



TESTIMONY OF

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PRESENTED TO THE

NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

AND

NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

REGARDING THE

NEW YORK STATE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR MENTAL HYGIENE

STATE FISCAL YEAR 2020–2021

FEBRUARY 3, 2020

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest in New York State's not-for-profit infrastructure to support vitality and the delivery of vital services
2. Support a \$200,000 appropriation to fortify the mental health workforce through a loan forgiveness program for mental health workforce
3. Limit access to legalized marijuana for individuals younger than age 26
4. Support Mental Health Education and Services in School Settings
  - a. Enact the Article 7 proposal to Streamline the RTF Pre Admission Process
5. Continue support for expanded mental health services in community-based settings and place a moratorium on cuts

Good afternoon. My name is William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services located in the Capital Region.

### **About Northern Rivers Family of Services**

Northern Rivers Family of Services was established in 2012 through affiliation with longstanding family services agencies **Parsons Child & Family Center** and **Northeast Parent & Child Society**. In 2019, we affiliated with Unlimited Potential, whose operations began in Saratoga Springs. Together, the 1,400-strong workforce of Northern Rivers and member agencies serve more than 18,000 children and families in 41 upstate counties each year, with \$88 million invested through more than 60 social

services and mental health programs. Northern Rivers builds a strong, successful, and healthy future for our children, families, and communities through quality services, collaboration, and innovative leadership. Our program areas include:

- Residential and community-based child welfare programming including foster care, preventive services, postadoption services, and evidence-based home visiting programs;
- Educational services for 400 students including early learning, pre-K, and Early Head Start as well as accredited middle-high school 853 schools;
- Community-based mental health and crisis services programs for children and adults including mobile crisis, school-based services, and licensed clinic programs; and
- Community-based waiver programs for children and adults including Health Home services.

I would like to thank Chairwomen Liz Krueger, Chairwomen Helene E. Weinstein, Mental Hygiene Committee Chairs and members of the Assembly Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees for this opportunity to testify on the Governor's Executive Budget for State Fiscal Year 2020–2021.

As has been stated many times:

***The budget is not just a collection of numbers,  
but an expression of our values and aspirations.***

Governor Cuomo has proposed a \$178 billion Executive Budget to deal with our state's needs and priorities including closure of a \$6 billion deficit, managing the impacts of the federal proposals, improving the infrastructure, increasing county and education efficiency, and promoting economic growth and development across the state.

While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor and the Legislature have taken over the past few years to stabilize the state's economy and help to build a better New York, **more needs to be accomplished to make New York State a great place to live, raise a family, and operate a business. Unless the proposed Executive Budget is adjusted to adequately support the human services sector and the children, adults, and families we serve each day, New York State will not reach its goals. Without support and opportunity for ALL New Yorkers, we will not be truly successful.**

We all understand the challenges we face today. Economic difficulties, including the project \$6 billion deficit, growing long-term care caseloads, high costs of pharmaceuticals, and the impacts of federal tax policy, are forcing critical conversations and new approaches to innovation at the state, local, and not-for-profit sector level. Yet these challenges give us the chance to make lasting, positive change. These conversations and innovative approaches can help us meet the complex needs of families and children and achieve improved outcomes.

The Governor's Executive Budget shows an understanding of the importance of initiatives that help children, such as supporting an increase in the child care tax credit, maintaining preventive services funding for at-risk families, supporting the implementation of children's behavioral health services, supporting mental health in

school programming, expanding support for pre-K education statewide, and ongoing support for the Raise the Age programs.

That represents a good start, but it falls short of creating a real, lasting impact.

Following are specific recommendations with regard to the proposed budget.

**1. Invest in New York State's not-for-profit infrastructure to support vitality and the delivery of vital services**

New York's families have faced many challenges in past years: the down economy, joblessness, homelessness, opiate/substance abuse, and violence in already plagued communities; for these forgotten New Yorkers, times are still hard. When families are in crisis and children are at risk, New York's network of not-for-profit human services providers are both the first line of defense and the safety net. **The agencies and the women and men in the not-for-profit human services sector are the first responders for at-risk and vulnerable families, children, and individuals.** Throughout the state, not-for-profit human services welfare agencies respond to critical family situations 24/7/365, and our fiscal viability is at risk.

