



**HILLSIDE**

Testimony Presented by:

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Before the:

Assembly Ways and Means and  
Senate Finance Committees

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

Mental Hygiene

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Good Afternoon, Chairpersons Krueger, Weinstein, Brouk, and Gunther, as well as members of the Assembly and Senate. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on Governor Hochul's Executive Budget for State Fiscal Year 2022-23. I would like to thank all members of the legislature – you make an incredible difference in the lives of NYS citizens.

My name is Maria Cristalli and I am the President and CEO of Hillside. Hillside is one of the largest non-profit agencies in New York State, has been a cornerstone of the Rochester, NY, community for 185 years. With a budget of nearly \$130 million, Hillside provides more than 80 programs to children and families at 38 locations across Central and Western New York and in Prince George's County, MD. The agency is accredited by the Council on Accreditation.

Hillside's diverse, skilled workforce is dedicated to serving the needs of youth and families. One of the largest employers headquartered in Monroe County, nearly 1,800 staff members working to serve nearly 10,000 families in 47 upstate counties each year. Hillside provides youth and families with customized services in the areas of mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, adoption, special education, development disabilities, health and safety net. In addition to wide-ranging community-based programs, we operate five residential treatment campuses, five 853 schools and 11 group homes as well as the nationally recognized Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, a youth-empowerment program embedded in school districts and communities in Rochester, Syracuse, Binghamton NY and in Prince George's County, MD.

My comments today will focus on portions of the mental hygiene budget, particularly those impacting children, but my written testimony also includes areas covering child welfare and education.

Even before the pandemic, the capacity of the children's mental health system was insufficient to meet need. The children's mental health system has been under-funded for decades. Nationally, Children's Mental Health Crisis has been identified by the US Surgeon General and the American Academy of Pediatrics – urging us to create immediate changes to improve access to services.

Last Fall, 76% of the NYS Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health member agencies reported that they have paused intake for services because of

workforce shortages. Hillside is among those agencies. We currently have 270 open positions out of a total of 1800 employees. This has affected our operations and we have delayed opening a new dually licensed OMH/OCFS cottage for youth involved with our juvenile justice system and announced the closure of a RTF in Greene, NY. On a daily basis, we are evaluating our ability to meet the needs of the children and families we serve. In my thirty years of service to Hillside, this is the most strained our workforce has been.

Since June, we have invested nearly \$5 million dollars in our people. These initiatives include raising Hillside's standard starting wage to \$15 per hour, investments in our compensation structure, and utilizing targeted retention and recruitment bonuses. We have also increased our recruitment efforts, examined our hiring practices, and have been in touch with the NYS Department of Labor and others about creating a workforce pipeline or opportunities for growth and advancement.

The workforce is not only impacting our operations but the shortage is having a direct impact on families.

- Waitlists are extremely long for community-based services. Families are worried about the ability to keep their children at home because no one can help and they need help now.
- Children are going to the hospital and waiting in the emergency departments for a long time. If they are discharged; they are going back home without community supports. Children are out of school and family members are forced to miss work.
- Families are told that their children are eligible for services yet there is no one to provide the services. It takes many months to get an appointment with a social worker and/or psychiatrist.
- Families are losing hope.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created transformational waves in virtually every aspect of society. In the human services field in general and Hillside services in particular, the need to form strong therapeutic connections with individuals and families in need has become profoundly challenged by a necessary climate of social distancing and physical isolation.

Unfortunately, the mental health needs of children and their families are increasing as a ripple effect of communities emerging from a pandemic that has amplified already existing inequities. Violence among youth continues to increase. Hillside has been impacted in both Rochester and Syracuse by gun violence. We need to

find a solution and we cannot continue to see our youth hurt. We need to get youth re-engaged and back in school. Social isolation and effects of the pandemic must be dealt with now or we are going to have longer-term impacts on our communities.

I know you are all hearing about the increased need for mental health services and there is a lot of support for increasing services in schools but we need to also focus on the current systems we have, leverage the workforce, and create community partnerships.

We are pleased to see numerous proposals in the Governor's proposed budget that will enable us to continue our work, these include:

- 5.4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA). This will enable us to make compensation adjustments. Our understanding is the COLA will expire at the end of March. We urge the Legislature to make this a multi-year commitment.
- Healthcare Workforce Bonus. We are happy to see this proposal covers all state licensing authorities (OMH, OPWDD, DOH, and OCFS). This is critically important because agencies, like Hillside, that are multi-licensed need the ability to invest in our entire workforce. Proposals that impact only one licensing authority create inequities and staff just move from one service to another.
- Enhanced RTF Rates. RTF bed capacity has been reduced statewide by 47% over the past 8 years from 518 beds in 2013 to 274 beds in 2022. As previously, discussed, Hillside is reducing bed capacity at our RTF in Greene and transitioning some of that bed capacity to our Auburn campus. The current methodology needs revision and additional investments are needed or providers are not going to be able to continue to provide residential mental health beds licensed by OMH.
- CHP Behavioral Health. The Executive budget proposes to invest \$11 million in SFY 23 and growing to \$44 million in SFY 24 and adding services that we provide that include: children and family treatment and support services, children's home and community based services, community treatment and residential for youth, and services provided by foster care agencies.
- Extending the APG rates for clinics, Part 584 crisis stabilization centers and ambulatory behavioral health services for children covered by Child Health Plus.

