**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

***Public Policy: When Should the Government  
Get Involved and at What Level?***

The definition of **public policy** is *'what the government does or does not do about a problem that comes before them for consideration and possible action.'*

Not all problems can be taken care of through government action. For example, if you do not have a pizza place in your neighborhood that is not a problem for the government. Likewise, if you have trouble finding a summer job, this would be considered a personal issue, not a public one. On the other hand, if a great number of adults lost their job in a short period of time, this would eventually become a public policy issue because of its impact on the entire economy. Similarly, if you have a virus and get very sick this is not a government concern. However, if a large number of people become sick and it becomes an epidemic, the government may address this problem with a public health policy.

**1. What types of problems do you think government officials might consider need their attention? List 3 below.**

**2. In your opinion, what one problem would you like the government to address right now? Why?**

As a citizen, it is important to know what level of government makes policies on different issues so you know who to contact if you have a concern. There are 3 levels of government – National, State and Local – and each is responsible for different issues. There are, however, issues that are addressed at 2 or all 3 levels.

For the topics below choose whether it is the **National, State** or **Local** government that is responsible for taking charge on that issue and write it in the space provided. For those that require more than one level of government action indicate that in the space provided.

1. Build an interstate highway (like I-90)
2. Education standards
3. Tax citizens
4. Make repairs to a county bridge
5. Pass laws and regulations
6. Choose machines to use in elections
7. Fund the Navy
8. Get a marriage license
9. Make coins and dollar bills
10. Apply for a professional license to become a dentist
11. Set up a court of law
12. Provide Medicare health coverage for people over 65
13. Administer Medicaid to provide health care coverage for the poor
14. Declare war against another country

**Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days**  
**Lesson #2**

**ANSWER KEY**

***Public Policy: When Should the Government  
Get Involved and at What level?***

The definition of **public policy** is ‘*what the government does or does not do about a problem that comes before them for consideration and possible action.*’

Not all problems can be taken care of through government action. For example, if you have no pizza place in your neighborhood that is not a problem for the government. Likewise, if you have trouble finding a summer job this would be considered a personal issue, not a public one. On the other hand, if a great number of adults lost their job in a short period of time, this would eventually become a public policy issue because of its impact on the entire economy. Similarly, if you have a virus and get very sick this is not a government concern. However, if a large number of people become sick, the government may feel the need to put a public health policy in place.

- 1. What types of problems do you think government officials might consider need their attention? List 3 below.**

***Have Students brainstorm and discuss their answers in class.***

***Possibilities include problems in areas like physical and mental health, the environment, foreign policy, the military, immigration, agriculture, housing, poverty, education, infrastructure repair, gun control***

- 2. In your opinion, what one problem would you like the government to address right now? Why?**

***Answers will vary. Have students explain their answers and see if there is some commonality in their responses. What topics come up most?***

As a citizen, it is important to know what level of government makes policies on different issues so you know who to contact if you have a concern. There are 3 levels of government – National(Federal), State and Local – and each is responsible for different issues. There are, however, issues that are addressed at 2 or all 3 levels.

For the topics below choose whether it is the **National, State** or **Local** government that is responsible for taking charge on that issue and write it in the space provided. For those that apply to more than one level of government, indicate that in the space provided.

***Explain that they would not go to a local or state leader about an issue that is decided by the national government like Medicare. Likewise, they should not reach out to the national government about local issues. The reason there is a division of responsibilities is because our Founding Fathers did not want too much power vested in any one level of government.***

1. Build an interstate highway (like I-90) **National**
2. Education standards **State**
3. Tax citizens **National, State, Local**
4. Make repairs to a county bridge **Local**
5. Pass laws and regulations **National, State, Local**
6. Choose machines to use in elections **State**
7. Fund the Navy **National**
8. Get a marriage license **State**
9. Make coins and dollar bills **National**
10. Apply for a professional license to become a dentist **State**
11. Set up a court of law **National, State, Local**
12. Provide Medicare health coverage for people over 65 **National**
13. Provide Medicaid health care coverage for the poor **National, State, Local**
14. Declare war against another country **National**

**Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days  
Lesson #3**

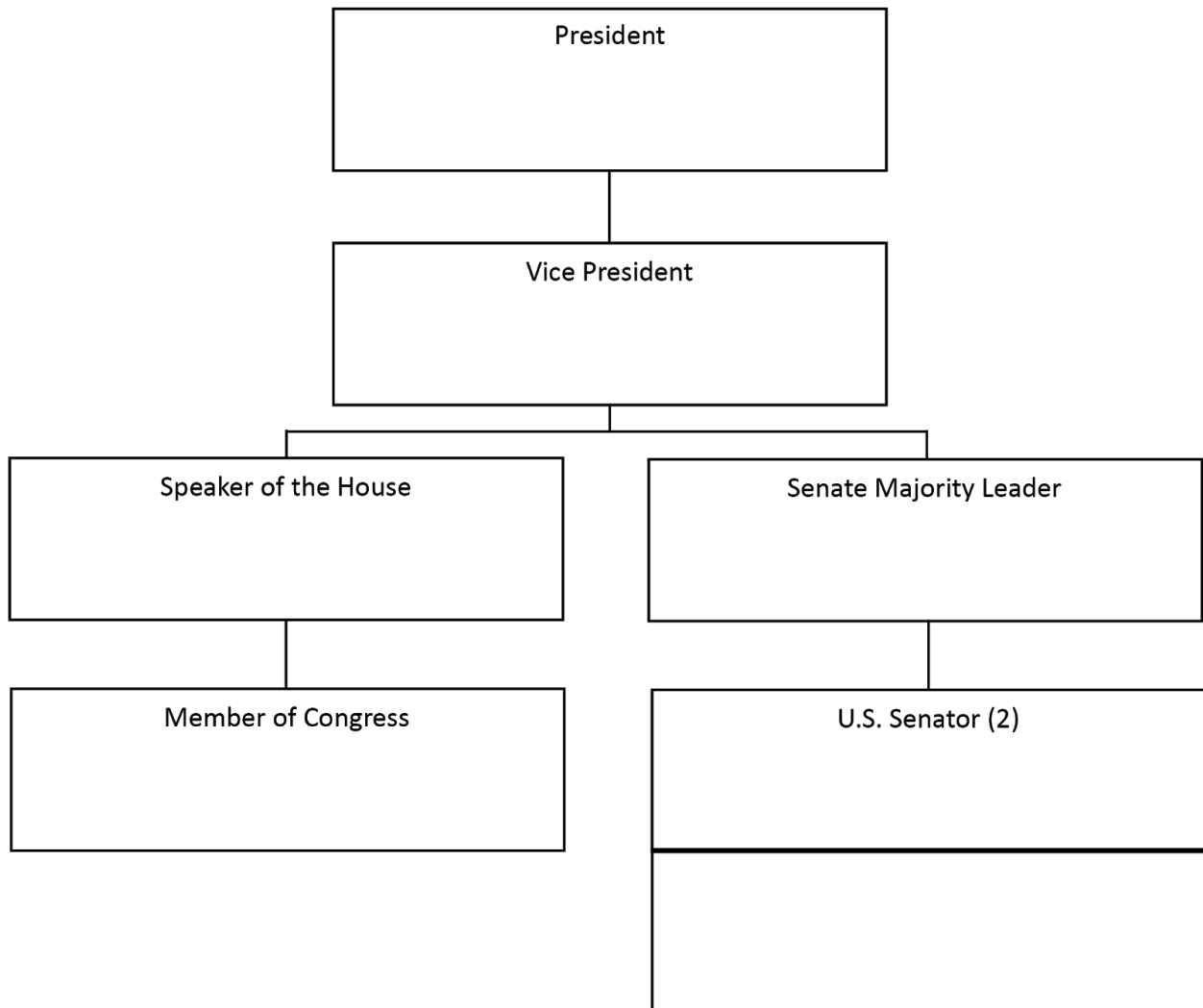
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

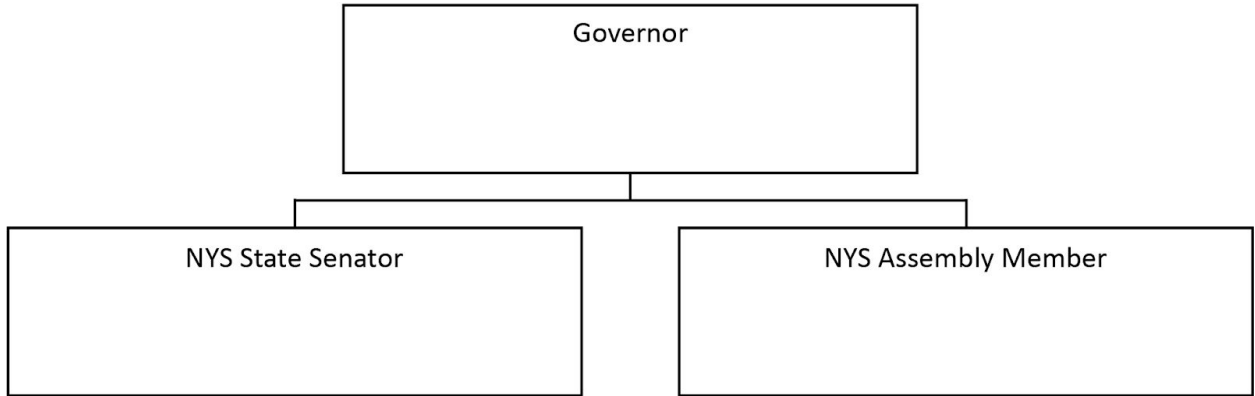
***Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials***

