



NORTHERN RIVERS

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TESTIMONY OF
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NORTHERN RIVERS FAMILY OF SERVICES

PRESENTED TO THE
NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
AND
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

REGARDING THE
NEW YORK STATE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR MENTAL HYGIENE
STATE FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026

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Summary of Recommendations

- 1. Build and fund a comprehensive workforce strategy across Mental Health and Human Services**
- 2. Innovate the Community Mental Health Funding Dynamic and Invest in Community Based Delivery of Services**

Good afternoon. My name is William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services located in the Capital Region.

About Northern Rivers Family of Services

Northern Rivers Family of Services was established in 2012 through affiliation with longstanding family services agencies Northeast Parent & Child Society and Parsons Child & Family Center. In 2019, we affiliated with Unlimited Potential, whose operations began in Saratoga Springs. Together, the 1,400-strong workforce of Northern Rivers and member agencies serve more than 18,000 children and families in 41 upstate counties each year, with \$88 million invested through more than 60 social services and child welfare programs. Northern Rivers builds a strong, successful, and healthy future for our children, families, and communities through quality services, collaboration, and innovative leadership. Our program areas include:

- Residential and community-based child welfare programing including foster care, preventive services, postadoption services, and evidence-based home visiting programs;
- Educational services for 400 students including early learning, pre-K, and Early Head Start, as well as accredited 853 schools (elementary, middle, and high school);
- Community-based child welfare and crisis services programs for children and adults including mobile crisis, school-based services, and licensed clinic programs; and
- Community-based waiver programs for children and adults including health home services.

I would like to thank Chairwomen Liz Krueger and Chair Gary Pretlow, Human Services Committee Chairs, and members of the Assembly Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees for this opportunity to testify on the Governors Executive Budget for State Fiscal Year 2025-2026

As we provide recommendations for your consideration, we want to remind everyone of two key concepts related to the budgeting of public dollars and investment. First, as has been stated many times:

The budget is not just a collection of numbers.
but an expression of our values and aspirations.

Second, the NYS Constitution helps define the responsibility to care for the needy.

“The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by such of its subdivisions, and in such manner and by such means, as the legislature may from time to time determine.”

— Article 17, NYS Constitution

What do we owe to the members of our community who need help? Those who struggle with child abuse and neglect, mental health challenges, substance abuse, housing, domestic violence, or other issues that make it harder for them simply to survive in this world, if we believe in the document that guides our great state, are deserving of our help and support

Governor Hochul has proposed a \$252 billion Executive Budget to deal with our states needs and priorities.

While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor Hochul proposes, we believe adjustments to the budget need to be made to make New York state a great place to live, raise a family, and operate a business. Our testimony recommends changes and suggestions for the final budget. Unless the proposed Executive Budget is adjusted to adequately support the mental health and human services sector and the children, adults, and families we serve each day, New York state will not reach its goals. Without support and opportunity for ALL New Yorkers, we will not be truly successful.

One lesson from the past years is that the needs of children and families don't fit neatly into budget codes, state agency silos, or generic diagnoses. Our Human Services sector provides mental health, child welfare prevention, and residential, educational and another vital services-based on the needs of the child, family, and complicated trauma faculties.

Our budget for the coming year must provide cross-discipline solutions. Undeniably, child welfare professionals provide mental health services, outpatient mental health professionals provide family stability and positive functioning, and residential care agencies provide specialized education.

1. Build and fund a comprehensive workforce strategy across Mental Health and Human Services

New bold ideas and innovation require the skills and expertise of a strong workforce. The recommendations in the proposed budget require recruitment and retention of thousands of individuals across every county, borough, and neighborhood. We need nurses, direct-care staff, medical professionals, cooks, drivers, case managers, peers, teachers, aides, and many more. **The proposed state budget includes a 2.1% human services investment effective April 1, 2025. While we appreciate the partial investment, the CPI as calculated by the federal government is 2.8%. Further, shortfalls in prior budget requires the the investment of 7.8% for the human services sector, including programs not previously funded,**

The 7.8% investment should be enacted through the cost-of-living-adjustment (“COLA”) mechanism, which also must be amended to be inclusive of all State-contracted human services programs, including contracts held by DCJS, DOH, NYSED, NYSOFA, OASAS, OCFS, OMH, OPDV, OPWDD, OTDA, and OVS. Critical programs such as crime victim services, independent living centers, supportive housing, preventive services, and rape crisis counselors were erroneously excluded from the previous COLAs and are essential to meet the human services needs of New York’s adults, children, and families.

We strongly support including prevention workers and health home care managers in the Human Services COLA as proposed in S.1580 (Persaud) /A.2590 (Hevesi)

This is a critical mechanism to ensure that providers have the necessary resources to keep up with the true cost of providing services and supports. Agencies that are providing these services, cannot be expected to subsidize the government while collaborating to keep New Yorkers afloat by providing them with mental and behavioral health, developmental disabilities, supportive housing, youth and child services, foster care, aging services, and a whole host of services for New Yorkers from all walks of life.

