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October 1, 2021

Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D.
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Assistant Secretary Delphin-Rittmon,

Thank you for the opportunity to detail the New York State Office of Mental Health's (OMH) vision for the use of funding under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 dedicated to coronavirus disease (COVID-19) testing and mitigation resources for people with mental illness.

Throughout the pandemic, OMH has supported the community by providing infection control guidance for mental health programs throughout the State based on the most up-to-date guidance from the Center for Disease Control and the New York State Department of Health. The most recent version of [The New York State Office of Mental Health Infection Control Manual for Public Mental Health System Programs](#) was published on September 21, 2021.

OMH has made great efforts to elicit community input from consumers, providers, local governmental units (LGUs), and provider associations during the past 18 months through an array of methods. Consumers, providers, and LGUs were asked to complete surveys on the impact of COVID-19. OMH hosted a weekly *Question and Answer Session* through Webex to give behavioral healthcare providers across the state an opportunity to ask questions and receive guidance about any COVID-19 related issues they were facing. There was also a *Provider Association Call* every two weeks to share updates and hear directly from advocates regarding the challenges and needs of the community.

In addition, OMH solicited extensive feedback regarding the expanded CMHS Block Grant funding opportunities. OMH hosted eight stakeholder feedback meetings, which included: five regional meetings, one meeting with residents, one meeting with provider associations, and one meeting with county/municipal Directors of Community Services. In all, over 700 stakeholders participated in these feedback sessions.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, community mental health residential providers have shared their concerns with OMH. In response, OMH has provided extensive guidance and some personal protective equipment, and prioritized these programs at the onset of the O-Agency Link-Outreach-Vaccinate (O-LOV) COVID-19 program. OMH has provided over 80,000 doses of vaccine since December 2020 and conducted over 400 mobile events to reach underserved communities. Although our agency is prepared to provide more vaccinations, there is a need for a new approach to outreach and educate to address vaccine hesitancy.

OMH will use the supplemental funds in accordance with the recommendations listed in the SAMHSA guidance letter to the State Mental Health Commissioners. Eligible entities will include OMH operated, funded, and licensed housing providers. Within OMH's portfolio of congregate residential programs, there are 322 adult community residences, 34 children's community residences, and 66 community residence-single room occupancy facilities. Only 66% of OMH residential consumers have been vaccinated, with geographic variability. Given the high community spread of the delta variant, there is an increased risk for breakthrough infections and asymptomatic transmission. There is also a risk of rising infection rates as the weather cools and individuals congregate more indoors. The following proposed investments address these concerns.

COVID-19 Rapid Testing and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Staff and Residents

\$ 1,678,900 in Proposed Investments

OMH is proposing the use of funding to assist residential programs in obtaining personal protective equipment and increasing COVID-19 testing for staff and residents by providing an allocation of funds to be used on the following items:

- **Laboratory Licensing:** Supporting OMH congregate residential programs in obtaining Limited-Service Laboratory (LSL) licenses with Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA) numbers. Laboratory services would be limited to only rapid COVID-19 antigen testing. OMH would use funds to pay the \$200 LSL application fee for each agency.
- **Testing Supplies:** Purchasing a supply of rapid COVID-19 antigen tests for residents and staff. Increased transmission is anticipated during the colder months, especially in residential/congregate settings. Testing is also an important preventive measure against staffing shortages, which have already impacted the healthcare workforce throughout NYS.
- **Air Filtration Equipment:** Purchasing portable units to improve air filtration in licensed residential facilities.
- **Personal Protective Equipment:** Purchasing a sufficient quantity of masks, gloves, and face shields for residents and staff.

Vaccine Education

\$ 1,021,100 in Proposed Investments

OMH is proposing the use of funding to contract with one or more NYS peer or other external agencies. This relationship would support a statewide educational campaign by establishing up to five regionally-based teams of peers who will work in the community with programs to provide vaccine education and support vaccination efforts. OMH would also provide funding for housing providers to obtain educational training and materials about the vaccines.

Proposed Investments for COVID-19 Testing and Mitigation Resources

Item	Total Costs	Description
COVID-19 Rapid Testing and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Other Equipment for Staff and Residents	\$1,678,900	Estimate based on Limited-Service Laboratory (LSL) licenses for 422 providers, 60,000 rapid antigen tests, approximately 60,000 masks, 12,000 gloves, 1,800 face shields, and air filtration equipment for residential facilities
Vaccine Education	\$1,021,100	Estimate based on 5 Peer education teams including 2 peers, 1 half time supervisor, transportation expenses, fringe and \$50 per provider to print educational materials
Total funding	\$2,700,000	

Thank you for this opportunity to assist community programs in New York State with COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

Sincerely,



Ann Marie T. Sullivan, M.D.
Commissioner