



Astor Services for Children & Families
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Joint Public Budget Hearing on Workforce Development

Senate & Assembly Labor Committees

11:00am, Monday, January 31, 2022

Good morning, my name is Yvette Bairan, and 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 mental health services, and early childhood development programs. Astor works closely with community, NYS oversight partners, Coalitions, and civic leaders, as well as elected officials, to ensure that our programs and support services are available for all who need them.


I would like to testify today about the alarming workforce shortage facing many mental health service providers that is only getting worse by the day. We need investments in the children's mental health workforce – a group that has been traditionally underpaid, yet on the front-line caring for the most vulnerable. Many industries are struggling with their workforce since the pandemic. The children's mental health workforce is no different but is at a crisis level, especially given how vulnerable our population is already. Statistics show that 1 in 6 U.S. youth experience a mental health condition each year, but only half get treatment. 59.6% of youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment. Our children are in crisis, and we need to stabilize our workforce so they can receive the support needed. It is an issue that deals with both investment and capacity and one that Astor takes very seriously.

Capacity and workforce retention has always been an issue in the human services field. Providers are expected to do more with less and that cannot be more evident than in the current backlogs and wait times that most families in our communities are facing when trying to schedule appointments. Our current staff are being stretched thin and facing physical and emotional burnout to ensure that there is the least amount of program disruption possible. Current research from a labor market analyst states that across the country and industry-wide, the number of individuals that are leaving organizations is about one in three. It was found that most companies in 2021 turned over about a third of their staff and that is a dramatic number. In the last six months, Astor has seen an eight percent shift in vacancies that has led to the need for many of our programs to shut down intakes and review caseloads on a weekly basis to see how many intakes we can bring in. In our outpatient clinics, we offer 40-70 each week and fill them but still have 178 children on the referral waitlist. Other programs like our HBCI (Home Based Crisis Intervention), SYNC (Serving Youth iN Their Communities) and CFTSS (Children and Family Treatment and Support Services) services will just not take referrals when we do not have capacity. Our partial hospitalization program has more referrals beyond capacity than total slots for the program. Our Bronx Day Treatment program could be accepting referrals right now but are not due to staffing shortages. We are currently facing a 20% reduction of students in our therapeutic pre-school program due to a lack of staffing and we had to reduce the census in our residential program in Rhinebeck, simply because we do not have staff to fill required slots for the safety of our children and workforce. Children in this program have been traumatized and come to us to help them heal. We are unable to



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assist a large group because we do not have staff. So, what happens to those we cannot admit into the program? They are in the community, many with limited resources to receive the comprehensive services needed.

Although these numbers and statistics seem dim, Astor is not alone in this plight. From an HR perspective, agencies like ours are doing everything possible to recruit and retain talented employees but cannot compete with City agencies like the Department of Education and for-profit competitors that are offering in some cases twice the salary that Astor is able to provide. Private industry telehealth agencies are offering around \$65 – \$100,000 where the average salary for a clinician in our Bronx programs is around \$47,000. We have added sign on bonuses and financial incentives as well as other non-monetary incentives, such as clinical training and free CEU credits towards their licensure, but it does not seem to be enough.

Additionally, what is happening now with remote employment due to the pandemic is only adding to the strife many employers are facing when it comes to workforce satisfaction and retention. Many employees are leery of returning to the office not only due to health concerns but also due to the convenience of remote work positions. Many providers are competing against employers from outside the city and state who are offering fully remote jobs. Jobs that were not available to New Yorkers prior to the pandemic are now finding normalcy in this new era of resignation. People love the opportunity for change, higher salaries, and all other benefits that some companies can offer and yet agencies like Astor do not have the luxury of being able to offer and compete at the same level.

To turnaround this current trend in underemployment, investments need to be made to not only support employee retention but also allow employers sustainable reimbursement rates to be able to compete with our larger competitors. Expanding funding and reimbursements for outpatient and school-based health clinics will allow us to reach more clients and families and allow us to partner/integrate mental health within the school buildings by providing hybrid services (both in-person and tele-health) as needed by clients and staff. We need to increase the rates for Residential Treatment Facilities and increase tuition rates for non-public schools who serve children with disabilities to create parity within the industry and across sectors.

We are all aware of the unprecedented challenges ahead but considering the exasperating mental health challenges facing our communities because of the pandemic, we must remain optimistic that you will partner with us on this journey by recognizing how imperative it is for us to secure the crucial mental health workforce who will provide the vital services desperately needed to help our State's vulnerable children and families. This will also enable emerging professionals the opportunity to hone their craft and make a bigger impact on those they serve.


I hope we can count on your support!

Thank you.



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