When adequate investment into the sector is not in the budget or only partially funded, providers must choose between giving workers well-deserved increases or paying the increased costs of utilities and rent. This investment will assist programs in covering some of the cost of inflation and increased costs, that went unaddressed in the rates last year. Some examples of increased costs include:

- Health insurance cost increases;
- Costs associated with staff recruitment efforts given high vacancy rates and unabated turnover rates in the field;
- Price increases for food, utilities, and maintenance.
- Insurance increases that greatly exceed the CPI

With over 800,000 human service workers across the State, many of whom are women and people of color, a 7.8% investment will be particularly impactful and alleviate the

financial strain many have faced while working in the sector. This inequitable system has forced nonprofits to operate with significantly less resources and reduces the possibility of staff earning wages and benefits equivalent to comparable positions in either government or the private sector. 22% of human services workers depended on SNAP benefits to make ends and they made 30% less than what government employees earn for the same role. These workers continue to serve their communities through times of crises while dealing with inflationary pressure and chronically underfunded government contracts. It is time for New York State to show up for them and their organizations by making a meaningful investment.

We deeply appreciate your consideration of this urgent request for a 7.8% investment and adding programs that have previously been left out of the COLA statute to encompass ALL human services programs this year and going forward. We are eager to collaborate with you to address this oversight and ensure that these vital programs are continuously supported

At the same time, New York State needs a coherent workforce recruitment and retention strategy. The proposed budget contains many solid ideas, yet they are scattered in various agency budgets. We need to compile these ideas to build a Human Services workforce plan.

The turnover rate for front line staff in New York's foster care programs is 49%; turnover for caseworkers in New York's family foster care, prevention, and residential foster care programs is 24%. The state must invest in this workforce to turn the tide from family's current reality of beginning therapeutic work again and again, too often, each time a new caseworker starts with them. Each budget year that New York does not invest in creating career pathways for child welfare professionals and in raising their salaries to retain them in the field is another year that New York wastes the opportunity to make a real difference in achieving positive outcomes for children-promoting family stability, reducing lengths of stay in foster care, and achieving lasting permanency for children.

Workforce Support Is a Social Justice Issue

Women comprise an astonishing 81% of the Human Services and direct-care workforce in New York. This equates to 268,900+ skilled, well-educated workers who are paid significantly less than women in New York's private sector, leading to increased staff turnover and jeopardizing the quality of service.

Not-for-Profit Organizations Are an Economic Engine

New York's not-for-profit workforce is not only hard-working, but is also an economic engine. Across New York State, 1 in 6 workers are employed by a not-for-profit organization. These workers contribute billions to the state's economic health, including the payment of income, sales, and property taxes. Beyond the direct economic impact, the not-for-profit workforce allows all New Yorkers to stay employed, avert costly medical costs, and educate our youth. A strong not-for-profit sector, with a viable direct-

care staff, creates additional economic growth and allows New York State to attract new business investments and companies.

Not-for-Profit Sector Operates as an Efficient Business

Our sector understands the need to maximize use of our resources and to provide value to our funders. We have worked in partnership with government on countless initiatives to reduce costs, focus on outcomes, use evidence-based practices, and improve quality services. These efforts come in a climate where the rates and contracts our agencies receive are frozen or lowered. Staff who we expect to do such vital work face staffing cutbacks, frozen salaries, reduced health benefits, and little or no contributions to their pensions. Not-for-profit agencies have always been forced to raise funds from private donors to supplement government resources—simply to continue to be able to do the work we are asked to do.

Again, the cost of living as expressed by the CPI justifies a 7.8% increase. Again, our sector, and by extension the New Yorkers we serve, will once again be left behind.

2. Innovate the Mental Health Funding Dynamic and Invest in Community Based Delivery of Services

Policy makers tout that New York’s Mental Health system is one of the best financed system in the world. By dollars this may be true, but the devil is in the details.

According to data, there were 715,000 people in New York’s Community public mental health system. Of that number, less than ten thousand reside in State Psychiatric hospitals. Yet, over \$1.3 billion is spent on those individuals while \$4.3 billion is spent on the other 705,000 individuals. This imbalance must be corrected.

In addition, New York, has 24 state hospitals while no other State has more than eight. New York spends one fifth of its overall mental health budget to maintain these number of psychiatric hospitals which houses a total of less than 4,000 people according to 2023 census findings.

We recommend the following investments:

School Mental Health

- Funding for School Mental Health Resource & Training Center, a project of MHANYS, critical for the implementation of the school mental health education law.
- Teacher Mental Health Training Act: Recognizing that teacher and student mental health are interconnected, MHANYS is proposing New York take the next step in addressing mental health in schools by passing [The Teacher Mental Health Training Act](#). The act would require educators and staff to complete three hours of mental health training annually.
- Support funding for expansion of school-based mental health clinics.

