



Testimony of
The Coalition of Voluntary
Mental Health Agencies, Inc.
Before the New York City Council
Health Committee

Delivered by
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Mental Health Services and the
New York City Fiscal Year 2001 Budget

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Chairman Robles, Chairwoman Clarke, distinguished Committee members, good afternoon. My name is Phillip A. Saperia. I am the Executive Director of The Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies, Inc. The Coalition is the umbrella advocacy organization of New York City's mental health community, representing over 100 non-profit community based mental health agencies that serve more than 500,000 clients in all five boroughs and nearly every neighborhood of our very diverse New York City.

I would like to begin today by expressing my gratitude to this body. The City Council in general, and the Health Committee and Mental Health Subcommittee in particular, are consistent in your support for New Yorkers with psychiatric disabilities. I just want you to know that your efforts are recognized and appreciated.

Unfortunately, an attempt is being made to undo some of the finest work you have done in the last three years. The Executive's January budget modification proposes cutting nearly all the mental health and substance programs that the City Council has added to the budget since 1998. These proposed cuts, totaling more than \$3 million, would eliminate a number of programs that provide treatment and services to some of the most vulnerable residents of our City. All of these programs are relatively new. Some have only come online in the past months.

Among the crucial programs these cuts would diminish or eliminate are: a school-based mental health program in The Bronx, mental health services for Spanish-speaking immigrants in Manhattan, mental health services for Chinese immigrants in Queens, a teen alcoholism prevention program in Staten Island, forensic mental health programs on Rikers Island, alcoholism services for elderly

Brooklynites and mental health case management for children involved with the juvenile justice system.

At a time of critical need highlighted by the Governor in his budget proposal, we are puzzled and distressed by the fact that the Mayor is proposing reductions in the City's commitment to the mental health care delivery system. Too many of our City's residents are **already** unable to access the care they need. Most of our public school children attend a school with no on-site mental health care. Countless non-English speakers are unable to find culturally and linguistically appropriate care. Thousands of New Yorkers with mental illness are released from Rikers Island each year with no discharge plans, no access to medication and no case management. New York City needs **more** mental health services, not fewer.

These shortsighted cuts would hurt people and neighborhoods. They would save small sums in the short term, but would end up costing the city uncountable dollars in unnecessary psychiatric emergency room visits, incarcerations, hospitalizations and decompensations; not to mention the human costs in terms of suffering. The Coalition strongly opposes these cuts and urges the City Council not to allow them to go through.

Simply maintaining the level of support for mental health services is not, however, sufficient. The mental health safety net in our City is eroded every year by inflation. Contracts are awarded that have no mechanism within them to keep pace with inflation. While the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has increased at an average of nearly 3% per year over the last decade, mental health rates, grants and fees have remained stagnant. This amounts to an effective 29.5% cut over the last decade as providers are asked to furnish the same services with fewer

real dollars.

It has reached the point where many providers **lose** money on every unit of service they provide. This situation is obviously untenable and a number of agencies in this past year, after pinching every penny they could, using up their cash reserves and exhausting their lines of credit have been forced to either reduce the levels of service they can provide or offer themselves up for acquisition.

We urge the City Council to include a modest 4% adjustment to the existing City Tax Levy funds to begin to repair in some small way the damage done to our mental health system by the lack of trended adjustments.

This damage is done in myriad ways both large and small. Foremost among these is that staff placement and retention is more difficult than ever before. Not only can voluntary providers no longer compete with State jobs that pay an average of \$10,000 per year more, but increasingly compete for staff with fast-food restaurants that offer higher salaries. For agencies that must compete with the Board of Education for certified teachers the situation is even worse. Salary differentials are as high as \$55,000 per year. Staff morale is low, and declining fast. Turnover rates have surpassed 50% in many agencies, in some the **entire** staff turns over every year. Many vacancies go unfilled for months because the salaries offered are so uncompetitive.

In addition, the non-personnel needs of agencies suffer without trended adjustments. Not only is it difficult to find staff at 1980s salaries, it is difficult to find spaces at 1980s rents. Even if agencies are fortunate enough to find space, they still lack the funds necessary to maintain them. All too often clients are seen

in aging and rundown treatment and meeting spaces.

More important is the negative impact this lack of adjustments has on the quality of care New Yorkers with mental illness receive. Every time a direct care worker leaves, the continuity of care for his or her clients is disrupted. The relationship they had built, an essential component of the recovery process, is destroyed. Add to this the difficulty of replacing them with qualified staff; the cost of want ads, the time spent interviewing replacements, the interruption of the routine for staff and clients. The quality of care suffers. Clients suffer.

A 4% trend would be a relatively minor expense. Only \$3.53 million would shore up the entire mental health sector in New York City. The staff, the clients, their families, the providers will all be grateful. The community will be grateful.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am sure that with the City Council's help we will be able to craft a mental healthcare system in New York City that provides sufficient, appropriate services that will help our residents with mental illnesses remain in the community and contribute to the vitality of New York City. The Coalition is committed to doing whatever we can to make that system a reality.