

November 28th, 2023

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,

We, the undersigned, believe that the New York State FY 2025 Enacted Budget should build on your historic commitment to mental health by making investments that ensure every family and youth navigating child-serving systems can access a Family Peer Advocate (FPA) or a Youth Peer Advocate (YPA) throughout their healing journey.

Specifically, the state should:

1. Add \$5.5M in flexible Aid to Localities funding under program code 1650 to allow for flexible approaches to supporting families and young people regardless of their insurance.
2. Increase reimbursement rates across all settings where peers work, including but not limited to CFTSS, to match rate increases as high as 150% for clinical settings also known as the Mental Health Outpatient Treatment and Rehabilitative Services (MHOTRS) Program.

Family Peer Advocates (FPA) and Youth Peer Advocates (YPA) are people with lived experience navigating complex child and youth-serving systems, including mental health, education, developmental disabilities, juvenile justice and child welfare. These uniquely qualified advocates utilize their lived expertise to inspire hope, empower families and young people to find their voice and meet their goals in service planning. Access to peer support can make the difference between a family and youth receiving the care they need or falling through the cracks and likely needing more intensive—and expensive—services down the road.

FPA and YPA operate wherever a family or young person is served: independent family-run agencies, embedded in community-based programs, residential treatment programs, schools, hospitals and even in county systems.

No matter what system they are navigating, families and young people who access this service report positive outcomes. In child welfare, parents with a Family Peer Advocate typically experience higher rates of reunification and lower rates of recidivism. In one study, ~60% of parents working with a parent advocate reunified with their child compared to 25% of parents without one¹. Research shows that parents and young people connected to family and youth peer advocates report feeling less

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235918549_Partnering_with_Parents_Promising_Approaches_to_Improve_Reunification_Outcomes_for_Children_in_Foster_Care

isolated, more connected to community, more likely to initiate and complete treatment, display more efficacy and understanding of a youth's conditions, and experience improvements in youth functioning.²³

When it comes to engaging families, FPAs and YPAs operate under the mantra “whatever it takes.” which means meeting the family where they are by:

- Advocate with youth and families in special education committee hearings, suspension hearings, family court proceedings, department of social service meetings, etc.;
- Promote inclusion and eliminate stigma by hosting social community events, summer camps, family nights, picnics, conferences, and other pro-social activities;
- Consult and support youth and families when services have waitlists or during off-hours when other supports are unavailable.
- Transporting youth and families, while coaching/supporting them, to necessary meetings related to their child's education, family court, social services, and/or juvenile justice appointments. These meetings are vital, however not eligible for Medicaid transport;
- Educate youth and families about their rights, options and training opportunities that are available to them to improve their skills and self-efficacy;
- Refer youth and families to community-based service organizations to assist with the most basic of needs related to safety, food and housing,

Based on current peer salaries, caseloads, and lengths of engagement, we estimate that \$5.5M in State Aid funding could help programs serve a well needed additional four thousand families and young people.

While the support FPAs and YPAs provide is reimbursable service through Medicaid and now Child Health Insurance Plus (CHIP), families with commercial insurance are not covered. Furthermore, these funding sources are typically more restricted to billable appointments and cannot as easily accommodate the innovative engagement approaches these programs traditionally do but are not funded for via Medicaid.

That said, increased Medicaid reimbursement rates under CFTSS are long overdue. The original rate formulation was set absurdly low based on an assumption of volume (200,000 young people) that never materialized due in part because the low rate cannot support a liveable wage for individual advocates while also paying for the additional administrative burden of processing payments through cumbersome Medicaid Managed Care⁴. Furthermore, despite being a home and community based service intended to meet families where they are at, rates are not adjusted for travel time and all the extra engagements needed to support families and young people such as schools systems, family and

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<https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=chsr-bhs-publications>

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<https://www.nasmhpd.org/sites/default/files/Benefits%20of%20Family%20Peer%20Support%20FIC%20SAMS%20Updated.pdf>

⁴ <https://nyscouncil.org/fwd-chp-article/>

others. Therefore, rate increases as high as 150% is certainly warranted; however, the state offered the rate increase only for MHOTRS clinical settings despite the fact that peers working in non-clinical settings perform the same work and many peers do not work in these settings.

We believe every parent and young person needs a peer advocate. Expansion of flexible funding can help fill these crucial gaps so FPAs and YPAs can meet the needs of all families, regardless of their circumstance or insurance coverage. And paying advocates who serve Medicaid-eligible families a liveable wage should not be a barrier for families and youth in need of peer support.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and feel free to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Aspire Hope NY
Families First in Essex County, Inc.
Families On The Move of New York City, Inc.
Families Ties of Westchester
Families Together in New York State
Family Resource Network, Inc.
Long Island Families Together
Northern Regional Center for Independent Living