

JOINT NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE
AND ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS
COMMITTEES
BUDGET HEARING ON MENTAL HYGIENE

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TESTIMONY BY JOHN J. COPPOLA, MSW
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is John Coppola and I am the Executive Director of the New York Association of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Providers (ASAP), a statewide association representing the full continuum of substance use disorders services across New York State: prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction. Our organization represents more than 150 agencies in addition to statewide and regional coalitions of programs, affiliate members, and individual members.

During each annual hearing convened in response to the Executive Budget proposal submitted by Governor Cuomo, we expressed great concern about the continuing upward trajectory of drug overdose deaths, the increase in the number of New Yorkers seeking treatment for a substance use disorder, and the unimaginable grief and suffering experienced by so many families across our state. During every one of those years, ASAP was disappointed that the proposed budget did not reflect the resources or the response that should be expected by the frontline workers and life-saving programs tasked with combating the problem. The budget proposed by Governor Hochul has created optimism that inadequate attention to a major public health crisis may be a thing of the past and that New York may be increasing its efforts with a service delivery system that has the capacity to match the magnitude of the crisis.

Tragically, deaths due to opioid overdose have continued their shocking upward trajectory. Overdose deaths increased across New York State by 31% since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In New York City alone, 2,243 people died from drug overdoses in the 12-month period ending on March 31, 2021, a 36% increase over the previous year. Included in these NYC overdose deaths is a 45% increase in *opioid* overdoses – heroin, synthetic opioids, fentanyl, and others. Rates of overdose attributable to cocaine and psychostimulants have also increased dramatically. The 31% statewide overdose death increase during the COVID-19 pandemic included 2,950 in communities outside of NYC. A record-breaking 96,779 drug overdose deaths occurred between March 2020 and March 2021 nationally, marking a nearly 30% increase over the same period of the previous year, according to CDC data.

Making matters worse, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated service delivery issues caused by years of underfunding. According to a recent survey of addiction prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction service providers, 75% of service providers have seen an increase in demand for services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concurrently, 88% of providers surveyed said that current funding was inadequate to address the demand for services. A staggering 98% reported inadequate staffing levels to meet the demand for services.

Fortunately, due to a strong federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with increasing concern about the nation's escalating addiction and overdose crisis – and due to successful efforts by New York State to hold corporations accountable for their actions that fueled the addiction and overdose crisis – funding has been made available in Governor Hochul's proposed budget to strengthen addiction prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services. For the first time in many years, New York State has an opportunity to enact a budget and a plan that provides a response to this crisis that has the magnitude necessary to reverse the deadly trends that have gone unchecked for far too long.

ASAP supports Governor Hochul's proposals and urges the Senate and Assembly to include these initiatives in the enacted budget. Specifically:

5.4% COLA - The total cumulative COLA increases that should have been provided to behavioral health programs, based upon the CPI-U each year from FY 2007-08 through FY 2021-22, totals 35%. Taking into consideration two small COLA increases that were provided by the Legislature and two modest salary increases, a conservative estimate of the cumulative amount of COLA withheld from substance use disorder and mental health service providers over the past 15 years is approximately 30%. The 5.4% COLA included in the Governor's budget proposal must be enacted in this year's budget. Our next step should be to increase the salaries of our workforce by 30% to cover the raises that were cut from budget after budget. Additionally, we call on the Legislature to remove the "sunset provision" in the Part DD Amendment as included in the Executive's proposed budget to help ensure that COLAs will be included in all future budgets.

To remedy years of historic underfunding, ASAP alongside our behavioral health advocacy partners across New York State strongly urge the Senate and Assembly to include in its one-house budget bills a \$500 million investment to help rebuild a sustainable SUD workforce, address access to care issues caused by high staff vacancy and turnover rates, and to implement long overdue rate adjustments that will begin to address the disparity between the cost of delivering care and current reimbursement rates. To recruit and retain qualified individuals to the SUD field, we encourage the Senate and Assembly to include in their one-house budgets tuition reimbursement, student loan forgiveness, and stipend funding to support internships and field placements while students learn the skills needed for their career.

We encourage the Senate and Assembly to support the following proposals, ensuring that every funding proposal is evaluated for adherence to anti-racism principles and addresses justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion issues:

- \$3,000 bonuses that apply to **all** service staff including people who clean service provider buildings, provide transportation, and other services that get overlooked. This is an equity and justice issue.
- In the Capital budget – Ensure that all previously appropriated but not used funds are used for their intended purpose.
- The 340B – Medicaid Pharmacy Benefit Carve Out must be repealed
- Make permanent the clinical practice exemption and support the Executive proposal to shift responsibility for certification and licensing of SUD and MH professionals from SED to NYSDOH

As we look ahead, we urge the Senate and Assembly to work with Governor Hochul to ensure that all funds available to support a fully-funded continuum of SUD services are used efficiently for the greatest possible impact. Specifically, we call on the Senate and Assembly to monitor and protect any opioid settlement funds from being swept into the State's General Fund or being used to supplant existing funding for addiction services, and continue the fight to ensure that these funds are used for their intended purpose.

We thank you for consideration of our perspective and recommendations, and for convening this important budget hearing.