

# Fund the Bold Mental Health Strategy and Build a Workforce to Implement

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May 23, 2023

In her second State of the State and state budget address, Gov. Hochul proposed significant investments in mental health with the goal of “fixing the entire continuum of care that is necessary to keep people safe and happy.” Her proposals ranged from expanding insurance coverage for mental health services to increased capacity for inpatient psychiatric beds. The plan also includes an expansion of outpatient services, payment parity for telehealth, more wrap around services for people transitioning from one setting to another, and expanded school-based mental health services.

This holistic approach is commendable especially in light of the growing need for mental health services in recent years. A recent survey of psychologists reported increases in patients seeking treatment for anxiety, depression, and substance-related disorders compared with 2020. Caregivers report an inability to meet the increased demand and that their patients are facing longer waitlists.

In addition to the physical infrastructure that creates places for people to receive services, a key factor to the success of many of these initiatives will be the staff to provide those services. These types of professionals can include psychiatrists and clinical social workers. The federal Health Services Research Agency has documented the current workforce challenges that contribute to barriers in access to care.

Newer strategies to address staffing shortages are emerging. Not only is telehealth being used more widely since the pandemic; on the same day that the governor issued her proposals, the Kaiser Family Foundation, a Washington, DC-based health policy think tank, released a report that examines strategies implemented through state Medicaid programs to address behavioral health workforce shortages.

## Key Areas of Focus

The report outlines strategies that fall into these key areas: increase reimbursement rates, reduce administrative burden, augment the workforce, and incentivize participation:

- Increase the reimbursement rates the state offers incentivizes more provider participation thereby expanding access
- Reduce administrative burdens helps lessen the time and effort necessary to process documentation by centralizing or standardizing credentialing and allowing practitioners more time to focus on care delivery

- Augment the workforce allows more flexibility when providing services and in the scope of practice so that additional providers can give care without the same requirements for supervisory oversight
- Incentivize participation to attract providers can include prompt pay for services or student loan repayment, for example
- Re-establish the children’s psychiatric fellowship at Albany Medical College to increase the availability of vital services in the Greater Capital Region
- Continue to integrate mental health care within primary care practices with incentives
- Expand school-based mental health services in educational settings with sensitivity to reimbursement rates, size, and location

## Increase the Pipeline for Staff

- Convene colleges and universities to develop an action plan to increase the recruitment and retention of students.
- Invest a portion of the budget funds into scholarship, paid internships, and field-based part time jobs for students in colleges and universities to begin to grow the workforce. As part of the effort, add requirements that beneficiaries should provide service in “public” setting rather than private practices
- Continue to push for and advocate for the mental health credential as proposed in the executive budget
- Develop pipeline actions to support an increase in peer staff to support growing needs
- Support providers to retain professionals through adequate rates

## Conclusion

The goal of our health care system is to improve the health of every New Yorker. Infrastructure and innovation are important tools, but the most important part of any health care system is the people who deliver that care. We need passionate, talented, well-trained people to implement these ideas, to know and understand the needs of every patient, and to make sure that New Yorkers get the quality care they need and deserve. The word “care” is part of health care, and only people can care. It’s vitally important that we have the right people in place; that is the only way to meet our goals.

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