**Directions:** Fill in the blanks of the National, State and Local government officials listed below. Use Commoncause.org and type in your address under Finding Your Representative to identify your elected officials. The only elected official not on this site will be your mayor/supervisor.

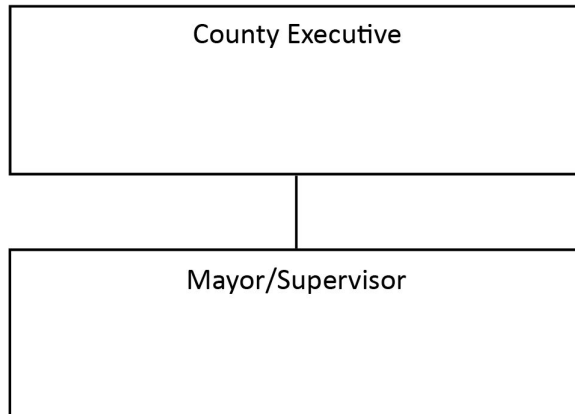
**National Government**



**State Government**



**Local Government**





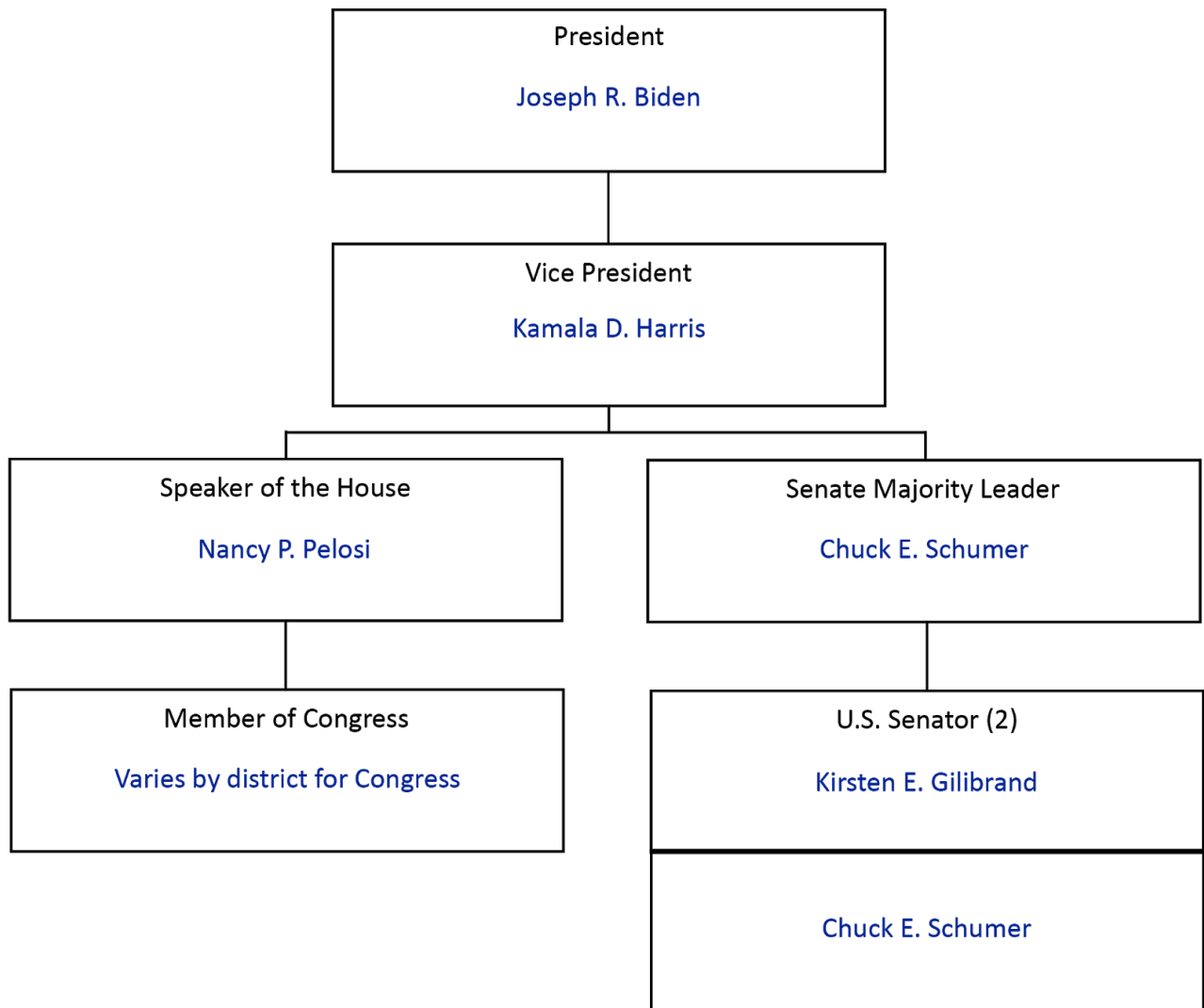
**Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days  
Lesson Plan #3**

