



TESTIMONY OF
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PRESENTED TO THE
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH

REGARDING THE
MENTAL HEALTH WORKFORCE
NOVEMBER 9, 2021

NORTHERNRIVERS

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Invest in the workforce and provide funding on annual basis**
- 2. Continue to redirect residential savings for re-investment rather than general budget relief**
- 3. Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience**

Good afternoon. I am William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services, headquartered in the Capital Region with offices throughout New York.

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 40 upstate counties each year, with \$88 million invested through more than 60 social services and mental health 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 programming 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 special education schools (elementary, middle, and high school)
- Community-based mental health and crisis services programs for children and adults including mobile crisis, school-based services, vocational rehabilitation, and licensed outpatient clinic programs

- Community-based waiver programs for children and adults including Health Home services

I would like to thank the NYS Mental Health Committee and members of the Assembly for this opportunity to testify on the mental health workforce.

COVID-19 and Workforce Need and Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic impacts have negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders. In a recent Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) brief, [53 percent](#) of adults in the United States reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. This is significantly higher than the [32 percent](#) reported in prior months. Many adults are also reporting specific negative impacts on their [mental health and well-being](#), such as difficulty sleeping (36 percent) and eating (32 percent), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12 percent), and worsening chronic conditions (12 percent), due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. As the pandemic wears on, ongoing and necessary public health measures expose many people to situations linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as [isolation](#) and [job loss](#).

Despite increased demand and facing all of these stresses as citizens, mental health providers and their staff did not allow the pandemic to negatively impact the delivery of services.

Impact on Families, Adults, and Youth

At the same time, the need for support, help, and services has increased, particularly in residential care, behavioral health, and health homes and CFTS/HCBS services. Currently, Northern Rivers' 3 licensed clinics have waitlists of more than 650 adults and children while our health home and services caseloads are experiencing waitlists and the lack of services to more than 500 families and their children.

***We cannot let the COVID-19 and workforce stress
undermine the critical mental health system across New York State.***

Following are specific recommendations with regard to the proposed budget.

1. Invest in the workforce and provide funding annually.

During the pandemic, NYS human services workers stayed on the job, provided great service, and cared for our most vulnerable. Due to both a robust and highly competitive economy that has increased private sector wages and with our sector hamstrung by insufficient reimbursement rates, not-for-profits are now even more challenged to attract and retain the quality staff that our vulnerable citizens deserve. All sectors of our economy have been facing pressures in the ability to hire quality staff. **The skilled, trained, dedicated professionals who work in our field are mission-driven, but they can't go to the supermarket and use their mission-driven card to pay for food.** It doesn't work. They need real wages that are competitive with other sectors.

Now, we see a steady stream of workers leaving or not even applying for community-based human services jobs. The result is many jobs are going unfilled,

leading to a staffing shortage that has reached emergency levels. The human services sector depends on trained staff to support our clients. **We cannot replace staff with technology nor can we raise our prices.**

Some programs are facing vacancy rates as high as 40 percent and unfilled jobs at record levels. At Northern Rivers, we have 125 unfilled positions and regular turnover averaging 35 percent, despite enhanced pay practices including starting hourly worker pay of \$17 per hour, shift differentials, 401(k) match/profit sharing, one-time retention payments, education and tuition reimbursement, free telemedicine, and partially paid health insurance.

We appreciate the recent actions by Commissioner Sullivan regarding the use of federal block grant and FMAP funds as it related to community residences, RTF, peer and community mental health workforce support. As has been stated, these funds are one-time in nature. We need permanent changes to deal with the fundamental causes of financial pressures.

The low pay in the human services field is a major factor in the workforce crunch. Even our enhancements, while significant, are insufficient in today's economy. Human services workers — most of whom are paid through contracts or rates established by and with the state government — represent 20 percent of our state's workforce and deliver services to more than 2.5 million New Yorkers.

- Human services workers generally make about 71 percent of what government employees make, and 82 percent of what private sector workers receive for the same role.
- Human services workers are overwhelmingly female (66 percent), over two-thirds are full-time workers of color (68 percent), and nearly half (46 percent) are

women of color. These shares are considerably higher than for New York City's overall private sector workforce, where only one-quarter (26 percent) of private sector workers overall are women of color. As such, pay disparities in this sector have important consequences for race and gender equity.

