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December 28, 2021

Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Re: Investing in Mental Health Services

Dear Governor Hochul:

A recent *New York Times* article surveyed more than one thousand mental health professionals across the country to hear firsthand how people are dealing with the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has posed—and continues to pose. It is no secret that nationally, mental health services have long been underfunded, and the pandemic and subsequent restrictions have dramatically exposed this shortcoming to the detriment of countless individuals who are struggling now more than ever. Of particular concern is the impact all of this is having on our youth, as earlier this month, the United States Surgeon General issued a report warning that the “unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate” challenges of our nation’s children have had a devastating effect on their mental health. It is our hope that New York State will lead the way in addressing this mental health crisis, by **making a significant investment in the upcoming State Budget for mental health services and treatment beds—particularly for our youth—and boosting mental health services by streamlining the licensing process, incentivizing careers in the mental health field, getting more mental health professionals into schools, and enabling qualified out-of-state professionals to practice here to help meet immediate needs.**

According to the *Times* survey, approximately 90% of therapists said they have seen a rise in clients seeking mental health services. Unfortunately, the supply of these services has not been able to keep up with the demand, and three-quarters of survey respondents indicated they have had an increase in wait times, which can often be three months or longer. We appreciate the support you have provided for stabilization centers throughout the State, however, unless more is done to comprehensively address the mental health challenges our State is facing, people requiring follow-up, ongoing or inpatient care will be unable to access it. This challenge is especially problematic in rural communities, where previous research has highlighted the disparities these communities face in access to providers, care coordination and underutilization.

As you know, Dutchess County is home to a model 24/7 Crisis Stabilization Center, which has proven to be incredibly effective. However, we hear from far too many constituents—especially parents of youth experiencing mental health challenges—who need access to more long-term, affordable solutions. That is why it was all the more unsettling when the 2021-2022 New York State Budget eliminated 200 Office of Mental Health inpatient mental health treatment beds.

This cut, which we opposed, was another step backwards in the effort to address the mental health crisis and a continuation of the State's reduction of these critically needed inpatient beds. In the past seven years, the State has cut approximately 20% of such beds overall, and that number was even higher for beds for children and youths, which saw a 32% reduction. Now is certainly not the time to be reducing access to this critically important resource for those suffering from mental health crises, and it is vital that we right the ship on this issue and increase availability of these beds and other services at a time when these services are needed more than ever.

Early on during the pandemic, the former Governor issued an executive order to authorize out-of-state healthcare workers to practice in New York to combat the staffing shortage. While this effort largely focused on addressing the immediate need of addressing the shortage of healthcare workers to deal with the physical threat of COVID-19, the need to address the resulting mental health crisis did not receive the same attention. While the State did establish NY Project HOPE, relying on mental health volunteers, this is unlikely to meet the anticipated long-term needs.

In light of this, the State needs to bolster its mental health workforce by streamlining the licensing process, incentivizing careers in mental health services and similarly enabling qualified out-of-state professionals to practice in New York, at least virtually, to help the State keep up with the demand for mental health services. The Surgeon General's report pointed out the disturbing rise in emergency room visits for suspected suicide attempts, which increased for adolescent girls by over 50% in early 2021 compared to the same time period in early 2019. Given the rise in those suffering from thoughts of self-harm, it is essential that we ensure New Yorkers can get the care they need when they need it, and we have no time to waste.

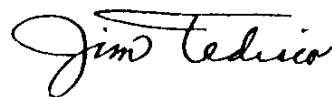
As much as the pandemic continues to drag on, it is becoming more and more apparent that the ripple effects it will have on us—and especially the children living their most formative years in this unprecedented and challenging time—will continue even longer. The State cannot afford to wait this crisis out, and bold, deliberate action is needed now to address it. With the State currently sitting on a budget surplus, it is our hope that you will commit the necessary resources that are available to address this on-going issue, and in your upcoming Executive Budget Proposal, that you will lay out a proposal that appropriately recognizes this issue for how serious it is by dedicating the resources necessary to help the many New Yorkers who are suffering.

We appreciate your time and consideration of this matter, and we look forward to working with you on this urgent request.

Sincerely,



Senator Sue Serino
41st District



Senator James Tedisco
49th District