Community Mental Health

- **Fund Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Training:** These evidence-based trainings are available for adult, youth, teen and specialty populations.
- **Older New Yorker Mental Health Coalition:** Support rebranding the Geriatric Mental Health Alliance as the Older New Yorker Mental Health Coalition (ONYMHC) and provide \$250,000 in the FY 2025-26 state budget for twenty Adult MHFA for Older Adult Classes for State Office for Aging (SOFA) providers. The ONYMHC will be an essential part of the New York implementation of the goals of the Master Plan for Aging especially as the population grows exponentially in the decade to come. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), approximately 20% of adults that are 65 and older will experience mental health issues. In addition, while individuals over 65 only represent 16.8% of the population, they make up approximately 22% of suicide completions. The National Council for Aging has identified a mental health crisis among older adults exacerbated by the COVID-19 isolation, socioeconomic factors, and lack of services.
- **Network Adequacy Regulations/Parity: Northern Rivers** urges final adoption of the New York State Department of Financial Services (DFS) and the New York State Department of Health (DOH) regulations that require insurers and health plans to maintain adequate networks. This includes ensuring appointments within ten days for outpatient providers and seven days following discharge from hospitals or emergency rooms. In addition,
- **Crisis Response:** Support continued funding for 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

Housing

- **Support Increased Funding for Supportive Housing:** Approximately 40,000 New Yorkers with serious psychiatric disabilities depend on supportive housing arrangements sponsored, licensed and funded through the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH). Supportive housing includes a wide range of housing options with different levels of support. These programs make living in the community possible for people with psychiatric disabilities, helping them to achieve as self-sufficient a life as possible. Support additional funding in the FY 2025-26 budget.

Non-Budget Legislative Priorities

NOTE: As bills are reintroduced in the new Legislative Session, we will be updating this document.

Mental Health Workforce

- **Recruitment/Retention/Retirement:** [Coalition of Retirement Equity \(CORE\)](#) is an initiative that has been launched to rally support for community-based not-for-profit human services to have a more equitable and sustainable retirement system. This workforce provides critical services that New York State would otherwise have to provide; however, this workforce does not currently have

access to the fringe and retirement benefits that the public sector and other sectors are provided. This disparity is exacerbating challenges in recruitment and retention.

School Mental Health

- **Teacher Mental Health Training (2025 Bill Number: A3041):** Requires training for teachers, administrators, and instructors in the area of mental health response, and requires New York State Office of Mental Health to assist in development of curriculum for training.
- **Suicide Prevention (2025 Bill Number: S2705):** Requires all New York school boards to adopt a policy on student suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention for grades 7 to 12.

College Mental Health

- **Enhancing Mental Health Literacy & Whole Health Parity (2025 Bill Numbers: S1008):** Requires the State University of New York, the City University of New York, and independent colleges, to adopt certain provisions related to student mental health such as administering student mental health surveys, establishing a mental health committee, administering mental health training to faculty and staff, and improving university policies regarding mental health.

Community Mental Health

- **Mental Health in the Workplace (2025 Bill Number: S381):** This bill directs the Commissioner of New York State Department of Labor to create and distribute to employers written materials regarding mental health services and resources available to employees to be posted in the workplace. The bill also directs voluntary guidance for employers to put in place strategies and programs to support the mental health and wellness of their employees, which would be translated into multiple languages.
- **First Responder Peer Support Program Act (2024 Bill Numbers: S7079-A/A7552-A):** This bill provides the authority for the Commissioner of the Office of Mental Health to establish a statewide grant program for first responder peer-to-peer programs and develop standards for eligible entities. First responder peer support programs provide a critical network of emotional and psychological assistance for individuals working in high-stress and traumatic environments. These programs rely on peers who have shared similar experiences to offer understanding, guidance, and support, helping to reduce stigma and promote mental well-being. By fostering a culture of mutual aid, peer support programs help first responders cope with stress, prevent burnout, and enhance overall resilience.

Conclusion

In closing, we urge the Legislature to negotiate a budget with the Governor that ensures New York remains committed to the programs that produce positive outcomes for our most vulnerable children, individuals, and families; one that ultimately saves the state money on more expensive interventions such as foster care, unnecessary medical care, homeless shelters, and the juvenile justice system. We strongly encourage the Legislature to support the need of the not-for-profit mental health sector. Failure to fund an increase for not-for-profit Human Services agencies will have a significant negative impact on the ability of individuals and families to receive services and ultimately on the physical, mental, and financial health of New York State as a whole.

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profit Human Services organizations and communities that yield positive outcomes for all New Yorkers. We must make New York state a great place to live, a great place to raise a family, and a great place to operate a business. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.