Northern Rivers Family of Services has joined hundreds of other human services agencies as part of the statewide **#3for5 campaign** that is calling for a 3 percent increase in funding for not-for-profits in the human services sector every year for the next 5 years.

This campaign is unprecedented in its scope through the inclusion of every major statewide not-for-profit agency serving mental health, addiction disorder,

developmental disabilities, child welfare, foster care, and the aging community—our friends, family, and neighbors most in need of help.

Existing law provides for an annual increase for these not-for-profits. Unfortunately, for the last decade, the funding increases for these agencies has been manually removed from the New York State Budget, which has led to a loss in excess of \$1 billion in promised financial support. The result is that the quality of services are declining, many agencies have had to institute waiting lists for care, facilities are deteriorating, and agencies are unable to offer competitive living wages to attract and retain the skilled staff necessary to deliver quality care and support. Those friends, family, and neighbors of ours most in need aren't getting all the help they deserve.

Our agencies are the safety net for New Yorkers in greatest need. While our agency's mission prevents us from turning away people in need, many of our members are now fiscally unstable and in danger of closing due to inadequate funding.

The importance of our organizations cannot be overstated. **Individuals** rely on us to fulfill their dreams of independence. **Families** rely on us to provide their loved ones with the quality care they need to keep them safe and thriving. **Communities** rely on us as economic engines and employers. **Taxpayers** rely on us to support New Yorkers in their home communities, off the streets, and out of expensive institutional settings and emergency rooms. Every New Yorker is being impacted by this ongoing crisis—even those who don't yet realize it.

This investment is a cost-effective win for all New Yorkers. In addition:

- Not-for-profit human services organizations support is a social justice issue
- Not-for-profit human services organizations are an economic engine
- Not-for-profit human services sector operates as an efficient business

We urge the members of Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee to continue your leadership in the human services sector through your support of #3for5.

**2. Support a \$200,000 appropriation to fortify the mental health workforce through a loan forgiveness program for mental health workforce**

We recommend a loan forgiveness program to support our workforce. As you know, there are needed loan forgiveness programs for nurses, social workers, child welfare workers and even farm workers, but nothing specific for licensed mental health practitioners like mental health counselors, family therapists and creative arts therapists, all of whom get graduate degrees to do very difficult work.

Nationwide, the student debt crisis has now reached \$1.6 trillion. Nowhere is the crisis more apparent or felt more sharply than in the nonprofit, human services field. Providers recruit mission-driven young people who want to make a difference, but quickly find that having student loans and working as counselors to young children with severe emotional disturbances are 2 economic realities that conflict.

While the New York State spending plan includes:

- \$50,000 for social work scholarships
- \$50,000 for child welfare worker loan forgiveness
- \$3.9 million for the Pat McGee Nursing loan forgiveness
- \$1.7 million LCSW Loan Forgiveness program;

and a reappropriation of \$350,000 for the services and expenses of a loan forgiveness program for addition services providers;

There is no similar state support for the licensed creative arts therapists, family therapists and mental health counselors who are so vital to the effective treatment and support in the children's mental health field.

Therefore, we urge the Mental Hygiene table to agree to include the following in their State Budget agreements:

We recommend an appropriation of \$200,000 for services and expenses related to the development and implementation of a loan forgiveness and scholarship funding program to recruit and retain staff into the children's mental health services and supports prevention, treatment and residential service system.

### **3. Limit access to legalized marijuana for individuals younger than age 26**

Marijuana use in individuals younger than age 26 can lead to long-term consequences.

Marijuana, or cannabis, is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States. It acts by binding to cannabinoid receptors in the brain to produce a variety of effects, including euphoria, intoxication, and memory and motor impairments. These same



cannabinoid receptors are also critical for brain development. They are part of the endocannabinoid system, which impacts the formation of brain circuits important for decision making, mood, and responding to stress.

Marijuana has changed over time. The marijuana available today is much stronger than previous versions. The THC concentration in commonly cultivated marijuana plants has increased threefold between 1995 and 2014 (4 percent and 12 percent respectively). Marijuana available in dispensaries in some states has average concentrations of THC between 17.7 percent and 23.2 percent. Concentrated products, commonly known as dabs or waxes, are far more widely available to recreational users today and may contain concentrations of THC between 23.7 percent and 75.9 percent.

