



September 14, 2021

Dear Governor Hochul:

On behalf of the Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids Campaign, congratulations on becoming New York State's 57th Governor. Your record speaks to your understanding of the breadth of behavioral health challenges facing New York's children, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are eager to work with your administration on urgent priorities to support the mental and emotional wellbeing of children in our state.

The Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids Campaign is a statewide coalition of behavioral health providers, advocates, and family organizations, that has joined together to create the public and political will necessary to ensure that all children and adolescents in New York receive the high-quality behavioral health services they need.

The depth of the behavioral health crisis for our state's children is difficult to overstate. Even prior to the pandemic, suicide was the [second leading cause of death](#) among children age 15-19, and [roughly half](#) of children with a behavioral [health condition](#) did not receive treatment or counseling. The State has been rapidly shutting down psychiatric beds and residential treatment facilities for children, but has failed to provide long-promised community-based preventive resources that would significantly reduce the need for higher-intensity inpatient services. Families have long faced a bleak landscape when trying to access behavioral health services for their children, whether they are seeking preventive care or more intensive and comprehensive services for children with more complex needs.

COVID-19 entered this dramatically under-resourced system to devastating effect. [Between March and July of 2020](#), 4,200 children lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19, and approximately 325,000 children were thrust into or near poverty; those numbers have only increased since then. Children have experienced over a year of profound personal loss, economic instability, housing and food insecurity, and unprecedented educational disruption.

In New York and across the country, the pandemic has [led to declines](#) in critical mental health screenings and access to services, even as rates of anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation [have risen](#). Children are experiencing serious emotional distress, yet have been unable to access adequate primary and preventive services, resulting in [stark increases](#) of psychiatric symptomatology and [hospitalizations](#). This has created a perfect storm that is impacting all children, and disproportionately impacting low-income communities and families of color.

Decades of research have shown that trauma in childhood can lead to long-lasting harms to the health and wellbeing of children as they grow older. Research on the study of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) tells us that the traumas of the pandemic are likely to contribute to behavioral health challenges and chronic illness for some children as they become adults. If we do not act now to support our young people through this crisis, the long-term repercussions for a generation of children will be immeasurable.

In light of these challenges, the HMK Campaign is eager to work with your administration to address the behavioral health needs of children and families in the state. Key areas we feel must be addressed **include increasing behavioral health funding for children and families, strengthening the full continuum of behavioral health supports, supporting structural and innovative solutions to workforce**

shortages, and increasing the transparency of children's behavioral health data. Our full recommendations can be found below:

Increase overall behavioral health funding for children and families.

Historically, children's services have received only a fraction of the overall behavioral health investments in the state. For instance, despite comprising 40% of the Medicaid population, only approximately 10% of Medicaid expenses are for children. By failing to invest in children, the State is failing to invest in the preventive services that help address behavioral health needs early, before children grow into adults with more complex needs that require more intense and costly services to address.

It has never been more urgent for New York to shift its paradigm and focus on children and their future. A first step towards this goal is to ensure an increased commitment of the United States Congress and the President to children's behavioral health. New York state leaders should advocate for a permanent commitment that 50% of any future increases in the Community Mental Health Block Grant (CMHBC) and Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment (SAPT) grants go to services for children and families. Within New York's own budget, state leaders should fight to increase the proportion of funding dedicated to the social and emotional wellbeing of children and their families. Only by investing in supports for the youngest New Yorkers can our state break the cycle of behavioral health crisis that turns struggling children into adults without recourse for care or adequate support.

**Strengthen the Full Continuum of Behavioral Supports –
From Prevention to Complex Care**

An effective behavioral health system requires adequate supports for children at all levels of need and across all ages. Unfortunately, New York has significant work to do in order to develop a true continuum of supports for children and their families.

In recent years there have been great strides in developing and implementing models that address the needs of young children and their families and preventing the development of more acute conditions later in life. We believe the state has an opportunity to bring many of these preventive interventions to scale so they are able to meet the needs of more families. Two-generation models like Healthy Steps and H+H's 3-2-1 IMPACT model address the needs of young children and caregivers in tandem. Other models help integrate behavioral health services into early care and education settings. To bring these types of services to more families, New York must expand the network of early childhood mental health providers and interventions in the state by addressing training, rates, billing, and other barriers to increasing capacity.

The State has increasingly recognized the importance of meeting children and families where they are – in homes, communities, and schools. As new federal funding has been allocated to schools, we strongly support enhancements in school-based behavioral health supports, including those that engage community-based organizations in the provision of services. We believe that for these services to be sustainable beyond the end of the federal funding period, we must have transparency in how federal funds are being spent, and a renewed commitment from the State Education Department to increase the portion of its budget dedicated to school-based behavioral health.

Additionally, for years, innovative models based on evidence-based practice have offered children and families that are child welfare or juvenile justice involved intensive and comprehensive services. However, these reach only a fraction of families who need them as they are not included in the children's behavioral health system. We urge your administration to help expand the reach of models such as Multi-Systemic

Therapy, Family Functional Therapy, Brief Strategic Family Therapy, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy to families who need them. Additionally, we believe it is important to identify and address systemic reimbursement, regulatory, and workforce barriers to delivering these services.

On the other end of the continuum are services for children with complex needs. As the state has shut down inpatient and residential beds, it has failed to replace these resources with the necessary service array (including evidence-based models) designed to support children with acute needs and keep them from requiring intensive inpatient care. The result has been a constant churn of children presenting at hospitals and emergency rooms, before being discharged back into communities without the resources to serve them. We urge you to commit to addressing the State's broken system of acute care, as well as investing in the preventive supports that help reduce the number of children in need of more complex care later in life.

Support Structural and Innovative Solutions to Workforce Shortages

Chronic workforce shortages are preventing children and families from receiving urgent behavioral health services. Given the extent of the workforce shortage in New York, the State's primary workforce strategy must be to increase reimbursement rates in Medicaid, commercial insurance and State contracts so that providers receive adequate compensation to enter and remain in the field. Without addressing deeply inadequate wages and benefits, all of the State's workforce efforts will address only a fraction of the need.

Increase the Transparency of Children's Behavioral Health Data

New York cannot create a more effective behavioral health system without first understanding where and how children are struggling to find services. Unfortunately, comprehensive data regarding children's behavioral health needs is challenging to access, creating barriers to accountability and service delivery. New York can begin addressing these barriers by:

- Establishing and promoting more effective metrics to measure children's unmet behavioral health needs.
- Establishing and promoting more effective metrics to determine network adequacy and other parity measures.
- Developing a public-facing, regularly-updated behavioral health dashboard that provides information on the full continuum of children's services and unmet needs, including a longitudinal comparison of services before and after Medicaid redesign.

Thank you for your consideration of these issues, and for your commitment to the children and families of New York.

Respectfully,



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On behalf of the Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids
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