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Testimony of the Alliance of New York State YMCAs

Presented to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Committee on Mental Hygiene

February 4, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the FY 2026-27 Executive Budget proposal.

On behalf of the 35 YMCA Associations and 140 branches across New York State, the Alliance of New York State YMCAs advocates for policies that support the mental health, physical health, and overall wellbeing of youth, families, and community members across New York State. YMCAs serve millions of New Yorkers each year and play a critical role in supporting youth outside of the school day, particularly as young people navigate mental health challenges.

The YMCA has a long history of providing safe, supportive environments where young people can build relationships, develop skills, and connect with trusted adults. Through before/after-school programs, summer and expanded learning opportunities, youth sports, and health and wellness initiatives, YMCAs function as a vital “third space” for children and adolescents – places that are essential for connection, belonging, and wellbeing.

Supporting Mental Health and Wellbeing

The Alliance of New York State YMCAs supports the Governor’s proposals to invest in youth mental health training and promote opportunities for young people to unplug from screens and reconnect with peers, caring adults, and their communities. As rates of anxiety, depression, and social isolation among youth continue to rise, these strategies are timely and necessary.

YMCAs are uniquely positioned to operationalize these priorities. Afterschool and expanded learning programs provide structured, supervised environments. Within these programs, young people build social-emotional skills, form positive peer relationships, and gain access to mentors who can connect with young people and provide support.



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Through a two-year Youth Mental Health pilot, the New York State YMCA Foundation partnered with 10 YMCA associations to embed mental health supports directly into daily youth programming. The goal was to equip staff with the skills, language, and confidence to recognize signs of struggle, foster safe environments, and connect young people — and staff — to support before a crisis occurs.

Before implementing the lessons learned from the pilot, YMCA programs collected pre-surveys from more than 400 elementary-aged youth at the start of the school year. The data revealed that **more than 60 percent of participants were below the national average in areas like self-management and mastery orientation — skills closely tied to confidence, resilience, and long-term wellbeing.** Eighty percent were below average in at least one key area of thriving.

Over six months, YMCA teams participated in trauma-informed organizational training led by the University at Buffalo, community care model training, and sessions with national leaders including the Child Mind Institute and YMCA of the USA. Staff learned how to reduce burnout, support emotional regulation, and build psychologically safe environments for both youth and adults. Ninety-six percent of staff reported meaningful knowledge gains in trauma-informed care, recognizing signs of struggle, and strategies to support youth and staff mental health. Nearly all reported successfully transferring this learning to colleagues — multiplying the impact beyond the initial cohort and rippling across the organization.

Building peer relationships, creating safe spaces to learn and grow, and ensuring every young person has a trusted adult who sees and understands them is the embodiment of the YMCA mission, and is a natural result from programming in community-based organizations across the State. In addition to regulating access to cell phones, increasing the number of school-based health clinics, and increased care coordination – we also would like to urge continued investment in community-based organizations and in the unique and responsive programming being offered in communities across the state.

Protective Factors

While afterschool funding is discussed within the context of human services, its role in supporting youth mental health cannot be overstated. High quality afterschool



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programs are a protective factor that promote resilience, routine, and a sense of belonging. We urge the Legislature to view investments in afterschool as complementary to broader mental hygiene priorities and to recognize community-based providers as partners in the continuum of mental health supports.

Conclusion

Throughout FY2026-27 budget negotiations, the Alliance of New York State YMCAs urges consideration for a comprehensive approach to mental health that supports the community-based provider. Embedded within communities, the YMCA supports individuals across the lifespan. Each day, YMCAs provide structured programs, trusted relationships, and inclusive spaces where youth, families, and older adults can engage. These environments reduce social isolation, encourage positive development, and contribute to healthier communities. Continued investment in community-based organizations will ensure that these critical supports remain accessible to New Yorkers in alignment with the State's broader pi