



Office of Addiction Services and Supports

**Testimony of Chinazo Cunningham, MD
NYS OASAS Commissioner**

**Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Mental Hygiene
FY 2023 Executive Budget Proposal Testimony**

Monday, February 14, 2022, 11:00 a.m.

Good afternoon Senator Krueger, Assembly Member Weinstein, Senator Harckham, and Assembly Member Steck. My name is Dr. Chinazo Cunningham, and I am the Commissioner of the New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports, or OASAS.

Thank you for the opportunity to present Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2022-2023 Executive Budget as it pertains to OASAS.

As you are aware, the COVID-19 pandemic and the overdose epidemic have brought unprecedented challenges to our system of care and its workforce. As a primary care physician working in a Bronx hospital at the height of the pandemic, I personally experienced the impact firsthand while on the frontlines.

So, first and foremost I would like to acknowledge the individuals in our field for their tremendous courage and dedication to ensuring that OASAS services have remained accessible to those in need throughout the pandemic.

As we look ahead, lessons learned will help guide efforts to improve access to addiction prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services. We are focused on building our system back to full utilization, while also maintaining and enhancing initiatives that have proven extremely valuable in the delivery of services, particularly in underserved communities. We will continue working with our Opioid Treatment Programs on the expansion of mobile treatment and telehealth, as well as building on our medication delivery experiences to implement new and innovative services Statewide.

To continue supporting these efforts and to help expand the reach of our services, Governor Hochul has proposed a budget that will ensure OASAS has the resources needed to meet these ongoing challenges. The proposed OASAS budget appropriates more than \$1.5 Billion, including approximately \$164 Million for State Operations, \$102 Million for Capital projects, and \$1.3 Billion for Aid to Localities. This is an increase of over \$543 Million, or a 56 percent increase from FY 2021-2022. The budget proposal reflects Opioid Stewardship funds, which have been specifically allocated to harm reduction and initiatives to make treatment and medication more affordable; and Opioid Settlement funds, to expand opioid addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery services, consistent with the terms of settlement agreements.

OASAS has engaged with stakeholders to fully understand issues our field has faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the overdose epidemic. During these 17 statewide forums, we repeatedly heard from providers and advocates that supporting the workforce is critical and a top priority. We fully agree with this. That's why it was extremely important that the budget included a 5.4 percent Human Services cost of living adjustment (COLA). To further recognize and help to retain staff, the budget provides up to a \$3,000 recruitment and retention bonus for front-line and direct care services staff, in addition to a Minimum Wage Increase for OASAS Providers.

Consistent with that feedback and to support our Provider system, we will reinvest in behavioral health services the funds realized from the transition from Medicaid Fee-for-Service to Medicaid Managed Care. Funding is allocated to help leverage enhanced federal Medicaid dollars for home and community-based services. Providers will also be supported with increased capital allowances for minor alterations and improvements for OASAS-funded facilities.

The Executive Budget supports OASAS' crucial mission and ongoing efforts to ensure equitable access to life-saving treatment services, including medication treatment. This includes innovative initiatives that strengthen and modernize our outpatient addiction system.

To ensure we bring medication treatment to where people are, we are expanding our Opioid Treatment Programs throughout the State by implementing a multi-prong approach. First, we will invest in new Mobile Methadone Units and retrofit existing outpatient mobile units. We will continue to leverage telehealth by installing equipment on mobile transportation units.

Second, we will remove financial and geographic barriers that prohibit people from accessing evidence-based medication treatment by requiring pharmacies to stock medications to prevent overdose and treat opioid use disorder. We will also implement a Treatment Affordability Initiative and Medication Affordability Initiative to assist uninsured and underinsured individuals obtain treatment, including life-saving medications.

Likewise, the Behavioral Health Ombuds Project receive additional support to assist individuals in navigating their insurance and assisting them in maximizing coverage for mental health and substance use services statewide.

Additionally, the budget includes a statewide non-medical transportation initiative to help individuals access prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services - further breaking down identified barriers to care.

As the state and country continue to experience unprecedented rates of overdose deaths, we must implement strategies aimed at meeting individuals where they are, to help keep them alive while we work to engage them in services.

The budget supports this goal with the establishment of a new Division of Harm Reduction within OASAS to develop and incorporate these strategies across the continuum of care. This unit will work collaboratively with DOH to support individuals most at risk by expanding access to opioid overdose prevention kits, safety kits, fentanyl test strips, and sterile syringes; and developing a public awareness campaign specifically focused on preventing overdose deaths in public settings.

We also know how important ongoing support services are to helping individuals remain healthy and maintain their recovery. Safe stable housing is a core component of recovery and reintegrating into the community. Therefore, the budget provides funding for short term transitional housing for individuals leaving OASAS residential treatment or correctional facilities who cannot otherwise access permanent housing.

The budget also gives OASAS the ability to develop standards and voluntary certification of Recovery Supportive Housing. Recovery Supportive Housing provides safe environments and mutual support for individuals in recovery. OASAS certification of these programs would ensure that individuals in recovery are protected from potentially predatory housing practices.

Finally, the budget allows us to continue advancing our prevention initiatives through a comprehensive approach which includes educational activities, raising public awareness, early interventions, and environmental change strategies. We will also expand the Alcohol Awareness

Program, to the Substance Use Awareness Program, to promote education rather than penalty for violations related to underage alcohol and cannabis use.

As we continue to manage the system of addiction prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services, our number one priority is to ensure the safety and well-being of those who are most vulnerable.

The Budget will support funding for all of the critical initiatives I discussed and allow OASAS to meet the needs of those we serve. I am excited and ready to work on the many challenges ahead at OASAS, and I look forward to working alongside you as we continue striving to help all those who have been impacted by substance use and addiction throughout New York State.

Thank you.