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Child Welfare Advocates from Across NY Call on State to Address Children’s Behavioral Health Crisis, Stop Cuts to Children’s Services

Youth Suicide on the Rise in NY; Over Half of Children with Mental Health Condition or Substance Use Disorder Who Need Treatment Do Not Receive It

Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids, Elected Officials Demand State Improve Access to Quality and Affordable Behavioral Health Care for Children and Families

ALBANY, NY — Today, elected officials rallied with child welfare advocates and behavioral health providers to call on New York State to ensure all New York children receive the behavioral health care they need and are legally entitled to. Given the rising rate of youth suicide in New York and shortage of mental health care professionals across the state, The Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids and elected officials including Assemblymember Richard Gottfried, State Senator Velmanette Montgomery, State Senator Gustavo Rivera and Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal demand the State puts a stop to all cuts to children’s behavioral health care. They also want to ensure that children in need of behavioral health treatment are not negatively impacted by looming Medicaid cuts. The State must fulfill its commitment to increasing access to behavioral health services for all children and adolescents. Photos from today’s rally are available here.

In New York, over half of children with a mental health condition or substance use disorder who need treatment do not receive it, largely due to rising behavioral health care costs and a dearth of treatment providers. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for New York children age 15-19, and the third leading cause of death for children age 5-15. These alarming figures are growing even faster amongst Black and Latinx children.
New York not only has a moral obligation to serve children — it also has a legal one. Under Federal and State law, commercial insurance companies and Medicaid programs must provide mental health and substance use disorder benefits that are equal to coverage for physical medical treatments. And, yet — despite having insurance — too many parents can’t find, or afford, the services their children desperately need.

The Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids is calling on the State to fulfill its promise to increase access to children’s services through the State’s existing Medicaid redesign plan. New York must start by restoring cuts made earlier this month to Children and Family Treatment and Support Services (CFTSS). CFTSS include crisis intervention, family peer support, rehabilitation from substance use, psychiatric support, and more. The Campaign also calls on the state to reverse recent, and reject future, cuts to Medicaid that directly impact the children’s behavioral health system. Too many families already struggle to access critical services — this is a time to invest in care, not cut it.

“Mental health is critically important for children,” said Assembly Health Committee Chair Richard N. Gottfried. “New York families and children have a right to affordable, quality behavioral health care in their own community when they need it. Yet many travel hundreds of miles to find treatment and many more never receive treatment at all. I’m proud to stand with The Campaign for Healthy Minds and Healthy Kids as we fight to ensure children across New York State can access the mental health care and substance use disorder treatment they need.”

“New York families should be able to access affordable and quality behavioral health care in their communities when they need it. Yet, many travel hundreds of miles to find adequate treatment and, in many cases, do not receive treatment at all. We, as a state, need to step up and tackle this crisis head on. I’m proud to stand with The Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids as we fight to ensure every child in New York access to the mental health care and substance use disorder treatment they urgently need,” said State Senator Gustavo Rivera, Chair of the Senate Health Committee.

Launched at the beginning of 2019 with enhanced rates, CFTSS was designed to serve approximately 200,000 children and yet today only 7,900 receive services through the program, and only 1,000 of those children are newly receiving services. Despite being far from meeting its targets, and despite extensive protest from stakeholders, the State moved ahead with the planned reduction to CFTSS reimbursement rates at the end of 2019, hurting families in need.

“The overwhelming demand for behavioral health services for children is reaching critical levels. Today 1 in 5 children is challenged with emotional, behavioral, or developmental conditions, with disproportionate representation among children of color. SCO serves thousands of New York’s children in shelters, foster care, and early childhood and afterschool programs, and we witness their challenges every day,” said Keith Little, President and CEO of SCO Family of Services. “New York needs to do more, not less, to help all of our children live healthier, happier lives. NY’s children deserve better. Our families deserve better.”
Amanda Davidson, a 21-year-old woman who has been directly impacted by the state’s mental health crisis said, “From a very young age, I started outpatient therapy and medication management for my depression, anxiety and PTSD and to this day continue to do so. However, finding a provider in my community who can give me the care I need has been a constant battle. As a result, I have been lost and helpless. My story is not uncommon. There are thousands of young people in New York like me. Fortunately, our elected officials have the power to change that. Our state’s leaders must take action to ensure all young people who are struggling with a behavioral health issue get the care they need and deserve.”

“New York State is experiencing a crisis in children’s behavioral health care access. Thousands of children and families across the state can’t access critical and sometimes life-saving treatment for mental health and substance use disorder conditions. With countless hoops to jump through and care becoming increasingly expensive, it is unsurprising that more than half of New York children and teens with a behavioral health condition do not receive the care they need. These young people and their families can’t wait — they need access to life-saving services now. The State must do its part to make that a reality,” said Alice Bufkin, Director Of Policy For Child And Adolescent Health at the Citizens’ Committee for Children.

