

Joint New York State Senate Finance and
Assembly Ways and Means Committees

Mental Hygiene Budget Hearing

February 13, 2024

Testimony by John Coppola, MSW
Co-CEO, InUnity Alliance

Honorable Members of the New York State Senate and Assembly:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. My name is John Coppola and I represent InUnity Alliance, the collective voice for addiction and mental health in New York. InUnity Alliance, formed by the coming together of the Coalition for Behavioral Health and the New York Association of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Providers (ASAP), is committed to addressing the critical challenges and urgent needs of the addiction and mental health sectors in New York State, including the workforce crisis, inadequate funding and reimbursement rates, gaps in services, and the needs of underserved populations.

Communities around the state are confronting a crisis of unprecedented scale, with significant increases in drug overdose deaths, an alarming rise in suicides and other mental health challenges, and a behavioral health workforce crisis that gravely jeopardizes access to essential care. These workforce issues are symptoms of a problem that has plagued our state for decades: the systematic underfunding of the addiction and mental health sectors. Our ability to respond to the needs of our state has been critically undermined by a severe workforce crisis, characterized by high rates of staff burnout, turnover, inadequate wages, and difficulties with recruitment. These problems collectively impede our ability to provide timely and effective care for those seeking help.

While we acknowledge and appreciate Governor Hochul's efforts to address New York State's mental health crisis, the reality remains that the proposed funding levels for addiction prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services are insufficient in the face of an escalating public health crisis. The investments in mental health made last year, though unprecedented, merely begin to scratch the surface of the vast needs across our state.

InUnity Alliance is eager to collaborate with the Senate and Assembly to guarantee comprehensive access to mental health and addiction services for all New Yorkers. We advocate for the inclusion of the following critical priorities in the SFY 2024-25 budget, aimed at fundamentally transforming our systems of care:

1. Support a 3.2% cost of living adjustment and a \$500 million investment to mitigate the sector's workforce crisis and help meet future demands. These investments must be included to address high levels of staff turnover, uncompetitive wages, and difficulty with staff recruitment, all of which exacerbate service delivery issues. The Legislature must ensure that any workforce investments are aligned with recommendations by OMH and OASAS provider workgroups to address staff recruitment and retention.
2. Endorse the Executive's initiative for a new Medicaid managed care procurement process, which would involve competitive bidding to ensure the selection of qualified managed care providers and improve timely payments for service providers.

3. Back the Executive proposal to increase commercial insurance rates to at least the Medicaid rate for outpatient services to guarantee adequate provider compensation and uphold parity compliance.
4. Advocate for the inclusion of measures from S.5329-B (Harckham) / A.6813-A (Paulin) in the final state budget that would reform the Office of the Medicaid Inspector General (OMIG) audit process. This reform aims to protect providers from unfair penalties resulting from claims and processing errors and introduces safeguards that would enhance the transparency of the audit process.
5. Support the Executive's new workforce initiatives like job marketing, a job bank, a behavioral health fellowship program, targeted rural community funding, and a credentialing program for paraprofessionals developed by OMH. The Executive budget provides \$14 million to support these types of workforce initiatives across the board under mental health and substance abuse and \$4 million in similar initiatives for children's providers.
6. Support ongoing funding for the 988 hotline implementation and operation. The 988 hotline is a national hotline for people who are in immediate crisis due to a mental health or substance use disorder issue. Instead of engaging law enforcement through 911, 988 is designed to provide a clinical response through social workers and other behavioral health professionals. The 988 response is focused on stabilizing people and connecting them to treatment.

Substance Use Disorder Specific:

1. Support the recommendations of the Opioid Settlement Advisory Board and ensure that all new revenues received from settlement funds are used to supplement – not supplant – funding for addiction services. These funds should also be used to support New York's overdose prevention centers (OPCs), as recommended by the Advisory Board in December 2023.
2. Make the Opioid Stewardship Fund permanent to ensure OASAS has a stable funding source beyond its June 20, 2024 expiration.
3. Endorse the Executive's proposal allowing substance use disorder service providers to dispense a 3-day buprenorphine supply for maintenance or detoxification treatment during transitions to a program.

Mental Health Specific:

1. Advocate for the "Children's Outpatient Behavioral Health Rate Reform Proposal" from Healthy Minds Healthy Kids, seeking \$195 million to increase clinic rates to keep pace with inflation and remunerate providers serving children and families. This investment is

needed to improve service access and reduce wait times for children's community-based mental health services. We support the Governor's proposal to increase school-based mental health services, but there is a need to bolster services in the community as well.

2. Endorse the \$20.5 million proposal to bolster crisis stabilization services, including mobile, telephonic, and residential services, by raising provider rates.
3. Restore the Executive's proposed \$125 million cut to Health Home and Care Management (HHCM) agencies across New York State to ensure continued access to services and limiting emergency room visits.

InUnity Alliance is committed to working alongside Governor Hochul, the Senate, and the Assembly to ensure that the SFY 2024-25 budget not only addresses the immediate challenges facing our mental hygiene system but also lays the groundwork for a sustainable, resilient future. Our proposed budget priorities represent an urgent call to action—a plea for the resources necessary to safeguard the well-being of all New Yorkers and to ensure that our addiction and mental health service system can meet the demands of those it serves, now and in the future.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and for the opportunity to advocate on behalf of those we serve.

Sincerely,

John Coppola
Co-CEO, InUnity Alliance