

February 5, 2025

**New York State Office of Mental
Health Testimony**

2025 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing



**Office of
Mental Health**

Good morning. Chairs Krueger, Pretlow, Brouk, Simon, and members of their respective committees, I want to thank you for the invitation to address Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget as it relates to mental health.

I am happy to report that the Governor's proposed budget continues to emphasize the importance of building a comprehensive mental health system that provides New Yorkers with robust prevention services, increased access to treatment, and a vital safety net for those with high needs who have been unable to effectively engage in treatment on their own. Since taking office, Governor Hochul, in partnership with the legislature, has made historic new investments in the mental health system and the Office of Mental Health (OMH) has been diligently working with counties across the State to implement these programs in a manner that meets the needs of local communities. To date, we have generated more than 780 contracts and funded more than 690 providers. And to ensure the success of these programs, Governor Hochul provides a Targeted Inflationary Increase of 2.1%, building on investments from previous years.

The Executive Budget provides for investments across the lifespan, with an emphasis on recovery and community-based wellness, as well as additional intensive services for high need individuals. Providing for early access to care is at the core of mental wellness and the Office of Mental Health continues to grow these services.

Across the lifespan, this year's Executive budget proposes the inclusion of \$1.5 Million to integrate behavioral health in OB-GYN offices in underserved communities to improve maternal mental health, providing for vital screenings and access to treatment for pregnant people and new parents. We know that treating maternal depression is critical to the successful growth of our youngest New Yorkers.

Governor Hochul is continuing her commitment to Youth Mental Health by including \$1.5 Million to expand teen Mental Health First Aid which is specifically designed to teach teens in grades 9-12 how to help each other to respond to mental health challenges. During the Governor's Youth Mental Health Listening Tour in 2023, young people repeatedly emphasized that they first talk to each other when they are experiencing mental health concerns. And those youth shared that they don't always know how to respond. Additionally, funding for Youth Safe Spaces which are clubhouses where young people can access mental and behavioral health wellness resources, foster positive peer relationships, and engage in positive activities, further strengthens their ability to help each other.

For those children and adolescents whose complex needs require specialized assessment and care, the proposed budget includes \$1 Million to create Comprehensive Clinical Assessment Hubs for evaluation and linkages to the specific array of care needed. There is also an amendment to Mental Hygiene Law which would allow runaway and homeless youth—who are already authorized to consent to their own physical health services—to also consent to outpatient and inpatient behavioral health services without parental consent. This change would help avoid delays in accessing essential behavioral health care, ensuring that vulnerable minors receive timely treatment and support. Furthermore, it is in keeping with the principle of parity between physical and behavioral health services.

For adult New Yorkers, this year's proposed budget provides for the development of Clubhouses, which are programs designed to assist individuals living with mental illness with the establishment of friendships and recreational activities as well as providing educational and vocational opportunities. Clubhouses enable the successful recovery vital to helping individuals thrive in the community. The National Alliance on Mental Illness describes the term recovery as, "reaching a place where you are able to pursue a safe, dignified and meaningful life." Governor Hochul and the Office of Mental Health are committed to assisting individuals with mental health challenges to reaching that place!

Additionally, by working with local communities to develop culturally appropriate care, we are more successful in engaging diverse populations in mental wellness activities. The Executive Budget includes \$2 Million to support community-determined wellness in historically marginalized neighborhoods which can help us towards reaching all New Yorkers with prevention services.

Utilizing Peers who have the unique perspective of living with mental health challenges has proven to be highly effective in engaging high need individuals with whom traditional services have had little success. \$4 Million is proposed for hospital-based Peer Bridger services and the expansion of Intensive and Sustained Engagement Teams (INSET) who work with individuals to secure their success in the community and prevent hospitalization and emergency room visits.

Ensuring that services are available across the lifespan, the recovery journey requires us to make adjustments as people enter different stages of life. This year's budget provides \$1.6 Million to create a pilot Aging in Place program for OMH licensed residential units allowing individuals to continue receiving optimum residential services and support in their homes as they grow older.

Our highest need New Yorkers require specialized intensive and innovative approaches to engage them in services. Governor Hochul launched the Safe Options Support initiative, or SOS, in January 2022. These teams, initially working with unsheltered individuals in the subways of New York City have since expanded to our Long Island and upstate communities. There are currently 27 SOS teams who have conducted more than 67,773 outreach encounters and have successfully housed 884 individuals who were previously unsheltered – some for many years – in permanent housing. Additionally, teams have helped to facilitate over 2,600 shelter placements in New York City. Teams have also initiated 875 voluntary referrals to a hospital emergency department or hospital-based comprehensive psychiatric emergency program. Building on this success, this year's budget includes over \$12 Million to enhance specialty services for these high need individuals. Funding will be available to add street medicine and street psychiatry to the SOS teams as well as additional funding for OASAS street outreach teams to integrate with SOS and provide for substance use services. For mobile outreach teams, proposed funding would establish welcome centers in five New York City subway stations allowing for a more private space for outreach workers to assist unsheltered individuals to better engage and connect them with services.

Beyond the data, it is the individual's life change that is so important. A woman who was unsheltered and living in the subway for many years, after working with her SOS team not only accessed permanent housing but reconnected with her worried sister who had been searching for her for years.

We will always make every effort to work with and engage individuals in need of services in their communities. Since 2023, with the over \$2 Billion investment in mental health, we are significantly expanding the availability of outpatient services throughout our system - including ways to effectively connect individuals to services upon discharge from the hospital. But sometimes for people living with a mental illness, due to their illness, they are unable to engage in community mental health services despite being at extremely great risk for their personal safety. This year, we are proposing a clarifying amendment to the involuntary inpatient commitment criteria to include individuals at substantial risk of harm due to an inability or refusal, as a result of their mental illness, to provide for their essential needs such as food, clothing, medical care, safety or shelter.

In addition, the Executive budget applies a new \$16.5 Million to the Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) program for counties to increase efforts to work with individuals on a voluntary basis while also providing support for local oversight; and \$2 million for additional staff at OMH to better support the counties, enhance State oversight, and enable increased use of voluntary AOT throughout the State. There are also proposed changes to Mental Hygiene Law to clarify AOT criteria and provide petitioners with better guidance on when an AOT petition can be filed within six months of an expired AOT Court order.

Finally, this budget specifically increases services in two additional key areas. It proposes funding for the much-needed update to the Crisis Unit of the Capital District Psychiatric Center and expansion of its Mobile Integration Team, providing ready access to crisis services in the Capital area. And the Executive Budget also provides \$160 million in capital for an increase of 100 psychiatric forensic inpatient beds on Wards Island in New York City to address the increasing need for restoration services to ensure that individuals can participate in their court processes in a timely manner. Lastly, the Budget also provides \$21.2 Million for OMH to increase clinical and direct care staffing at its four forensic facilities to reduce staff to patient ratios, improving safety and quality of care.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Executive Budget, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.