“At JCCA, we witness the vital importance of mental health and substance use treatment services for teens and children every single day. Providing young people in need with behavioral health services such as counseling, psychiatric support, and substance use rehabilitation programs can dramatically improve their future. Often times it actually saves their life. That’s why New York State must restore the enhanced reimbursement rates for Children and Family Treatment and Support Services and put a stop to any future cuts to children’s behavioral health care. If we fail to take action now, sick children will continue to become sick adults and the State will pay the price for decades to come,” said Ron Richter, CEO & Executive Director of JCCA.

“We know what to do to keep kids and families healthy, and we know what happens when we don’t. It’s time to build the services that can deliver the care that works,” said Dr. Jennifer Havens of NYC Health and Hospitals and NYU Langone Health.

“Today we declare war on delayed access to children’s mental health services. Timely access to care and a caring responsible adult in the life of a child facing adversity are the two key elements to developing resiliency and a healthy mind. We urge the Governor and the Legislature to agree to a moratorium on children’s mental health cuts, effective December 31, 2019. This will allow the Children’s MRT plan for expansion of CFTSS, HCBS, Health Home Care management and enrollment in Medicaid Managed Care to be completed. This will allow for improved service capacity to become a reality,” said Andrea Smyth, Executive Director of the New York State Coalition for Children’s Behavioral Health.

“New York’s children and teens are casualties of an under-funded behavioral health system, with suicide as the second-leading cause of death for children ages 15 to 19, and the third-leading cause of death for children 5 to 15. With the backdrop of the Opioid Crisis, 24% of New
York's high school students report being offered, sold, or given illegal drugs on school property, and almost 5% of high school students report the use of heroin at least once. Despite the State's efforts to increase mental health and substance use disorder services to children and families and improve access to care, inadequate funding for services and staffing has led to debilitating consumer costs, long waiting lists and a bottleneck of children unable to access care. Children are New York's future, and it is the responsibility of all of us, including the State, to ensure that all children can access the vital, lifesaving care they need," said Lauri Cole, Executive Director of the NYS Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare.

“Rising Ground is proud to join with our colleagues in an all out effort to improve the quality of life across New York communities by ensuring we have adequate mental health services for children through the Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids. All indicators tell us that investing in children is the best way to invest in our future. Today, New York has a fragmented and overstretched system for delivering quality mental health services to children, especially those from disadvantaged communities. We must change this by ensuring that all children have access to effective care and treatment and urge support for the Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids,” said Alan Mucatel, Executive Director of Rising Ground.

“Children and adolescents with mental health and substance use challenges across New York face significant barriers in accessing critical and sometimes life-saving services. Sadly, half of children with behavioral health concerns do not receive treatment. Young people and their families deserve better. The State must invest resources to ensure children get the lifesaving treatment they need,” said Kimberly Williams, President and CEO of Vibrant Emotional Health.

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ABOUT: The Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids is a statewide coalition of behavioral health providers, advocates, and New York families, joining together to create the public and political will necessary to ensure all children and adolescents in New York receive the high-quality behavioral health services they need.

The Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids members include:

- Citizens' Committee for Children of NY
- Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies
- COFFCA
- Families Together in New York State
- HHC and Kenworthy
- Institute for Community Living
- JCCA
- Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services
- Legal Action Center
- The New School Center for New York City Affairs
BACKGROUND:
The current behavioral health system for children is underdeveloped and unable to respond to the mental health crisis facing New York’s children and youth.

- 54.5% of children ages 3 through 17 with a mental/behavioral condition in New York don’t get the treatment they need, including 55% of young people with major depression.

In New York’s under-resourced children’s behavioral health system, sick kids become sick adults, and the human and financial costs are felt by families, health care systems, and communities more broadly. Conversely, when the State invests in early prevention, intervention and treatment services for children and families, New York sees the long-term benefits in population health and cost savings across special education, juvenile justice programs, preventable foster care placements, homeless services, and the larger health care system.

Despite the devastating and well-documented consequences of unmet mental health needs, New York has historically underinvested in children’s behavioral health. This has led to a poorly articulated system of care that is resource starved, understaffed, overly reliant on crisis management, and unable to fully meet either the basic mental health or the specialty care needs of New York’s children and families. Promised expansion and full integration of services and eligible populations have not kept pace with public commitments or enacted legislation.

New York State must ensure timely access to necessary clinical services; make available a range of evidence-based interventions that have proven effective; and hold accountable the health plans and insurance carriers charged with and paid to deliver behavioral health services to New York’s children.