



*...Because every child deserves a childhood.*

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## **2021 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Mental Hygiene, February 05, 2021**

Good Morning my name is Yvette Bairan. I am the Chief Executive Officer at Astor Services for Children & Families, serving both the Mid-Hudson Valley and the Bronx. In my role as CEO, I lead Astor in the administration and oversight of our children's mental health services, child welfare services, school-based and early childhood development programs. As many of you may know, Astor works closely with community and civic leaders, as well as elected officials to ensure that our resources are available for New York's constituents desperately in need of our services. Thank you Chairs Krueger and Weinstein and Chairs Brouk and Gunther and other members of the legislature for inviting me here to speak today.

Since 1953, Astor has provided critical services for over 10,000 vulnerable children and their families annually, primarily from our black and Latino communities. These children, adolescents and teens struggle daily with emotional, behavioral, mental and psychological problems, often experiencing debilitating isolation and anxiety as a result of the pandemic. Many of the children are at risk of placement in foster care; while others are families that need our assistance and expertise in helping them develop the skills and support needed to raise their children to be happy, independent, functioning young adults in an environment filled with increasing challenges.

Across the country, and particularly in the Bronx, the COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating children's unmet mental health needs. As providers scramble to meet new behavioral health challenges resulting from isolation, economic and housing insecurity, family loss, and heightened child welfare risks, including a disturbing increase in suicide attempts, Astor has been on the front lines ensuring that our clients and the communities we serve are receiving the support and resources needed to help our children and their families during these unchartered times. Well before the pandemic, Astor was on the forefront providing tele-mental health services, as well as in-person care management and prevention services when needed, to ensure that the families we serve get the help they need and know that they are not alone.

Since shifting the majority of our services to tele-mental health in March of last year, which included establishing a hotline number for anyone needing assistance, we have had approximately 130,263 tele-mental health sessions and have admitted more than 3,336 new clients. As the numbers increase, our ability to keep up with providing quality tele-mental health and in-person services is being jeopardized as a result of insufficient access to reliable technology, as many of our clients lack even basic access to the internet and services like Zoom. Unfortunately, our clients and families are not the only ones lacking reliable technology and connectivity; the majority of Astor's staff are using their own personal computer equipment or outdated agency equipment, which not only puts them at a disadvantage in helping those children in need of mental health services in a timely manner, our school-based clinicians are also finding this lack of updated technology extremely problematic and resulting in unnecessary delays in servicing children and their families. Investing in a technology upgrade will enable us to provide our workforce with the necessary tools to adequately conduct tele-mental health visits and provide technical and emotional assistance when and where it is needed most.

It is noteworthy to mention that Astor can deliver effective tele-health service at a much lower cost per visit compared to in person visits. State investment in our tele-health delivery of service to clients is not only cost effective during this pandemic but promotes safety for staff and clients alike.

Astor is respectfully requesting the inclusion of funding in the 2021-22 State Budget for Tele-Mental Health and Mobile Upgrades to provide much needed resources to providers and their mobile infrastructure enabling them to continue providing the much needed mental and behavioral health services in our communities during these times of recovery and resurgence.

We are all aware of what an unprecedented challenge is ahead for the budget, but in light of the exasperating mental health challenges facing these children and their families during Covid, we must remain optimistic that you will partner with us on this journey by recognizing how imperative it is for us to upgrade our technology in order to continue to provide the vital services desperately needed to help these vulnerable children.

We appreciate our partners in the State Senate and Assembly and look forward to working with you giving these children the opportunity to heal and become healthy functioning members of our community. I know, with your support, we can come out of this stronger and more united than ever before. Thank you