

**Testimony of
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To The

**New York State Joint Senate Task Force on Opioids,
Addiction and Overdose Prevention**

August 9, 2019

Good morning, Chairman Rivera, Chairman Harckham, Chairman Carlucci, and members of the Joint Task Force on Opioids, Addiction and Overdose Prevention. I am representing the Public Employees Federation (PEF) & our members at the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), and the Office of Mental Health (OMH). My name is Bill Cruz, I am an Addiction Program Specialist and I have worked for OASAS for 39 years. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on behalf of PEF and our members, and to provide our perspective regarding the statewide opioid abuse crisis and the current system of supports and services for individuals who are receiving mental health and addiction services in New York State.

PEF is the union that represents professional, scientific and technical employees. We care about families and communities throughout New York State. Our members serve on the front lines of the opioid crisis, as they work every day to care for people with mental illness, those struggling with addiction, and individuals who contend with both. Amongst thousands of other public employees who deliver state services involving health, human services, employment, criminal justice and education, our members at OMH & OASAS work tirelessly toward effective human services and a public health system which values safety, respect, recovery, hope, and excellence.

The U.S. Department of Healthⁱ (2017) provides guidance on five key priority areas for addressing opioid misuse, opioid addiction, and pain management practices. These priorities are: 1) understanding the epidemic through improved public health observation; 2) improving access to treatment and recovery services; 3) promoting the use of life-saving drugs that can reverse the effects of an opioid

overdose; 4) providing support for research on pain and addiction; and 5) advancing better practices for pain management.

Today, we are going to elaborate on the second of those priorities:

Improving access to treatment and recovery services. In 2015, PEF gave comments to the New York State Behavioral Health Services Advisory Council on the proposed integration of OASAS and OMH. At that time, I mentioned that OASAS downstate had lost 62 treatment beds. Those beds have not come back. In 2017 there were 2,217 overdose deaths in New York City, by 2018 there were 2279. There were 567 overdose deaths in the Bronx in 2017 and in 2018, there were 601. Yet, while the number of overdose deaths has increased, the OASAS budget has remained the same since 2015. In FY 2016 there were 735 full-time employees and in the current budget year there are 737. Despite the increasing intensity of the opioid crisis, OASAS's budget has remained flat. Further, while treatment in general has become more complex and sophisticated, the administrative staff that inspects treatment facilities has been reduced. The agency is doing more with fewer staff.

To develop and deliver effective services, we must recognize the varying treatment and recovery needs of our target populations, and adapt our services accordingly. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2017) found "that 1 in 12 American adults (18.7 million) had a substance use disorder (SUD) and that 1 in 5 (46.6 million) had a mental illness. More than 8.5 million, though, were found to have both a SUD and mental illness."ⁱⁱ The relationship between mental health and substance abuse is complex and intersecting, and can be referred to as "dual diagnosis" or "co-occurring disorder".

In closing, in order to adequately address the complexities of the current opioid epidemic, staffing levels at facilities administering these critical services must be increased to truly meet the challenge we now find ourselves in.

I would now like to turn it over to my PEF union sister and colleague at OASES, Beverly Williams.

ⁱ HHS.gov. (2017). *Secretary Price Announces HHS Strategy for Fighting Opioid Crisis*. Available at: <https://www.hhs.gov/about/leadership/secretary/speeches/2017-speeches/secretary-price-announces-hhs-strategy-for-fighting-opioid-crisis/index.html> [Accessed 6 Aug. 2019].

ⁱⁱ Petruzelli, M. (2019). *SAMHSA Releases National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. Available at: <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/capitol-connector/2018/09/samlisa-releases-national-survey-on-drug-use-and-health/> [Accessed 6 Aug. 2019].

