



NYS Assembly Mental Hygiene Testimony

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February 16, 2023

My name is Michelle Pryce-Screen, and I am the Executive Director and Chief Program Officer of Getting Out and Staying Out (GOSO), a nonprofit re-entry program. Founded nearly 20 years ago, GOSO works with more than 1,350 legal system-involved young people each year to secure brighter futures for themselves and their communities.

At Getting Out and Staying Out, many of our participants have been detained or incarcerated, and access our comprehensive suite of services after being released. We have demonstrated that it is possible to stop people from cycling in and out of jail by providing mental health and social services in the community, including referrals to housing supports, mental health and substance use treatment, and case management. These services, which address the underlying problems that can lead to involvement with the criminal legal system, are more cost-efficient, effective, just, and humane than incarceration.

People involved with the criminal legal system experience high rates of mental health problems, often as a result of complicated social barriers, including homelessness, trauma, unemployment, and poverty. Many have complex conditions: an estimated 56% of individuals in New York prisons report substance use disorders, one-quarter have serious mental illness, and many suffer from multiple physical health conditions that are exacerbated by challenges to their emotional wellbeing. Specifically, more than half of those incarcerated at Rikers Island are suffering from mental health issues, and many adolescents at juvenile facilities are experiencing debilitating levels of trauma, anxiety and depression

The “reentry” population that we work with — people returning to their communities from jail or prison — report acute mental health needs but often have difficulty accessing timely, appropriate care. Regardless of their current living situation, mentally ill system-involved individuals often do not have resources to seek out individual care or group programming. Where services are available, there are long waiting lists, and even those managing severe conditions like schizophrenia can wait weeks for appointments with psychiatrists, social workers, counselors or other clinicians. Adding to the challenges is the requirement in New York State for individuals with a mental health condition applying for supportive housing to get a psychiatric evaluation.

Access to all forms of mental health treatment can prevent many more individuals from hospitalization, rearrest, or reincarceration. At Getting Out and Staying Out, we believe that well-funded community response programs can prevent legal-system involvement, recidivism, and the associated negative outcomes for many individuals with mental health issues. We support initiatives that expand proven models of care to improve the coordination and delivery of mental health services for individuals and communities impacted by and at risk for violence, arrest and incarceration.