



TESTIMONY OF
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ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON LABOR
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NORTHERNRIVERS

Good morning, I am William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services headquartered in the Capital Region with offices throughout New York.

I am also speaking today on behalf of the NYS Coalition of Children's Behavioral Health. The Coalition is the premier voice for children's behavioral health service providers and the children and families they serve in New York State. The Coalition works collaboratively with other statewide advocates to support the formation of policy that will best serve the needs of children with mental, emotional, and behavioral health challenges and their families.

About Northern Rivers Family of Services

Northern Rivers Family of Service together is a 1,400-strong workforce of that serves more than 18,000 children and families in 41 upstate counties each year, with \$88 million invested through more than 60 social services and mental health programs. Northern Rivers builds a strong, successful, and healthy future for our children, families, and communities through quality services, collaboration, and innovative leadership. Our program areas include:

- Residential and community-based child welfare and mental health programing including foster care, preventive services, postadoption services, and evidence-based home visiting programs;
- Educational services for 400 students including early learning, pre-K, and Early Head Start, as well as accredited 853 schools (elementary, middle, and high school);

- Community-based mental health and crisis services programs for children and adults including mobile crisis, school-based services, vocational rehabilitation, and licensed outpatient clinic programs; and
- Community-based waiver programs for children and adults including Health Home services.

I would like to thank Latoya Joyner Member of Assembly Chair Committee on Labor and Stefani Zinerman Member of Assembly Chair Subcommittee on Emerging Workforce and members of the Assembly here today.

Northern Rivers Family of Services is strongly committed to assisting in the development and implementation of transformation efforts and recommendations that allow for a robust workforce and career development paths for all New Yorkers.

While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor and the Legislature have taken over the past few years to develop plans and strategies, we believe we can accelerate the progress through meaningful investments to adequately support the human services sector and the children, adults, and families we serve each day.

How Did We Get Here?

There are several critical themes and factors that have contributed to workforce crisis across NYS. Specifically:

- While worker “quit and separation rates” have been continuously increasing over the past decade, they reached an all-time high in 2021 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This mass exodus from the workforce, widely referred to as the

Great Resignation, impacted a wide range of industries. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 4.1 million quits during September 2022, demonstrating a relatively small decrease from the record high of 4.5 million quits initially reached in November 2021.

- The lack of childcare that is affordable and available impacts the ability poor parents to stay in or return to the workforce. Child care deserts and high costs are an incredible barrier to re-entry to the workforce.
- With stagnant wages, frequent turnover and the growing pressure of student loan debt, human services providers face a staffing crunch that leaves them without sufficient resources to meet the needs of the state's most vulnerable populations.
- **The low pay in the human services field is a major factor in the workforce crunch, according to a coalition of the state's human services professional associations. Median wages are slightly more than \$27,000 — which includes part-timers but not most licensed clinical staff, such as nurses — well below the \$40,500 median for all other industries in the state. Average pay for people who provide daily care for clients at group homes and day programs is just \$15-\$17 an hour.**
- Experts have identified an array of factors persuading workers to leave their positions. While some workers are exiting the workforce entirely, due to retirement or familial responsibilities, there is evidence of a large prevalence of reshuffling.

Values for Investing in New York's Workforce

As we undertake a system reform that places an importance and priority on creating a strong workforce in all sectors, we need to recognize how the nonprofit sector supports all industries and employers. One in six workers in NYS work in a nonprofit setting providing vital mental health, child care, child welfare, housing and other services. These providers depend on government funding policies and private fund raising to support their workforce. We need to ensure as we develop policy and budget priorities to create long term incentives.

1. Existing services cannot take a single day off. Therefore, as we “rebuild the plane as we fly it,” we need to be careful not to destabilize existing programs and providers. We must ensure a full continuum of services that has capacity for different and changing needs, ensuring a continuity of care for all and a smooth, transitions, multifaceted evolution to even more impactful services.
2. We need transparent communication with families, stakeholders, providers, and the general public. Change is often difficult, and openness and transparency will reduce
3. We need to work to eliminate system racism and overrepresentation in the reform efforts. It is well-documented that racial disparities exist within the child welfare system. Children of color are also at greater risk of substantiation of reports of child abuse or neglect and out-of-home placement, and spend more time in foster care.
4. We need to ensure we have a well-trained, available workforce to implement new initiatives and strategies. Our child welfare and mental health workforces need substantial investments to increase the number of individuals to carry out the vital

work. These investments need to not only support the addition of new staff, but also the retention of current staff and providers.

