

THE CENTER

Committee on Mental Hygiene
2024 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Fiscal Year 2025
Submitted February 13, 2024

Testimony of
The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center
New York, NY

**THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL &
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the 2024 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing regarding the proposed New York State Fiscal Year 2025 budget as it relates to issues within the oversight of the Committee on Mental Hygiene.

New York City's LGBT community formed The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center (The Center) in 1983, in response to the AIDS epidemic, ensuring a place for LGBTQ people to access information, care and support they were not receiving elsewhere. Now the largest LGBT multi-service organization on the East Coast, The Center sees more than 6,000 weekly visitors and hosts over 400 community group meetings each month. The Center has a solid track record of working for and with the community to increase access to a diverse range of high-quality services and resources, including our substance use recovery programming for adults and youth; HIV/AIDS programming; youth programs; and our families and opportunities work.

The Center's services

The Center fosters a welcoming environment where everyone is celebrated for who they are. We offer the LGBTQ communities of NYC advocacy, health and wellness programs; arts, entertainment, and cultural events; recovery, parenthood, and family support services. In addition, The Center has made racial equity a keystone element of our approach to community building.

- **Counseling and support groups:** The Center provides short-term individual counseling and referral services, as well as hosts a range of support groups for our transgender and gender nonconforming communities. Both individual counseling and groups offer support around a variety of topics, including gender identity and expression, emotional challenges, substance use and recovery, and aim to build peer support networks.
- **Employment support:** Despite legal protections in New York State, the effects of discrimination continue to place trans and gender nonconforming communities at extremely high rates of poverty, unemployment, underemployment and homelessness. The Center provides services to directly combat this inequality, including individual career coaching support, case management, events focused on career exploration, legal workshops and networking opportunities.
- **Health insurance enrollment and linkage to care:** The Center is a designated navigator agency for the NY State of Health, the health insurance marketplace for New York through the Affordable Care Act. We provide information and education on the options available, and help individuals, families, small businesses and their employees enroll in New York State Medicaid, The NY Essential Plan, Child Health Plus and Qualified Health plans. We also help connect individuals to TGNCNB affirming medical and behavioral healthcare as needed.

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- **HIV prevention, testing, and linkage to care:** We offer counseling for individuals, groups, couples and families, plus a variety of events, speakers and informal social gatherings for positive people and their loved ones. This includes HIV & AIDS education, anonymous testing, counseling and support, partner notification, and linkage to medical treatment including PEP, PrEP, and antiretroviral medications.
- **Legal services:** The Center partners with community-based legal providers to provide TGNCNB community members with drop-in assistance around gender-affirming access to healthcare, insurance, employment issues, housing, name and gender marker changes, public benefits and more.

On Mental Hygiene and Health

Right now, LGBT communities are at another inflection point: according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), “there is strong evidence from recent research that members of [the LGBT+ community] are at a higher risk for experiencing mental health conditions — especially depression and anxiety disorders.” In their studies, NAMI highlights that “LGB adults are more than twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience a mental health condition,” with Transgender individuals being nearly four times as likely to suffer the same. Still yet, given the limitations of traditional large-scale studies, the true crisis facing LGBT+ people has not been fully understood, and the growing need for culturally relevant support has not been adequately addressed. In an effort to close some of the existing gaps in services, The Center will design a Mental Health Clinic offering affirming LGBTQIA+ mental health care services regardless of ability to pay. Government support from the New York State Legislature is consequential to our ability to address the mental health needs of New York’s LGBT communities.

We write to respectfully request a \$500,000 appropriation in the New York State FY25 budget to support the launch of our Article 31 Licensed Mental Health Clinic.

Our proposed clinic is an ambitious plan to bolster our existing services and will provide a broad range of mental health services, including talk therapy: individual, couples & family, psychiatry, and medication management. The clinic will collaborate closely with the existing substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery support services at The Center to integrate services for our community as needed, along with other areas of the program portfolio to provide holistic wraparound care grounded in The Center’s community model by connecting patients to our support services like case management and insurance navigation and to community engagement events that connect and engage the LGBTQIA+ community.

The underlying causes of the disproportionately higher rates of LGBTQ+ people facing mental health challenges are varied. Among them, are increased instances of prejudice, harassment, family rejection, and discrimination in their lives, in addition to those forms of discrimination that are increasingly normalized in our government institutions. So far this year, according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 506 anti-LGBTQ bills have been introduced in state legislative houses across the United States, seeking to limit

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access to free speech, education, healthcare for our communities. In the most extreme cases, like in Texas, over 50 bills have made their way into the state house. New York can continue holding the line against homophobia, transphobia, and hate by demonstrating our deep support for the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people in our state.

LGBTQ youth face some of the most alarming rates of mental health challenges, with 68% of LGBTQ youth reporting symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder in the past two week, including more than three out of four transgender and nonbinary youth (see The Trevor Project's 2020 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health). LGBTQ youth also have higher rates of depression and suicide ideation (40% of LGBTQ youth and 50%+ of TGNC youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months). These challenges, exacerbated during COVID-19, often co-occur with higher rates of substance use (LGBTQ Health, 2019), greater risk for HIV/AIDS (CDC, 2018), and diminished access to medical care (National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, 2016).

The Center is not new to offering mental health services tailored for LGBTQ+ people. Since being approved by OASAS in 2016, The Center has served 181 LGBTQ youth through its SUD program. The Center is the only OASAS Part 822 licensed LGBTQ-specific outpatient drug treatment program in New York State. The Center has received permanent telehealth attestation allowing our trained staff to provide expanded virtual and (when public health allows) in-person mental health services alongside our substance use treatment services. Additionally, The Center provided mental health counseling and supportive services to 200+ LGBTQ-identified adults over the last year. Client statistics included:

- (1) 70% of clients completed at least 12 individual mental health sessions; and
- (2) 100% of clients who completed mental health services were provided with active referrals for either long-term mental health treatment or another concrete service (medical care, substance use treatment, HIV services including testing) in recognition of the overlapping challenges that often need to be addressed to improve mental health.

There is an unmet need for (and need for increased capacity of) LGBTQ-affirming and competent mental health therapy services in the NYC area. Currently, The Center does not provide counseling to community members with private insurance and often refers out those with Medicaid insurance as well. Callen-Lorde, who operates an Article 31 Clinic, consistently has a waitlist and is unable to take referrals The Center sends as a result; the typical waitlist exceeds four weeks. Becoming an Article 31 Mental Health Clinic will allow The Center to address this need and treat these individuals who seek support through this organization.

Your support for funding of \$500k will help to ensure that New York's LGBTQ+ community can access life-saving supports, and continue to grow into the thriving New Yorkers that our city and state need.

For over four decades, The Center has worked to ensure that the LGBT community of New York City has access to the highest quality and most diverse range of services and resources. Though we are living in a time of unprecedented social, legal and political acceptance of the LGBTQ community, there is still much work to be done on a local and

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state level to ensure that our community members can successfully combat the social and economic injustice they face daily. Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to provide this testimony today on an issue of great importance state-wide. We look forward to continue working with you to ensure New York State's future as a safe space for all New Yorkers.

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