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Good afternoon, my name is Erin Melfi I am a Licensed Creative Arts Therapist working at Brylin Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital in Buffalo NY serving children, adolescents, and adults. I am also a member of 1199 SEIU.

I truly appreciate the work that the Attorney General's office is doing to highlight the need for more and improved mental health services.

For those that are not familiar with art therapists, we are masters level clinicians licensed through the department of education. We are required to complete a masters level program, 1500 supervised clinical hours, and to pass a test - all required by New York State. We attend continuing education courses alongside mental health counselors and social workers and pay our yearly fees to the state. What sets us apart from other clinicians is the use of the creative arts as an alternative form of emotional expression in collaboration with traditional therapy to help those we serve.

I enjoy my work as an art therapist and appreciate the opportunity to work with people to live healthier and more fulfilling lives.

Unfortunately, this is difficult to do in an environment where providers are expected to do more and more with less and less. In my experience, mental health therapists and staff will tell you there is often more emphasis on health care as a business than the quality of care they provide. This kind of pressure leads to stress, burnout, and high turnover among staff.

We need to get back to quality, trauma informed, therapeutic care - that takes time but also improves lives. This is the kind of care we all were trained to provide and it's the kind of care we know works. If we could do this in an ethically sound setting which promotes growth, where we can be paid fairly and treated kindly, therapists would be lining up for job openings and staying in those jobs.

Last week Governor Hochul announced she wants to invest \$1 billion to tackle the mental health crisis we have right now, including opening up more psychiatric beds. I'm glad the Governor has made this a priority.

However, there has to be recognition that we, the front-line mental health professionals, will be the key to improving mental health services. If we don't have the time to do our jobs and the wages to keep and attract more staff, opening up more beds or outpatient services will not succeed.

On that note, I would like to express my disappointment that the Governor recently excluded creative art therapists when she signed a bill expanding insurance coverage for outpatient mental health services. We make up approximately 14% of licensed New York State mental health providers, meaning this would have allowed New York State residents access to approximately 1600 more outpatient mental health providers.

The mental health crisis is fundamentally about not having enough professionals and staff to meet the need. Excluding over 1600 potential providers undermines the state's ability to solve this crisis. I hope lawmakers will include expanded coverage for art therapists when they take up the Governor's call to tackle the mental health crisis.

Thank you for your time.