



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pete Harckham

## Harckham, Senate Pass Legislation to Create an Office of Mental Health, Addiction and Wellness

PETE HARCKHAM May 26, 2021

| ISSUE: **SUBSTANCE ABUSE DISORDER, MENTAL HEALTH, BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**



*Albany, NY* – New York State Senator Pete Harckham and his Senate colleagues approved legislation (S.5084B) yesterday that will merge two state agencies—Office of Mental Health (OMH) and Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS)—and create a new state agency, the Office of Mental Health, Addiction and Wellness.

“It is time for New York to have a more patient-centered agency focused on holistic care and co-occurring disorders, which is what this merger will accomplish,” said Harckham. “This new agency will engender a comprehensive ‘whole’ patient approach that will also reduce barriers to treatment and funding while also acknowledging a certain behavioral health parity.”

“Equalizing treatment and programmatic opportunities for mental health conditions, disabilities and substance use disorders will benefit families and caregivers in countless ways,” continued Harckham, “and it makes sense to reconceptualize all of this in one agency.”

The newly passed legislation, which Harckham introduced, will create an inter-office coordinating council composed of the commissioners of the two existing agencies. The council members will work together to ensure that the state policy for the prevention, care, treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with mental illness and substance use is planned, developed and implemented comprehensively.

The idea is that within one agency gaps in services to individuals with multiple disabilities will be eliminated and no person denied treatment and services because of having more than one disability.

Also, the procedures for the regulation of programs which offer care and treatment for more than one class of persons with mental disabilities will be coordinated between the offices having jurisdiction over such programs.

In March 2021, Harckham held a press conference in Albany and received strong backing from advocacy groups across the state about merging OMH and OASAS into one agency. Harckham, chair of the Senate Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, and State Sen. Samra G. Brouk, chair of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, were both instrumental in getting a proposal for the merger into the Senate’s one-house 2021-2022 state

budget plan.

Harckham noted that legislation for the proposed merger of agencies “did not come out of a vacuum”—it has been discussed conceptually for years.

To address various concerns about the merger, discussions have been held with providers, families, treatment professionals and paraprofessionals, plus participation from the public and private sector unions. Scope of practice issues have been looked at as well.

The new legislation requires that any cost-savings that occur because of the merger go toward programs and services benefitting residents served by the agency.

“The creation of a new agency that recognizes the importance of the integration of mental health and substance use services will definitely streamline care and improve access,” said Glenn Liebman, CEO of Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (MHANYS). “I am also heartened that any savings that come about because of the integration of the agencies will stay in the behavioral health system.”

“We strongly support the Senate’s decision today to pass legislation integrating the Office of Mental Health and the Office of Addiction Services and Supports,” said Amy Dorin, president and CEO of the Coalition for Behavioral Health, “We hope the Assembly will take up this legislation soon. Too many New Yorkers who need mental health and substance use care are stuck between two systems and two sets of regulations. Providers, who want to focus on their clients, instead are forced to navigate two different agencies and the conflicting rules that come with this. An integrated agency centers the needs of New Yorkers and will create a true system of care.”

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Establishes the office of addiction and mental health services

February 23, 2021

In Assembly Committee

Sponsored by **Pete Harckham**

Do you support this bill?