**ANSWER KEY**

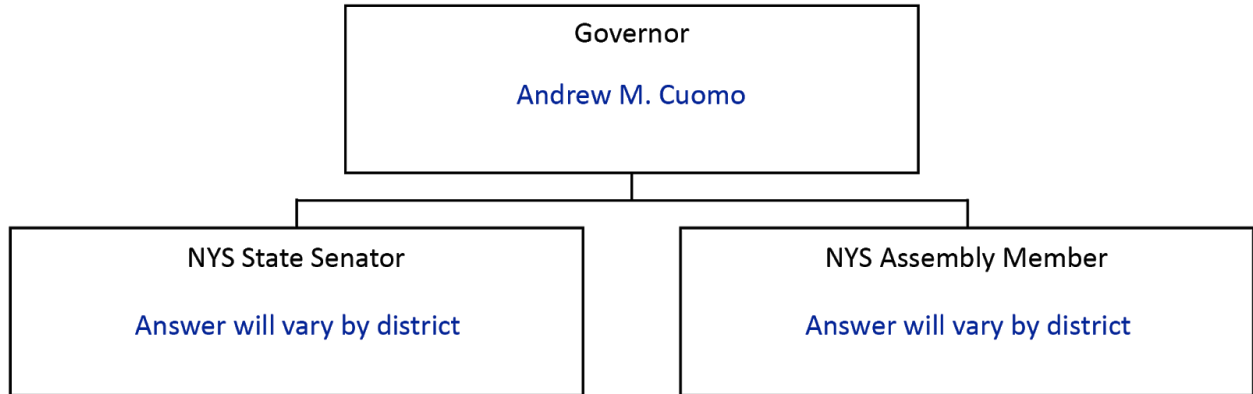
**Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials**

**Directions:** Fill in the blanks of the National, State and Local government officials listed below. Use [www.usa.gov/elected-officials](http://www.usa.gov/elected-officials), [www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator](http://www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator) and/or [nyassembly.gov/mem/search/](http://nyassembly.gov/mem/search/) to research and identify your elected officials.

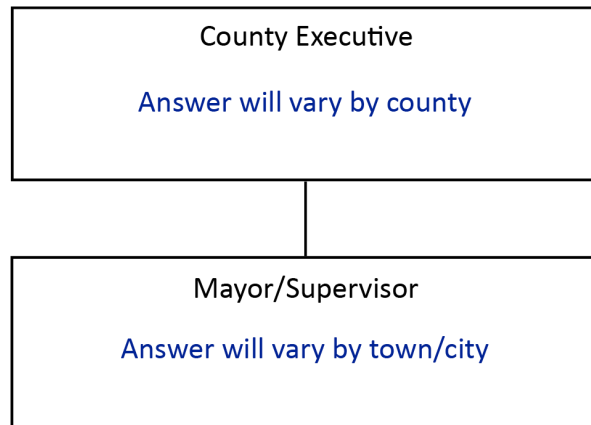
**National Government**



**State Government**



**Local Government**



# Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days

## Lesson #4

### Public Policy Case Study: Excused Absences from School for Mental Health Days Background Information/Talking Points for Educators

#### Introduction

Several states, including Oregon, Utah and Minnesota, have passed laws in recent years that establish mental health days as legitimate excused absences from school on par with sick days for physical illnesses. Other states, including New York, are considering passing similar laws.

