



**Joint Senate/Assembly Budget Hearing on Mental Hygiene
Testimony of Antonia Lasicki
Executive Director of ACL
February 3, 2020**

Good afternoon Senator Krueger, Assemblywoman Weinstein, Senator Carlucci, Assemblywoman Gunther, Members of the Committee and other members of the Legislature. My name is Toni Lasicki and I am the Executive Director of The Association for Community Living. ACL is a statewide membership organization of not-for-profit organizations that provide housing and rehabilitation services to more than 35,000 New Yorkers who have been diagnosed with serious and persistent psychiatric disabilities. They also operate many of the other mental health community-based services in the state.

My organization is a member of and helped to launch the *Bring It Home* campaign—a statewide coalition of community-based mental health housing providers, mental health advocates, faith leaders, consumers, and their families. Through education and advocacy, our coalition is working to bring better funding for better care to New Yorkers who live in mental health housing programs. To date, we have 152 organizations, more than 900 individuals and nearly 100 Faith leaders signed on as supporters. The providers in the group operate nearly all the nearly 40,000 community-based units of mental health housing in the state. We are also a member of the recently formed 3 for 5 Campaign that is asking for a 3% increase in rates for human services organizations in each of the next 5 years.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today and voice Bring It Home's and 3 for 5's message to secure adequate funding for our critical mental health community-based programs.

The Governor's proposed state budget adds \$20 million to raise rates for OMH Housing programs. We are very appreciative of this and ask that you support it. It is the largest single investment in the programs in many, many years. However, although the state has added \$50 million over the last 5 years, only some programs in certain geographical areas have received any increases. There are programs in places in NY that have yet to receive an increase in any of their rates in more than 12 years. Therefore, many of the programs have lost 40% - 70% of their funding due to inflation, depending on which model is being looked at – there are 5 models from 24 hour a day supervised settings to independent living. This new money will not significantly change that fact. Providers will continue to struggle to provide basic services to their clients. We appreciate the language that the Governor used in his proposal making "community based residential programs" eligible for the money. It does not restrict the money to certain programs or certain geographic locations as has been the case in the past. We look forward to hearing from OMH as to how the money will be allocated.

It is also important to note that some of the housing programs in some areas of the state that have received most of the increases of the last 5 years have lost more of their funding to the cost of rent increases than they have received. I have attached one chart that shows how the programs have fared compared to inflation over the last 20 years and another that shows what an adequate Supported Housing rate would be in each county in the state.

The fact is that we need \$165 million in additional funding to stabilize all 40,000 units of housing across the state. It may seem like a lot, but when you compare it to the cost of a state hospital, a jail or prison, a nursing home or even a shelter, it is very cost effective. These programs save lives and they save money.

I have been involved in mental health housing for more than 30 years. I was once a direct care worker, a program manager, a program director and an executive director. It is a fact that services for people in the programs have diminished while their needs have increased. The clients we serve come to us now with more and more behavioral health challenges, more physical challenges and chronic illnesses, and more substance use issues, yet the staffing levels have not changed since the 1980s. Our providers tell us every year that managing the

medical issues, e.g., diabetes, asthma, COPD, obesity, and the metabolic issues that result from years of taking strong anti-psychotic medications have become a serious challenge for their staff. They tell us that consumers' drug and alcohol use exacerbate their mental illnesses causing more serious behavioral issues.

New York has historically been a national leader in mental health care. Under the leadership of both Gov. Andrew Cuomo and his father Mario Cuomo – and with the strong support of the Legislature – New York set new national standards for caring for, and protecting, people with psychiatric disabilities. However, despite offering a breadth and depth of mental health housing that is unparalleled in the nation, (nearly 42,000 including state operated, all adult and children), the state has not kept its promise to adequately fund these housing programs that care for our family members, friends and neighbors who most need help.

Here is the reality: despite the most recent additional funds, including this year's additions, our mental health housing system is still at a critical juncture. By not providing these housing programs the funding they need, recovery can be impacted negatively to the point of destroying lives and families. Beyond those moral implications, ignoring this funding crisis creates a tremendous burden for New York's taxpayers. Vulnerable New Yorkers that rely on our services are at risk of displacement. They can be hospitalized, become homeless, enter nursing homes or become incarcerated – all at greater taxpayer expense than the support we offer.

The residents who receive care in community-based housing are our neighbors and family members who suffer from psychiatric disabilities, and who deserve stable, affordable housing with supports and accessible treatment and services. Without the foundation of a stable home with supports, the most vulnerable of our neighbors need to constantly start their recovery over again, losing momentum and falling farther and farther away from becoming part of the community once again. Proper funding will end this inhumane cycle.

Please commit to working with the executive to address the remaining \$165 million deficit by adding an additional \$20 million to match the Governor's proposal, and developing a multiyear

plan to stabilize the approximately 40,000 units of housing. i.e., the workforce, services, property and administrative costs associated with the programs. This is for licensed community residences and CR-SROs that provide 24 hour a day supervision, as well as licensed treatment apartments that provide daily supports, unlicensed Supported Housing where the funding now goes primarily to rents with little to nothing left for services and SP-SROs that are losing money annually due to lack of increases.

3 FOR 5 Campaign

ACL is part of the Statewide #3for#5 campaign that is calling for a three percent increase in funding for not for profits in the human services sector every year for the next five years.

This campaign is unprecedented in its scope through the inclusion of every major Statewide not for profit agency in the mental health, addiction disorder, developmental disabilities, child welfare, foster care and aging community.

Existing law provides for an annual increase for these not for profits. Unfortunately, for the last decade, the funding increases for these agencies has not been included in the New York State Budget, a central reason why the housing programs mentioned above are in the dire straits that they are. This has resulted in a loss of over \$1 billion in promised financial support. The result is that the quality of services is declining, and agencies are unable to offer competitive living wages to attract and retain the skilled staff necessary to deliver quality care and support.

The importance of ACL's members cannot be overstated. Individuals rely on us to fulfill their dreams of independence and 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, while employers and taxpayers rely on us to support New Yorkers in their home communities. We want to keep the homeless and those at risk of homelessness off the streets and adequately fed. We want to keep them out of other more expensive institutional settings and emergency rooms. We want to help them with their medications, with getting jobs, with repairing relationships and learning to live in the community of their choice. It does no good for them or for communities to leave people homeless, cold, starving, with no medications and a

future of cycling in and out of very expensive settings. This investment is a cost-effective win for all New Yorkers.

We urge the members of Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee to continue your leadership in the not for profit sector through your support of #3for#5.

Make no mistake about it - New York is facing a dilemma—we can either become a national model for how states can successfully protect a population that so desperately needs support or watch the housing system collapse and become an example of what can go wrong. It's time for our state leaders to make the right choice on their behalf. Let's show the rest of the country how to handle a health crisis and become a model of how a strong system can succeed when it's properly supported.

Recommendations:

- Add another \$162 million over the next 3 years to mental health housing rates to stabilize the workforce, services, property and administrative costs associated with the programs
- Support the 3 for 5 campaign's request that will keep these programs abreast of their obligations by adding an escalator to the contracts and rates for 5 years.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to address any questions you may have or to continue to discuss these crucial matters at any time in the future.

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