

New York State Joint Legislative Public Hearing on Mental Hygiene

February 13, 2024



Testimony submitted to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Mental Hygiene by the Times Square Alliance

Good afternoon, and thank you Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, Mental Health Chairs Brouk and Gunther, and members of Assembly Ways and Means, and Senate Finance committees.

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My name is Tom Harris, and I am the President of the Times Square Alliance, the business improvement district that exists to make Times Square clean, safe, and desirable for all. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in person today as part of the State Senate's Budgetary Hearing on Mental Hygiene. First, I would like to commend the Governor, Senate, and Assembly for making robust support for mental health services a continued priority. The Governor's budget proposals, including making hospitals more accountable for how they treat patients with severe mental illness and funding more mental health and supportive housing beds, are absolutely needed. However, we also feel strongly that more is required if we are going to help those most in need on our streets. Specifically, AB A7827, which was introduced last year by Assemblyman Braunstein, includes a number of additional proposals that would significantly improve treatment for persons suffering from severe mental illness.

Since 2020, the Alliance has been a partner, along with Breaking Ground, the Center for Justice Innovation, and Fountain House, in the Community First Program. Community First is a neighborhood-based outreach program that utilizes peer navigators who consistently interact with people on the street, earn their trust, and work to get them connected with the services and treatment they need to achieve a more stable life. Many of the people we have come to know since starting this program are suffering from severe mental illness.

One of our community members, on the street for six years, lives in an encampment laden with flammable materials. Another homeless man, with a history of violent behavior and threatening members of the public, has lived on the streets of Times Square for the last six years. A woman has been on our streets for five years, has clear signs of psychosis, yet denies both that she is homeless and rejects any offer of services. Another woman, known to have been living on our streets with mental illness for the past two years, just had surgery and narrowly avoided having her legs amputated; she was told to stay indoors but she refused and is back on our streets. A man living on our streets for at least two years is known to fake seizures to attract attention, once in the middle of Seventh Avenue traffic. The common factor in all of these cases is that these people suffer from severe mental illness, yet do not recognize that they are ill, and will often resist help even when in very dire circumstances. We have supported and collaborated with outreach teams for years to try and convince these individuals, and multiple others like them, to accept services, while we watch them decline and decompensate on our streets.

And we are managing an ever-expanding problem – NYC DHS and the 311 mobile response team are addressing a much higher count of 311 calls regarding unhoused persons assistance and encampments in Times Square since January 2022. **There's been a 292% increase** – not because Community First or other social services programs are not trying, but rather because the lack of effective policy that would adequately support the most vulnerable. Since 2021, Community First navigators have interacted 2,273 times with 881 individuals. Seventeen have voluntarily accepted mental health services.

The Supportive Intervention Act would fix flaws and gaps in NYS law that prevent individuals from getting the treatment and stability they desperately need. It complements the Governor's current proposals by pro-actively connecting patients to help where they are, not only when they arrive at the hospital. This legislation codifies a broader and nationally accepted interpretation of the "danger to self" standard to include inability to meet basic health care needs. It would also broaden the categories of professionals who can assess individuals with severe mental illness outside of the hospital and recommend removal for treatment. Data shows that when a nurse, social worker, or other mental health professional conducts a removal, patient outcomes as far as connecting with treatment are significantly better than removals conducted by the NYPD, which we all agree we would like to minimize. We strongly urge you to support the Supportive Intervention Act which would significantly benefit the individuals in crisis that we attempt – and often cannot – help every day.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Harris', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Tom Harris
President
Times Square Alliance