

Thank you, Attorney General for holding this Public Hearing. My name is Melinda DuBois, and I am the Executive Director of the Mental Health Advocates of Western New York and the chair of the Anti-Stigma Coalition.

Today, I'd like to speak about Children's services, Peer support, crisis care, and the importance of prevention.

At MHA, we help families negotiate the children's system of care. Parents consistently say it is confusing and inadequate. At times, families are forced to make incredibly difficult decisions. We work with families who have taken out second mortgages to get their child the care they need. Parents who refuse to allow their child to be discharged to their home due to fear that their other children will be hurt or traumatized. Sometimes CPS is called on these parents. We have families who have had to quit their jobs to care for their child. Our family peer advocates work with parents who are frustrated, feel defeated, and are desperate for help. There are not enough residential treatment centers, the system for accessing these services is cumbersome and complicated, and our children are suffering. Our Court Appointed Special Advocates work with abused and neglected children who consistently fall through the cracks. They are languishing within systems that are not adequate to meet their special needs.

At MHA we frequently hear complaints about the care received at CPEP. We know that CPEP is understaffed and under resourced. Staff are working under very difficult conditions, and both staff and patients are feeling traumatized. CPEP reform needs to be a priority.

We need a CPEP where our most vulnerable citizens are wrapped around with love and compassion. Where their needs are met and they are treated with dignity, where adequate follow up care is available. Where visits to CPEP are rare because needs are met in the community. When that happens, we will be on our way to supporting our vulnerable citizens and until that happens, our services will come up short.

At MHA, our staff are peers. While NYS recognizes the power of peers in the workforce, the overly restrictive regulations required by OMH make it difficult for smaller peer agencies like MHA to

continue to provide this essential care. It is time for us to recognize that alternative methods of care can be as effective as traditional models. Community mental health workers, peers, and alternative treatments are essential to the future of Mental Health care. This is a community wide problem and needs to be addressed in every part of the community, in schools, in workplaces, and on the streets.

And finally, prevention is key. At MHA, we provide programs in schools for children as young as 4 years old. Our Youth Peer Advocates are in Middle and High schools. We provide Mental Health First Aid training. Our prevention programs should be funded and in every school. In NYS, mental health education is a requirement, but we know that many underfunded, understaffed schools are “checking the box” rather than vigorously incorporating MH into every aspect of their teaching. It is as important as math and science.

In closing, changing a system will require a coordinated effort, must include consumers and peers in the solution, and will only succeed if mental health is addressed at every level. Prevention, early intervention, addressing stigma, insuring all have access to care, and finally, treating individuals and families in crisis with compassion, dignity, and love are essential to the solution. When these changes occur, we will be on the right path to addressing the mental health needs of our community.