



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pete Harckham

Harckham, Advocates Express Support for Creating a State Office of Mental Health, Addiction and Wellness

PETE HARCKHAM March 27, 2021

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Albany, NY – New York State Senator Pete Harckham, a coalition of behavioral health advocates and concerned residents held a press conference today on the East Capitol steps of the State Capitol to express support for creating an Office of Mental Health, Addiction and Wellness.

Right now, a proposal to merge the state Office of Mental Health (OMH) and the Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS) to create a new state agency—Office of Mental Health, Addiction and Wellness—has received strong backing from advocacy groups across the state, but still lacks a full commitment from the State Assembly. Sen. Harckham, chair of the Senate Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, and State Sen. Samra G. Brouk, chair of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, were instrumental in getting the proposal put into the Senate’s on-house budget plan.

“The purpose of the merger is to provide a more patient-centered agency focused on holistic care and co-occurring disorders while reducing barriers to treatment and funding,” said Harckham. “Once created, this new agency will be better positioned to establish behavioral health parity—equal treatment of mental health conditions and substance use disorders—to an extent that patients and families will benefit in meaningful ways.”

“The integration of these agencies reflects what we know about better outcomes: Individuals who receive integrated mental health and substance services show better clinical improvements and report better treatment satisfaction,” said Brouk in a statement read at the press conference. “Getting patients out of ‘siloed’ treatment is better for them and it is better for their providers.”

To address various concerns about the merger, the one house Senate budget includes the creation of a stakeholder advisory board comprised of providers, families, treatment professionals and paraprofessionals, plus participation from the public and private sector unions. Scope of practice issues will be looked at as well. Rather than focus on cost-savings, the real intention is to create an agency that implements established best practices.

Harckham noted that the proposed merger “did not come out of a vacuum”—it has been discussed conceptually for years, including intense outreach by both agencies over the last 18

months.

“With frightening levels of suicide and overdose during the Covid-19 pandemic, the time to move forward is now,” said Harckham.

Andrea Smyth, executive director of the New York State Coalition for Children’s Behavioral Health, said, “We know the future of youth- and family-driven care must feature integrated service delivery. Many of us have been working toward the integration of health, mental health and addiction services that respond to family needs for years. That is why we want the Legislature to authorize the reconfiguration of these state agencies and outline a process that breaks down the silos in care for youth and families so they can recover together.”

Dr. Angelia Smith-Wilson, executive director of Friends of Recovery – New York, said, “Friends of Recovery – New York hears stories every day of individuals seeking recovery for co-occurring mental health and substance use disorder issues and not receiving the care that they so desperately need. The time is now to create strategic integration that adequately addresses both mental health and substance use disorders, with the advocates, particularly representation from black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities, to ensure services are delivered to those who need it most.”

Denise Murphy McGraw, American Association of Marriage & Family Therapists of New York Chapter, said, “New York’s licensed family therapists know the chances of long-term recovery increase when the entire family receives support and treatment. That is why we join Senator Harckham in calling for a unified state agency so future treatment can be integrated and regulations streamlined.”

Matthew Shapiro, associate director of Public Affairs, National Alliance on Mental Illness – New York State, said, “Integral to advancing recovery from mental health and addiction

issues is the ability to treat the whole person, as these issues often overlap. Despite this connection, for too long the support services meant to provide recovery from these ailments have been siloed into separate agencies, and a person only receives services to treat half of their issues. Creating an Office of Mental Health, Addiction and Wellness would integrate care leading to a more holistic approach to recovery and overall wellness. This is why NAMI-NYS stands alongside Senator Harckham and our fellow advocates to call on the Assembly to include this new agency in their one-house bill.”

Glenn Liebman, CEO of Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (MHANYS), said, “We thank Senator Harckham for sponsoring legislation that would help support the creation of a new agency that recognizes the importance of the integration of mental health and substance use services. We are particularly appreciative of the provision that ensures that any savings that come about because of the integration of the agencies will stay in the behavioral health system. We want to ensure better integration without the loss of any funding. This legislation meets those twin goals.”

Amy Dorin, president and CEO of the Coalition for Behavioral Health, said, “Too many New Yorkers who need mental health and substance use care are stuck between two systems and two sets of regulations. Providers, who want to focus on their clients, instead are forced to navigate two different agencies and the conflicting rules that come with this. By integrating the Office of Mental Health and the Office of Addictions Services and Supports, the Legislature has an opportunity to center the needs of New Yorkers and create a true system of care.”

William Gettman, CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services, said, “Breaking down barriers to treatment and recovery is one of the most important things we can do to provide real help to New Yorkers, especially children, in need. The creation of an Office of Mental Health, Addiction, and Wellness will help simplify the provision of these services for the great

agencies who do this invaluable work, and will improve access for the people who need it most. We can do more together, and with this change, we will.”

Karen Carpenter Palumbo, president and CEO of Vanderheyden, said, “Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers unfortunately struggle with co-occurring mental health and substance disorders. The realization of one agency will only be successful if there is a commitment to equality in specialty care and funding to provide the highest quality of care in the prevention, treatment and recovery of mental health and substance disorders for all New Yorkers.”

Paige Pierce, CEO of Families Together in New York State, said, “To many parents and young people suffering from addiction, it is apparent that their substance use and mental health are deeply intertwined. Parents are often forced to navigate these systems as if they have two different children: one with emotional pain and one with substance use disorder. Too often, the result is that both needs are left unmet as each system wastes valuable time deciding who this child belongs to, and the consequences are deadly. This long-needed merger presents an opportunity to finally improve the way families experience care on the ground so that there is no wrong door. To meaningfully integrate care, we must integrate the entire system—and that starts with these agencies.”

Barbara Callahan, an impacted parent, said, “The merger of OMH and OASAS offers much hope for families who have struggled with addiction. If we are unfortunate enough to need these services, we can at least experience them as integrated services in our community. For years, we struggled to get these systems to see my child as the whole and wonderfully complex person that he was. No family should suffer as ours has.”