

My name is Brandy Vandermark-Murray, I am a Licensed Mental Health clinician and currently serve as the Sr. VP of Operations at Horizon Health Services. I want to thank the Attorney General for coming today, and spending time to understand the importance of adequate access to mental health services to our community.

I have worked in the behavioral health field in Western New York for 20 years with many years in direct care for individuals with both Mental Health and Substance abuse issues. While I have seen significant improvement in service line development over the past decade, we still have gaps in services and significantly underfunded resources.

Families and individuals with significant mental health often need comprehensive services – services that range for acute to normative, services that are offered outside of the traditional 9-5 brick and mortar and services that are trauma informed. While WNY is known for collaboration we still have infrastructure barriers that cause treatment programs to remain siloed and the experience for the patient/family to not be engaging.

Access to services is critical for early intervention and crisis prevention. The number one barrier to access to all community mental health services across the board is workforce. **Workforce** challenges have been problematic for behavioral healthcare providers long before the pandemic and over the past few years has gotten worse and worse. Poor and inadequate reimbursement rates for services provided at many of our mental health programs in the community make it virtually impossible to pay staff a fair wage for their work and retain them long term. Staff who are skilled and enjoy the populations that need services the most are working in conditions that are understaffed and poorly paid. More and more front-line staff are leaving the field or going to private practice/virtual models where they can see less acute patients for more considerably more money.

Most of our workforce is comprised of women and minorities: two groups that are historically underpaid and conditions are only worse in the behavioral health care industry. We have been starved of adequate COLA adjustments for 30 years. Between inflation and the ordinary cost of living our workers are losing money. We need a significant COLA in this year's budget with built in escalators.

One time funding is insufficient. Our workers need to be enticed to the industry, they need student loan forgiveness, they need fair wages to treat the underserved and while they are working, they need continued training. Without ongoing training and fair wages these workers are walking. They are working for web-based therapy companies getting paid cash to speak to the worried-well. They are leaving our most vulnerable and sickest New Yorkers in the hands of new clinicians who are struggling to make ends meet. With a 30% turnover rate and tight labor market, the workers who remain in our clinics have higher and higher caseloads which creates an untenable job and burnout. Mental illness deserves good, quality care, by competent and well-trained therapists who can improve the quality of life of these patients.

It is heartbreaking as a healthcare provider to have waitlist for programs that can be instrumental in someone's recovery or to see programs close their doors because they are not able to staff or maintain operations due to inadequate funding.

Every time we develop a new program in our community that we all agree is needed, we struggle with acknowledging another program will be impacted due to spreading the already thin bandwidth of the behavioral health workforce in WNY.

The quality of services is more important than the number of services we offer, otherwise patients and families go from service to service, not benefiting from the services they received and often being re-traumatized and disheartened by the system.

We have so many dedicated healthcare providers in WNY- without appropriate funding and infrastructure, concerns over access and quality of care will get worse before it gets better.

Thank you for your time and listening to these critical concerns.

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