



December 2nd, 2024

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

Dear Governor Hochul,

We, the undersigned, appreciate your continued leadership and dedication to advancing mental health services in New York State. As we look toward the FY 2026 Enacted Budget, we urge you to strengthen this legacy by expanding access to Family Peer Advocates (FPAs) and Youth Peer Advocates (YPAs) for every family and youth navigating child-serving systems.

Specifically, we recommend the following actions:

1. **Increase Aid to Localities Funding:** Allocate an additional \$5.5 million in flexible Aid to Localities funds under program code 1650 to provide unrestricted support for families and young people, regardless of their insurance status.
2. **Raise Reimbursement Rates Across Peer Support Services:** Align peer support reimbursement rates across all settings, including CFTSS, with the 150% rate increase provided to clinical settings under the Mental Health Outpatient Treatment and Rehabilitative Services (MHOTRS) Program.

FPAs and YPAs are uniquely qualified individuals with lived experience navigating complex child-serving systems, including mental health, education, juvenile justice, and child welfare. Their personal expertise allows them to empower families and youth, providing essential support during difficult times. Peer support can be the critical factor that ensures families receive necessary services, preventing them from falling through the cracks and reducing the need for more intensive and costly interventions later on.

FPAs and YPAs provide their services in diverse settings: independent family-run agencies, community-based programs, schools, hospitals, residential treatment programs, and county systems. Regardless of where they work, families who engage with FPAs and YPAs report overwhelmingly positive outcomes. In child welfare, for example, parents working with an FPA experience higher rates of reunification and lower rates of recidivism. Studies show that approximately 60% of parents with peer support reunify with their children, compared to just 25% without this support.

Moreover, research demonstrates that families working with FPAs and YPAs are more likely to initiate and complete treatment, feel connected to their communities, and see significant improvements in youth outcomes, including functioning and emotional well-being. FPA's and

YPA's are a relatively low cost intervention and early connection to them often prevents emergent issues from resulting in costly crises down the road. And because of the high success rate of engagement, family support is often asked to participate in data and survey collection, often providing more authentic feedback, then would otherwise be collected.

FPAs and YPAs take a “whatever it takes” approach, which includes:

- Not just referring, but supporting families through the process of accessing community resources for basic needs like food, housing, and safety to ensure they receive them.
- Advocating for families in key meetings, such as special education hearings, suspension hearings, family court, and social service meetings;
- Providing transportation to essential meetings, such as those related to education, family court, and juvenile justice, even though these services are not covered by Medicaid;
- Educating families about their rights and available training opportunities to enhance self-advocacy;
- Supporting families during off-hours or in situations where services are unavailable;
- Organizing social events, family nights, and community-building activities to reduce stigma and promote inclusion;

We estimate that an additional \$5.5 million in State Aid could help programs serve over 4,000 more families and youth who currently lack access to these services. While peer support is reimbursable through Medicaid and the Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP), families with commercial insurance are left without coverage- state aid dollars can help fill that gap by supporting families and youth regardless of their insurance. Additionally, state aid dollars help programs serve families who are not yet approved by a Licensed Mental Health Practitioner to ensure families and youth can get support right away. Furthermore, Medicaid reimbursement typically only covers billable activities, limiting the ability of FPAs and YPAs to offer innovative, holistic engagement strategies that are so vital to authentic peer support. This includes workshops and community events that help families and young people connect with their fellow peers for social support and mutual aid.

For CFTSS billable services, the current reimbursement rates for peer services are inadequate and fail to cover the true cost of service delivery. The original rate structure was based on an unrealistic assumption of high service volume, without accounting for the travel time required to deliver services in home and community settings. This time constraint limits the number of billable hours a peer advocate can accomplish in a day leading to workforce shortages and unsustainable wages for advocates. The situation is further compounded by the administrative burdens of Medicaid Managed Care. Crucially, these rates also fail to consider the additional time and effort needed to engage with families across various settings, such as schools and family systems.

The state acknowledged these shortcomings by implementing a 150% rate increase for MHOTRS clinical settings. While we recognize the importance of this increase for difficult and time-consuming home and community-based peer support, we strongly urge you to extend this rate adjustment to peers in non-clinical settings, who provide the exact same services. Without

this adjustment, these peers remain undercompensated, despite the essential nature of their work.

Every family and young person in New York State deserves access to peer advocacy. Expanded flexible funding will help ensure that FPAs and YPAs can meet the needs of all families, regardless of their insurance status or unique circumstances. Furthermore, increased reimbursement rates for CFTSS will provide advocates with a livable wage, ensuring they can continue offering this transformative support to families in need.

Thank you for your consideration of this critical request. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or for additional information.

Respectfully submitted,

Paige Pierce, CEO
Families Together in New York State

Undersigned Organizations:

Action Toward Independence Inc.
AspireHope NY
Astor Services
Behavioral Health Services North
Brooklyn Perinatal Network, Inc.
Catholic Charities of Broome County
Cattaraugus Rehabilitation Center
Child and Family Services of Erie County
Children's Home of Wyoming Conference
CoveCare Center
Families First of Essex County
Families On The Move of NYC, Inc.
Family of Woodstock Inc.
Family Resource Network, Inc.
Family Service Society, Inc.
Family Ties of Westchester
Hillside
JCCA
Long Island Families Together, Inc.
Mental Health Advocates of Western New York
Mental Health Association in Tompkins County
New Directions Youth and Family Services
New York State Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health
Northern Regional Center for Independent Living
Northside Center for Child Development
Recovery Options Made Easy

Rockland Community Services
SCO Family of Services
Together We Can
Vanderheyden Inc.
Villa of Hope
Welllife Network
Youth Action YouthBuild