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OMH NEWS
Special Edition
ANN SULLIVAN, MD / Commissioner

Addressing the Social Determinants of Mental Health

- **Adverse childhood experiences**
- **Discrimination or social exclusion**
- **Exposure to violence**
- **Criminal justice involvement**

Highly detrimental U.S. societal problems

Socioeconomic status and opportunities for accruing wealth

- **Low educational attainment**
- **Unemployment or job insecurity**
- **Poverty and income inequality**
- **Neighborhood poverty**

- **Adverse built environment**
- **Neighborhood disorder**
- **Pollution**
- **Global climate change impact**

Immediate and global physical environment

Basic needs in terms of housing, food, transportation, and health care

- **Housing instability**
- **Food insecurity**
- **Poor access to transportation**
- **Poor access to health care**

Sixteen categories of social determinants of mental health, in four broad areas.

OMH report offers recommendations to address the social determinants of mental health

As the disparate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made tragically evident, societal inequities in living conditions and access to health care among segments of our state's population are critical contributors to the health and well-being of the people we serve. New York State is working through several avenues to address these inequities.

A new report from OMH, *The Social Determinants of Mental Health: A White Paper Detailing Promising Practices and Opportunities at the New York State Office of Mental Health,* describes these inequities in detail and offers opportunities for solutions.

The paper was written by **Merrill Rotter, MD,** Senior Forensic Advisor to the Commissioner of OMH, and **Michael T. Compton,** MD, MPH, Research Psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

Social determinants and their impact

The White Paper discusses of the "social determinants of mental health," which are the social, economic, and physical-environment factors that shape an individual's mental health across the lifespan.

Dr. Rotter   *Dr. Compton*

They include discrimination, unemployment, housing instability, food insecurity, and poor access to health care, among others.

Social determinants likely have a more potent effect on behavioral disorders than physical illnesses. One reason is the fact that social determinants are both risk factors for and consequences of behavioral disorders, like serious mental illnesses and substance use disorders.

OMH can use its influence in several arenas to work toward solutions:

- **Funding –** Providing initial or sustaining funding for specific initiatives of great value to the agency and providing State Aid funding to counties.

- **Policymaking –** Setting policy both within the agency and in conjunction with other state agencies and the state legislature.

- **Data collection and analysis –** Collecting data from a variety of reporting sources, with dedicated staff to provide sophisticated analysis and visualization of results.

- **Research –** Pursuing a diverse array of research and disseminating results from two world-class psychiatric research centers, staffed by a highly skilled research workforce, and supported by excellent facilities.

- **Training –** Educating the state workforce through variety of venues and platforms, including professional conferences, online state-wide grand rounds, the OMH-supported Center for Practice Innovations, trainings developed in collaboration with community-based agencies, and the mandated modules on the State's learning management system.

- **Informal influence –** Using OMH's "bully pulpit" to endorse, encourage and commend activities that support addressing the social determinants at both the societal/structural and individual client levels.

- **Regulation and licensing –** Overseeing and surveying of thousands of inpatient, outpatient, and residential programs across the state.

- **State operations –** Operating a vast array of inpatient, outpatient, and residential services.

Spheres of Influence

- Regulation and Licensing
- State Operations
- Funding
- Policy Making
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Research
- Training
- Informal Influence

For example, the stresses associated with housing instability can impact a person's clinical condition, including behaviors that imperil future housing opportunities. The population OMH serves is at the intersection of several groups with significantly greater exposure to social determinants - including people experiencing discrimination, trauma, poverty, insufficient access to health care, criminal/legal contact and insecure housing.

Working toward solutions

In recent years, government, health care providers, insurers, and communities are paying greater attention to the social determinants of health and mental health. This attention is driven by fiscal, clinical, and public health priorities, as well as considerations of health equity and social justice.

OMH has been contributing to these efforts in several ways, as exemplified by participation in the development of the current cycle of the **New York State Prevention Agenda,** which includes multiple themes pertaining to the social determinants. OMH's efforts to date have come about as part of the agency's routine activities and areas of commitment. For example, state-operated facilities attend to a number of social needs, but this came about due to the extent of social disadvantage among clients served, rather than from a distinct initiative founded upon addressing social determinants and eliminating inequities.

Given the critical and increasingly recognized importance of the social determinants of health, OMH in August 2018 established a **Social Determinants of Mental Health (SDMH) Workgroup** to help define a social determinants agenda and coordinate with other agencies. Specific bureaus and related initiatives have been instituted at the New York State Department of Health (DOH) and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

The White Paper - a product of the SDMH Workgroup - outlines the spheres of influence of OMH as a means of framing thinking and an even more intentional approach to addressing the social determinants. It describes current social determinant-related activities, new initiatives, and potential opportunities within each of those spheres, as OMH continues to increase its contribution to this critical approach to clinical care and social justice.

The White Paper is available at the OMH Institute for Program and Policy Innovation website: https://omh.ny.gov/omhweb/omh-institute/sdmh-white-paper.pdf.