- Human services workers with a high school education and higher, core human services workers generally make about \$20,000 a year less than a public sector worker with a comparable education.
- Poverty pay in the core human services sector means that 15 percent of all workers (both full- and part-time) qualified for food stamps in the 2016–2018 period analyzed, higher than the 12 percent share for all private sector workers, and much higher than for government employees (9 percent).
- Many human services not-for-profits are struggling with high vacancy rates, with an estimated average vacancy rate around 11 percent as of March 2021, 54 percent of which had a vacancy rate higher than 10 percent, and in excess of 30 percent had a vacancy rate higher than 15 percent resulting in sustainable workloads.

(Source: Fiscal Policy Institute, Building a More Equitable New York: Human Services Not-for-profits, February 2020.)

Yet compared to peers in the private sector, not-for-profit human services workers are dramatically underpaid: **While the average New Yorker earns \$67,500 annually, the average human services worker in New York earns only \$27,800.**

Many workers in the sector are forced to rely on the same public assistance programs as the clients they serve or are forced to work a second or third job.

Nearly every sector in the state is experiencing labor shortages. But in these mainly not-for-profit human services jobs, the effects are far-reaching. Workers are

pulling double shifts to make up for staffing shortages. And with so many jobs going unfilled, vulnerable populations aren't always able to get the vital services they need.

In addition to our staffing crisis, human services providers are also faced with inflation and supply chain impacts fueling large increases in basic supplies and operational supports. Some examples include 14 percent increases in food, 42 percent increase in fuel, and major insurance cost increases.

Through your leadership last year, we had the first COLA in more than a dozen years. Every year outside of last year, the budget included COLA language for the human services workforce and **every year one of the sad budget traditions is that this language was always struck out of the final budget.** Now moving forward, the language has been sunset so it is not even in the budget after March 31. Hundreds of millions of dollars that would go to staff to provide training, counseling, addiction treatment, housing, peer and family support, and care management were lost because funding COLA not a priority. How many people's lives would have been enhanced and even saved by this funding? Sadly, we will never know the answer. This year, with a new Governor, a better budget outlook, and strong relations with the Legislature, we will be advocating strongly that there be a 5.4 percent cost of living increase for the behavioral health sector.

Measured by the Consumer Price Index, the COLA is at 5.4 percent. The flexibility inherent in the COLA will provide agencies with ability to pay more to staff and help subsidize the cost of doing business by helping to pay increased health care costs, energy costs, and other factors that impact the running of an agency. This is the most significant issue we have in the budget, and we urge your support to begin to make whole the need that is out there to support our staffs.

While a 5.4 percent increase seems like huge step forward, the years of neglect have made things more difficult for people in the addiction field. **We need a New York State version of the Federal Relief Act to make significant down payments on the funding we have lost in the past.** We urge legislative support for the 5.4 percent increase in the Consumer Price Index and additional funding through a New York type Relief Act to help support the behavioral health needs of these in our community

2. Continue to redirect residential savings for reinvestment rather than general budget relief.

The Legislature has long supported reinvestment from facility closures for community services. Last year, the enacted budget diverted savings from these closures to general budget relief—actually taking resources away from our sector at a time when we needed them most. We encourage the Legislature to reject any future proposals that redirect savings into the general fund. Reinvestment has historically supported the transition of services from a residential or inpatient service to more normal, efficient, and effective community-based services; at a time when these services are more important and valuable than ever, they need greater support. Elimination of this option represents a fiscal gimmick that has long-term community health, mental health, and safety impacts.

3. Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience

Critical workforce shortages in the mental hygiene professions exist across New York State. The shortages contribute to higher costs to voluntary not-for-profit agencies and impede access to care. For decades, the dramatic shortage of licensed mental

health practitioners has been “masked” by an exemption to the scope of practice for certain practitioners licensed under Art. 163 of the Education Law. That exemption was address in Part Y of Chapter of the Laws of 2018 and is due to sunset permanently in June 2022.

The Legislature must act immediately to address a crisis that will ensue in June when the exemption permanently sunsets. The solution is a modernization to the scope of practice and standardization of the master’s level educational, clinical training, and licensing standards for licensed mental health counselors, licensed marriage and family therapists, and licensed psychoanalyst. There are currently more than 10,000 of these capable, trained, and licensed practitioners working up to their full scope of training in New York State.

Conclusion

The strength of the state’s not-for-profit partners has always been the mission-driven, resilient, and caring response to need. Together, NYS’s health and human services agencies and not-for-profits have fought through economic challenges in the past. We believe with prudent and necessary investments in the FY 2022–2023 state budget, gains can be made in behalf of all New Yorkers.

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.