In New York, each school district makes its own policies about excused absences. There is currently no law that requires, allows or encourages schools to include “mental health days” in their policies regarding acceptable reasons for excused absences. However, there is a proposed law in New York that would permit a student excused absences due to “mental or behavioral health”.

In order to better appreciate the significance of “mental health days” it’s important to understand the basics of school attendance and excused versus unexcused absences. In New York, all minors ages six to sixteen years of age are required to attend school. Every school or school district must have a comprehensive attendance policy and report attendance records to the state.

**What’s an excused absence?:** A student who is not in school for at least one class period per day must be marked absent, even if the absence is excused. Schools can excuse absences when a student misses school for reasons like medical, religious or emergencies.

**Excused vs. unexcused absences:** Students are required to be in school for a certain minimum amount of days in the school year. This is typically about 90 percent to 95 percent of school days. For the purpose of attendance records, both excused and unexcused absences have the same effect toward meeting this minimum. Meeting the minimum portion of school days is necessary in order to complete a certain grade, for example, or to graduate. The difference is that unexcused absences may result in corrective action taken by the school such as meetings with parents, adjustments to schedules or services, and can ultimately result in truancy (unlawfully missing school) or transfer to another school. Having too many unexcused absences can also count against a student for things like school awards or participation in school activities. So it can become very important for a student to be able to meet the criteria for an excused absence when there is a legitimate excuse.

**Who decides what's excused?** In New York each *school district* decides the types of absences that qualify as excused. In New York there is nothing in the law that defines what qualifies as an excused absence, although a specific allowance is made for religious observance. The state education regulations also suggest some categories a district might consider for excused absences:

- Illness - student
- Death/illness – family/significant others
- Legal circumstances - court, lawyers, probation, etc.
- Other family reasons - visitors, travel, parent work issues, child care, etc.

**What's a student "illness"?** Most school districts use the term illness as one of the reasons for an excused absence. But what qualifies as an illness? In our society, because most people are not very informed about mental health, we tend to think of illness as "physical illness" and consider "mental illness" as something separate.

**Mental health days:** The idea of adding mental health days is to make it very clear in a district policy that illnesses related to mental health qualify as excused absences.

**Why mental health days are important:** Mental illnesses and the symptoms associated with developing mental health challenges impact students in many ways, affecting their academic performance, maturation, relationships, prospect for graduation and much more. Bouts of depression and anxiety can be just as debilitating as many chronic health conditions and when a student is experiencing the symptoms associated with mental health conditions it can impair their ability to function in school. Just as with physical illnesses, people with mental health conditions need the ability to take a break from the demands of school in order to rest, heal and seek professional treatment when necessary. When public policies reflect an appreciation for parity between mental health and physical health it helps to reduce stigma and supports norms which acknowledge the seriousness and legitimacy of mental illness.

## Mental Health Matters Advocacy Days Lesson #4

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Public Policy Case Study: Excused Absences from School for Mental Health Days

**I. Read the two articles below to learn more about what states are doing to allow for mental health days at schools.**

New York Times - [Need a Mental Health Day? Some States give Students the Option](#)

National Education Association - [Stigma Buster: Schools Look at Mental Health Days for Students](#)

**II. Review the legislative changes other states have made on this topic**

[Utah law](#)

Look at line 56 to see the change in the Utah law

[Oregon law](#)

Look at line 12 to see the change in the Oregon law

[New York proposed law](#)

A bill was proposed in the last legislative session. Read the proposed changes by going to the link above. Type in the number of the bill A8543-A or S6687 and year 2020. Check off that you would like to read the text of the bill to see the changes in green. You can also review the sponsor's memo of support to explain the reason for the proposed legislation.

**III. Discussion Questions**

1. Do you think a law specifying "mental illness" as an excused absence is necessary? Why or why not?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Does the law really need to specify "mental illness"? Why not just assume that the term "illness", includes mental illness?

3. If New York were to pass a law that allowed students to take “mental health days”, and considered them to be excused absences, should the student or parent have to state that the reason for the absence is in fact a “mental health day”? Why or why not?
  
4. Do you think a student has a right to privacy when it comes to taking a mental health day?
  
5. What positive things might happen if New York were to define illness in the Education Law as meaning either a physical or mental health condition?
  
6. Have you ever felt like you could have benefited from being able to take a mental health day?
  
7. In some of the news stories about school mental health days some people have remarked in the comments sections that students would abuse the right to take a mental health day to “goof off”. Do you agree? Why or why not?