



**Families Together  
In New York State**

# **Testimony to Joint Budget Hearing on Mental Hygiene**

**February 11, 2014**

**Submitted to the  
Joint Fiscal Committees of the New York State Legislature**

**The Honorable John A. DeFrancisco  
Chairperson, Senate Finance Committee**

**and**

**The Honorable Herman D. Farrell, Jr.  
Chairperson, Assembly Ways and Means Committee**

**Submitted by:  
Paige Pierce  
Executive Director  
Families Together in New York State**

My name is Paige Pierce. I am the Executive Director of Families Together in New York State, a family-run organization that represents families of children with social, emotional, behavioral and mental health needs. We represent thousands of families across New York State whose children have been and are involved in many systems including mental health, substance abuse, special education, child welfare and juvenile justice. Our board and staff are made up primarily of family members and youth who have been involved with the various children's systems. Our families include foster families, adoptive families and families headed by relatives known as kinship.

There are over a half million children and youth in New York State who have a mental, behavioral or addiction disorder associated with significant functional impairment. Without access to appropriate services many of our children end up dropping out of school. Only 30% of children with social, emotional or behavioral disabilities graduate with their classmates AND receive the appropriate services. Where are the other 70%? They may end up with repeated, expensive hospitalizations, possibly for attempting suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in New York for 15 to 24 year olds. Too many youth will develop serious addiction problems or end up in the juvenile justice system.

With all of the above in mind, our organization is testifying on the OMH Regional Center of Excellence plan and the 2014 Executive Budget Proposal in the interest of affected family members across the state. Throughout implementation and budget process, we would like to emphasize the importance of the following guiding principles:

1. Families and youth must be active participants in planning services for their family and in developing and monitoring policies and services within their communities and state.

2. All children, youth, and their families must have timely, affordable access to appropriate services within their community.

To start, families and youth must be active participants in planning services for their family and

in developing and monitoring policies and services within their communities and state. We are encouraged by the expansive work conducted by the RCE Regional Planning Teams to give voice to stakeholders from the community and field experts alike. Their work has produced ambitious yet attainable goals for a community-based mental health system. It is of the utmost importance that the vision set forth during these meetings materializes into a very real service delivery system for NY families and their children. It would be a disservice to families if the promise of these Regional Planning Teams falls short of any lasting and meaningful influence over this process, or to hold the consensus they tirelessly built up as token support for consolidation. We are encouraged by the nomination of family members with children in the mental health system and/or family support professionals to positions on the committee. To be clear, we believe commitments made in the Executive Budget to pre-invest \$25 million for the expansion of community-based services are a significant and necessary step toward realizing that vision, as it provides for the expansion of 150 new Home and Community Based Waiver slots. We also ask that this legislature extend pre-investment to include the development of non-profit and state operated crisis/respice beds. This item received unanimous support from every Regional Planning Team and comes highly recommended as a service that would be most helpful to families. Additionally, we support the reinvestment of savings from the implementation of Medicaid Redesign from the Department of Health (DOH) budget and encourage investment toward children's services such as respice, transportation, and peer and family supports services.

All children, youth, and their families must have timely, affordable access to appropriate services within their community. In principal, one of the main incentives that our families have had to support the RCE initiative thus far is the potential reallocation of some resources traditionally

dedicated to institutional settings toward less-expensive community-based alternatives, a move that could surpass current service capacity for the system as a whole. Given the input provided by family support professionals and family members, it is imperative that the ideas, knowledge, experience, and creativity of these individuals are utilized to best serve our target population in allocating resources to regional hubs in the most effective and data-driven manner as possible. These teams and the experts (both professional and personal), know where the gaps in service exist and best understand how to fill them in the interest of families.

With our input, the state of New York has a momentous opportunity to fundamentally change the way we serve children with mental health challenges. We can do so in a way that both improves the cost-effectiveness of our system and foster a positive, satisfying, experience for family members so that they can focus on the recovery of their child, not on the frustrations of working within a system often characterized as rigid and unfeeling.

The above principles and the appropriate actions required to address them are all contingent on one important piece: expansion of community-based services identified by the Regional Planning Teams. While the RCE proposal identifies this as a major tenant, as advocates we know nothing is set in stone in the ever-shifting climate here in Albany and throughout the state. While we understand the state's fiscal situation is slowly improving, we also understand that the reduction of beds could be a tempting target for budget balancing. We will continue to work with OMH, the legislature, and the Governor to make clear that the mental health community is prepared to trade a system that relies on large in-patient facilities and expensive hospitalizations for one that emphasizes community-based services and larger capacity, not to bare the burden of the state's

fiscal situation. As one of the most vulnerable populations in the state, anything less would be detrimental to families.

We look forward to working with the Legislature, the Office of Mental Health, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, the Council on Children and Families and all child-serving systems to ensure that families and youth are appropriately served in their communities and able to stay in their homes to the greatest possible extent.

If there is a single message I would want to leave with you today, it is that families have a greater vested interest and expertise to ensure the success of our children than any other stakeholder in our state. We are a strong, informed voice that can be helpful to you as you make decisions that will affect our children's lives. Please view us a resource and as strong allies and partners.