The risks of physical dependence, addiction, and other negative consequences increase with exposure to high concentrations of THC and the younger the age of initiation.

Based upon the scientific evidence and the common understanding of brain development, we strongly urge that legalized marijuana be limited to individuals age 26 and older.

#### **4. Support Mental Health Education and Services in School Settings**

We are very proud that New York is the first State in the nation to mandate the teaching of mental health in schools. Since implementation of the law, over eighteen months ago, many strides have been made. Of greatest importance and to the credit

of schools, there is a much greater emphasis on changing school climates to make them more conducive to mental health and wellness.

Given the importance of this legislation, we were very appreciative of the Assembly and especially Assembly member Gunther in helping to fund MHANYS School Mental Health Resource and Training Center. This funding has been utilized to hire staff to educate schools about mental health and to work with teachers, students, administrators, clinicians and families to create mentally healthy school environments. We thank the Governor for his commitment as well by helping to fund the Resource Center in last year's budget and his proposal to include in this year's budget as well.

The New York State Office of Mental Health have been a strong leader as has the State Education Department in ensuring that information about mental health is shared with schools across the State. We also applaud OMH's initiative to provide School Based Mental Health Services to over 800 schools across New York State.

**The impact of the mental health education legislation has created a growing demand for children's mental services and an increased commitment by school districts to develop in district mental health clinics on school grounds. To meet the growing need and demand, we need to speed and simplify the process for establishing mental health clinics, encourage school districts to develop and implement creative approaches for services within a school district, and share valuable resources. One method to support the growth is to give OMH the authority and funds to provide start up and rap around grants to**

**providers and school districts that allow for cross systems collaboration, joint training, and on-site consultation.**

We need to continue the great work that New York has done in fighting for greater mental health in schools recognizing that we are the leaders in the nationwide process of change.

### **RTF Streamlining**

We applaud the Governor and OMH in the developing Article 7 language that streamlines the Pre-Admission Process for Residential Treatment Facilities (RTF). These changes will speed the intake process, allow for quicker treatment, and reduce length of stay outcomes.

### **5. Continue support for expanded mental health services in community-based settings and place a moratorium on cuts**

The current behavioral health system for children is underdeveloped and unable to respond to the mental health crisis facing New York's children and youth.

Despite the planning and startup of Medicaid services for children in the past year, across New York State, too many families find it impossible to get the mental health and substance use disorder services their children desperately need. The consequences can be devastating: Children get sicker, parents miss work, schools are overburdened, and families are overwhelmed and sometimes broken.

Children are left on waitlists or forced into emergency rooms, hospitals, the juvenile justice system, or preventable foster care placements because they cannot get the

care they need when they need it. Families and communities suffer further when unaddressed problems in childhood develop into adult mental illness.

Given the rising rate of youth suicide in New York and shortage of mental health care professionals across the state, we strongly recommend the State ends all cuts to children's behavioral health care

It is no longer enough for the State to assert that managed care and health insurance coverage are sufficient to meet the access and continuity of care needs of the children's behavioral health system. New York State must ensure timely access to necessary clinical services, make available a range of evidence-based interventions that have proven effective, and hold accountable the health plans and insurance carriers charged with and paid to deliver behavioral health services to New York's children.

We recommend:

- Placing a moratorium on any cuts to children's behavioral health services;
- Establishing mechanisms to identify, analyze, and address systemic barriers that prevent children and families from accessing timely and appropriate services including low funding rates, caseload standards, travel impacts, etc.;
- Holding health plans accountable for meeting contractual obligations and enforcing mental health parity laws on behalf of children and youth;

- Seizing the opportunity to lay the foundation for a system of care that guarantees timely access to treatment and improves children’s behavioral health outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, we urge the Legislature to negotiate a budget with the Governor that ensures that the State remains committed to the programs that produce positive outcomes for children, individuals, and families; one that ultimately **saves the State money on more expensive interventions such as foster care, unnecessary medical care, homeless shelters, and the juvenile justice system.** We strongly encourage the Legislature to support the need of the human services not-for-profit sector. Failure to fund an increase for not-for-profit agencies will have a significant negative impact on the ability of individuals and families to receive services and ultimately on the physical, mental, and financial health of the state as a whole.

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profits and communities that yield positive outcomes for all New Yorkers. We must make New York State a great place to live, a great place to raise a family, and a great place to operate a business.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.