- Enhancing the Home-Based Crisis Intervention rates and expanding the number of programs.

Additional investments are needed in our workforce, if we are truly going to be able to stabilize the system. Hillside supports the following initiatives being advanced for inclusion into the final budget:

- Enacting a \$500 state income tax credit for children's mental health workers earning under \$100,000 per year.
- Enacting an additional \$10 million children's mental health workforce support program that will allow for non-taxable grant payments to help workers in need of health insurance expenses, stipends for food, housing, transportation or child-care expenses, or for payments to avoid default or interest on student loans.
- Authorizing and funding a \$12 million pilot project that uses an Alternative Payment Methodology to create a short-term hospital diversion service for complex care/cross systems youth that offers families immediate access to safe, out-of-home services while a child and the family prepare for transition to intensive in-home services like YouthACT, HCBI or HCBS.
- Increased Support for the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Program. The proposed budget includes \$50,000 which is not enough to have an impact. These programs should be funded at \$1 million for a total investment of \$2 million.

### **Lack of Available Clinicians**

Currently, Hillside has 20 clinician open positions which is 13% of the clinicians we employ across the organization (n=115). This is directly impacting our ability to provide residential treatment as well as community based behavioral health. We need to fill these positions but also add to our clinical staff to be able to meet demand in our community.

For example, there is a lot of support for increasing mental health services in schools but who is going to do this work? School districts already offer higher wages and benefits than a not-for-profit agency. Hillside partners with school districts and BOCES across Central and Western NY. We are starting conversation with BOCES and school districts who are interested in Hillside providing clinical supports in schools to address the increased mental health needs. We are concerned that additional investments into school districts or mandates to provide services will result in clinical staff leaving our agency and going to work

for a school district. We are hearing from our school district partners they are concerned about legacy costs and, in some instances, being able to provide the services. We think it would be better to partner and share limited resources and find ways to increase the pipeline of clinicians.

Hillside's current staffing shortage is only going to get worse unless we finally find a solution to allow Mental Health Counselors, Marriage and Family Therapists and Psychoanalysts to be able to diagnosis and undertake treatment planning. We are thankful the Legislature extended our current agency exemption, for one year, through June of 2022. This enables us the flexibility to utilize our workforce. However, the Legislature has made it clear the exemption will not be extended again and therefore we need to ensure we have the ability to keep our current workforce, continue to recruit, and hire qualified licensed mental health practitioners that can diagnosis and undertake treatment planning.

Increasing the number of mental health professionals who can diagnosis and undertake treatment planning is one of our biggest priorities and solution to overcoming the increased demand for behavioral health services. We urge the Legislature to include S. 5301-A (Brouk) and A. 6008-B (Bronson) in the final budget. The bill would standardize the education and modernize the scope of practice for Licensed Mental Health Counselors, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists and Psychoanalysts.

Hillside may be unique in that we currently employ all three clinicians in addition to Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists and Nurse Practitioners. Our Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists and Nurse Practitioners provide critical care to our youth but we all know there are not enough of them. The University of Rochester, in our backyard, has programs for Mental Health Counselors as well as Marriage and Family Therapists. Our partnership and ability to help train these professionals has created a pipeline of individuals who are part of our clinical team. However, right now students who graduate from these programs and stay in New York are not able to diagnosis or undertake treatment planning even though they are trained to do so. We believe this needs to change and that modernization will help with recruitment into these programs which will ultimately help alleviate our workforce shortage.

We have also seen that different types of clinicians benefit the children and families we serve. No two families are alike and the need of each child is

different. The ability to have a diverse workforce that undertakes different treatment modalities will have the largest impact on those we serve.

We cannot wait until the end of Session to resolve this issue. We urge you to include S.5301-A and A. 6008-B in the final budget so that we have the ability to plan for the current exemption expiring knowing we will have the ability to recruit and retain critically necessary mental health clinicians. If this is not resolved by June, children and families are going to have a harder time accessing services and if the service is available, waitlists and delays will increase.

#### Additional Areas Hillside Supports:

- 11% increase in funding for 853 Schools for the 22-23 school year.
- Reform the current School Age Rate Methodology that funds 853 Schools to enable to schools to support the needs of students but also the changing landscape in residential care.
- Increased funding for foster parents (ELFA Part O).
- Extension of the Child Welfare Financing Structure (ELFA Part N).
- Community Optional Prevent Services funding at \$12.2 million. Formula funding provided to Monroe County has enabled Hillside Work Scholarship Connection to support almost 1000 youth in the Rochester City School District while also leveraging private philanthropy.
- Increased funding for the MSAR, starting July 1<sup>st</sup>, for residential beds licensed by OCFS.
- \$50 million in funding for the Nonprofit Infrastructure Fund.
- Increasing funding for Hillside Work Scholarship Connection in the education budget from \$490,000 to \$1 million (allocation prior to 2009) which will support additional youth receiving services in the Rochester City School District.
- Continued funding for My Brother's Keeper which support youth enrolled in the Hillside Work Scholarship Connection Program in the Syracuse City School District.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to working with all of you to ensure our ability to continue to provide critical services to children and families while implementing solutions to alleviate the mental health crisis.

Before I conclude, I would also like to publicly thank our amazing workforce that has continued to show up every day. Many of the children we serve, live with us and, and require our workers on a daily basis to leave their families to care for others. Many work more than one job to support their family. I am thankful for their dedication and willingness to serve.

Now I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.