



Testimony of Justin Barron
Director of Community Engagement Services
on behalf of
Community Access
before
The 2026 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Mental Hygiene
February 4, 2026

Chairs Krueger, Pretlow, Brouk, Simon, and other distinguished Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you regarding the NYSFY 2026-27 Executive Budget. I am Justin Barron, Director of Community Engagement Services for Community Access, a New York City nonprofit founded in 1974 that provides supportive housing and a variety of mental health support services. Our mission is to expand opportunities for people living with mental health concerns to recover from trauma and discrimination through affordable housing, training, advocacy, and healing-focused services. We are built upon the simple truth that people are experts in their own lives. I am giving testimony today to request your urgently needed support for mental health Self Direction in New York State, specifically to **secure \$2.2 million in the NYS OMH 2027 budget to continue operating the only two mental health Self Direction programs**, which are set to close in December of this year.

Self Direction is an innovative approach to mental health care that provides participants with greater self-determination and economic empowerment in identifying which goods and services they need to support their recovery process. Self Direction is rooted in the idea that individual service recipients are in the best position to articulate and determine their own needs and, with assistance, can manage a portion of their service dollars to best address their needs. Self Direction offers people more choices, greater control, and enhanced personal responsibility for their care and support services. **Rigorous evaluations^{1, 2, 3} of Self Direction programs show that they improve quality of life and achieve superior health outcomes with high user satisfaction, at no greater cost than traditional services.**

¹ Randomized Controlled Trial of Self-Directed Care for Medically Uninsured Adults With Serious Mental Illness: Judith A Cook, Jessica A Jonikas, Jane K Burke-Miller, Marie Hamilton, Carl Falconer, Michael Blessing, Frances Aranda, Gretchen Johns, Christine Cauffield. [Randomized Controlled Trial of Self-Directed Care for Medically Uninsured Adults With Serious Mental Illness - PubMed](#)

² Cook, Judith A. et al. Mental health Self Directed Care Financing: Efficacy in Improving Outcomes and Controlling Costs for Adults with Serious Mental Illness. *Psychiatry Journal*. January 11, 2019.

³ Croft, Bevin. Self-Direction and the social determinants of health. *Community Mental Health Journal*, February, 2020.



For many years, Self Direction has been successfully implemented statewide in New York for the intellectual and developmental disability community through the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) under a 1915(c) Medicaid waiver. In contrast, mental health Self Direction has yet to reach most New Yorkers.

In 2018, the Office of Mental Health (OMH) initiated a mental health Self Direction pilot, authorized through the 1115 Demonstration Waiver, for HARP enrollees at two sites, Community Access in New York City and Independent Living in Newburgh. **Independent evaluations of the pilot demonstrate a transformative impact on the participants' quality of life. About 350 HARP-enrolled participants have directed budgets toward goals covering employment, education, physical health, mental health, social relationships, housing, and substance use recovery.** Participants have budgeted for self-defense classes, art supplies, gym memberships, personal trainers, culturally-specific alternative therapies, tutoring, driving lessons, sports team fees, and travel to reunite with family. Participant feedback has been nearly unanimous: Self Direction fosters recovery, personal fulfillment, and community inclusion unmatched by any other model.

The New York pilot programs also show strong evidence of cost savings – with many participants drastically reducing or eliminating the use of costly inpatient and ER services. Even one avoided inpatient or ER visit generates considerable cost savings compared to the typical annual Self Direction budget.

However, despite its demonstrated successes, the Community Access and Independent Living Self Direction program contracts expire in December 2026. There is currently no plan to continue the existing programs or expand the model to other New Yorkers living with mental health conditions.

I want to recognize and express gratitude to Senator Brouk and Assemblymember Simon, chairs of the mental health committees, who have voiced their support for the following goals:

1. In the short-term, to maintain momentum, **we need to secure \$2.2 million in the NYS OMH 2027 budget to continue operating the two existing mental health Self Direction programs.** This goal requires transitioning the programs out of their “pilot” phase. Closing the only two programs would create a critical rupture in support for their current participants and would effectively end mental health Self Direction in New York State for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, our programs are a vital asset, housing

essential institutional knowledge, service expertise, and fiscal control infrastructure which has **consistently demonstrated the programs' ability to prevent fraud, waste, and abuse**. We urge the legislature to sustain the existing Self Direction programs and prevent the loss of this asset into which the state has already invested considerable resources.

2. For long-term viability, we seek the legislature's support in introducing a budget proposal for a scalable model such as a State Plan Amendment to add Self-Direction Goods and Services as a cost-neutral option within Community Oriented Recovery and Empowerment (CORE) services, or as an In Lieu of Services (ILOS) option within Medicaid for HARP members.

In a time when choice and dignity in mental healthcare are under attack at the federal level, expanding Self Direction can reinforce the state's Olmstead Plan commitment to community-integrated, person-centered care. Now is a critical time for New York to lead the nation in advancing mental health Self Direction.

Thank you,

Justin Barron, Director of Community Engagement Services
Community Access

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Justin Barron". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.