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## **2023 Office of Mental Health Community Engagement Feedback Session Results**

### **Executive Summary**

Governor Hochul's comprehensive \$1 billion plan to transform and strengthen New York State's mental healthcare system and the historic investments she secured in the fiscal year 2024 budget to accomplish this goal are aimed at dramatically expanding access, reducing wait times, and ensuring appropriate levels of care statewide. This plan will increase operational capacity for inpatient psychiatric treatment, expand outpatient services and create new housing units for New Yorkers with mental illness. In addition, the plan will expand mental health services for children and youth, broaden insurance coverage for mental health and substance use disorder services, and invest in the mental health workforce.

To guide this ambitious expansion, the New York State Office of Mental Health engaged stakeholders and gathered input via a series of community engagement feedback sessions conducted statewide this year. Individuals with lived experience, family members, providers, community leadership and advocates provided the agency with feedback on regional needs, access to services, and inequities, among other topics.

In total, more than 1,700 New Yorkers participated in these sessions, which were conducted between February and April 2023. The agency conducted four statewide virtual sessions, along with 36 in-person sessions hosted within communities in all regions of the state. Feedback presented to the agency during these sessions often touched on similar subject matter, including workforce issues, outpatient care, services for school-aged children, discharge planning, housing, inpatient care, and insurance coverage.

Recruitment and retention of the workforce was a reoccurring theme, with many voicing a need for added incentives and a better pay scale to maintain the existing workforce and attract new workers to the field. Greater workforce diversity was also cited frequently, with many noting the need to better reflect the varying race, ethnicity and gender identity of clients. Others highlighted the importance of reducing administrative paperwork, which can pose both a burden to the workforce and reduce the time available to care for clients.

The need for transportation for individuals seeking or receiving outpatient care was frequently mentioned, since public transit is often limited in areas outside of New York City. Telehealth helps to alleviate some of this concern, but only in areas with broadband access, which often excludes rural communities. Also indicated was a need to better communicate the outpatient mental health services available and greater collaboration among human service agencies with overlap between the populations they serve –namely the Office of Mental Health, Office of Addiction Services and Supports, and the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities.

Those providing feedback called for expanding mental health services for school-aged children –especially for adolescents– and adding more school-based mental health clinics. Participants also indicated a need for greater training among educators to identify students in crisis and to increase peer supports in schools to assist families in crisis.

Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Programs were frequently mentioned, including the need to establish them in certain areas of the state where they are lacking and grow their collaboration with other programs where they exist today. These programs were also often identified as having capacity issues that lead to long wait times and needing to collaborate better with referring providers.

The need for safe affordable housing and supportive services was stressed among many participants. For example, some explained that with a lack of housing set aside specifically for those with mental health needs, communities might rely on temporary housing, such as hotels and motels, which do not provide the services or care these individuals often require.

Inpatient capacity at hospitals was identified as an ongoing issue, with a need for additional space for long-term stays, residential respite programs, and sub-acute residential facilities. With existing capacity, participants indicated a need to design these environments to feel therapeutic and be more inviting –especially for youth– and to increase the beds serving adolescents. Also cited were issues with commercial insurance reimbursement rates for mental health services being too low, forcing some clinicians to move to private pay only.

This input is now helping to implement new programming and develop resources to enhance New York State's mental health system. Above all, the input is helping guide the agency's ongoing work to increase access, eliminate service gaps and promote equity throughout the state. The attached report starts with results from the statewide virtual sessions and then is broken down by the community that hosted each engagement session and the common themes identified by those who attended.