5. We need stable funding that encourages innovation, fiscal viability, and incentives for performance and reform. Innovation cannot occur if the threat of cuts or reductions lingers annually. There is no innovation without bold new ideas, and these ideas need to be tested in real time; we need to ensure an adequate period of funding to validate impacts.

Based on the state's effort to date and the above-cited values, we recommend the following:

- 1. Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience.***

In addition to the pandemic, New York's families have faced many additional challenges in past years: the down economy, joblessness, homelessness, opiate/substance abuse, and violence in already plagued communities; for these forgotten New Yorkers, times are still hard. When families are in crisis and children are at risk, New York's not-for-profit network of human services providers are both the first line of defense and the safety net. **The agencies and the women and men in the not-for-profit human services sector are the first responders for at-risk and vulnerable families, children, and individuals.** Throughout the state, not-for-profit human services welfare agencies respond to critical family situations 24/7/365, and our fiscal viability is at risk.

Workforce Support Is a Social Justice Issue

Women make up an astonishing 81% of the human services and direct care workforce in New York. This equates to more than 268,900 skilled, well-educated workers who are paid significantly less than women in New York's private sector, leading to increased staff turnover and jeopardizing the quality-of-service delivery.

Non-for-Profit Organizations Are an Economic Engine

New York's not-for-profit workforce is not only hard working, but also an economic engine. Across New York State, nearly 1 in 7 workers are employed by a not-for-profit organization. These workers contribute billions to the state's economic health; including the payment of income, sales, and property tax. Beyond the direct economic impact, the not-for-profit workforce allows all New Yorkers to stay employed, avert costly medical costs, and educate our young persons. A strong non-for-profit sector, with a viable direct-care staff, creates additional economic growth and allows New York State to attract new business investments and companies.

Specifically, we recommend that the annual COLA be provided the humans services sector at the 8.5% level, consistent with the CPI.

We further recommend staff for preventive services, domestic violence, runaway and homeless youth and children, and adult health home be included in the workforce investment.

Frontline staff, regardless of titles or funding stream, must be supported and shown financial respect to promote system reforms, start-up of new models, and avoidance of higher turnover, program closures, and lower levels of service. The importance of

our organizations and staff cannot be overstated. **Individuals** rely on us to fulfill their dreams of independence. **Families** rely on us to provide their loved ones with the quality care they need to keep them safe and thriving. **Communities** rely on us as economic engines and employers. **Taxpayers** rely on us to support New Yorkers in their home communities, keeping them off the streets and out of expensive institutional settings and emergency rooms. Every New Yorker is impacted by this ongoing crisis—even those who don't yet realize it.

2. *Prioritize financial support to allow employers to provide onsite child care especially during non-traditional hours.*

The lack of affordable child care is a major barrier for employees. Without reliable childcare individuals cannot reenter the workforce. Employers are willing to start on site operations if funding is available. The availability of reliable childcare will provide an incentive to prospective employees to return to work.

3. *As part of a comprehensive workforce support and development investment, the issues of training, professional development, and student loan debt must be addressed.*

We support the inclusion of funding for the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program, the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program, and other innovative approaches that tackle the high level of student debt that those who pursue these careers must assume. These efforts will reduce turnover and support the retention of highly trained staff

Conclusion

In closing, we urge the Legislature to promote and help create a vision and spending plan that ensures that New York state remains committed to the programs that produce positive outcomes. The challenges workers face are as great as they've been in generations. COVID, great resignation and other related impacts have wrought havoc in the lives of millions of families. The policies that will create jobs are those that will increase aggregate demand by making investments that will not only boost employment in the short-term, but lay the foundations for long-term economic growth.

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profit human services organizations and communities that yield positive outcomes for all New Yorkers. We must make New York state a great place to live, a great place to raise a family, and a great place to operate a business.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.