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Advocates Warn of impending Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Access to Care Emergency

June 9 - Albany Mental health and substance use disorder provider organizations, advocates and lawmakers are warning New Yorkers of an impending crisis that could dramatically reduce access to mental health and substance use disorder services across New York unless a bill currently awaiting a full house vote in the NYS Senate is passed before the end of the legislative session.

S.6431/A7405-A, a bill sponsored by Senator Samra Brouk, Chair of the Senate Mental Health Committee and Assembly Member Harry Bronson has passed the Assembly and awaits final action in the Senate. The bill would permit community-based mental health and substance use disorder provider organizations to continue to provide life-saving care to tens of thousands of New Yorkers seeking affordable, high quality services from the public mental hygiene system is at risk. Specifically, the bill would extend by one year an exemption granted to both the state workforce as well as community-based agencies, from having to comply with a law that governs who can provide services, including clinical treatment services, to New Yorkers seeking assistance from the public mental hygiene system.

Advocates state that the law, first passed in 2002, never contemplated the unique workforce challenges that have always faced the public mental hygiene system where salaries are extremely low and where the work is often emotionally draining. At present, there is a workforce crisis, with staff vacancies are at an all-time high, leaving these organizations without the human resources needed to meet current demand for care. Inaction on this issue will exacerbate this already impossible situation.

"As chair of the Senate Mental Health Committee, I am focused on making high-quality mental health care services easily accessible to every New Yorker. One of the greatest challenges we face in this mission is capacity, a problem that has been worsened by the surge of demand due to COVID-19. Our community-based service providers have been providing life-saving treatment to our friends, family and neighbors for almost two decades, and it is incumbent upon us to ensure this bill passes in the coming days so they may continue to serve our communities at a time when we need them most," said Senator Samra Brouk

"A crisis is looming. A mental health crisis which is getting even worse due to COVID-19 where the demand for services far outreaches the workforce available. But this is not just a workforce issue. This crisis is about our children, it's about our families, it's about our communities. Quality, reliable behavioral healthcare and addiction services are nearly impossible to access for residents of most counties in New York State. Forty of New York's 62 counties (65%) are counties designated as mental health shortage areas. Overall, more than three million people in the State live in designated Federal and/or State mental health shortage areas. We must meet this crisis head-on for our children and families with passage of this legislation," said Assemblymember Harry Bronson

"Nonprofits providing behavioral health services are experiencing a workforce crisis unlike any other. Samaritan Daytop Village, which is one of the largest providers of health and human services in the state of New York, has been actively recruiting to fill positions since the start of the pandemic. Yet, as of today, we still have more than 200 positions that remain vacant," said Mitchell Netburn, President & CEO of Samaritan Daytop Village. "Without the ability to employ mental health professionals who hold an exemption, we would be challenged to fulfill the continuum of care. Their absence would devastate the mental healthcare system in New York."

"Recruitment and retention of mental health practitioners is at a never-before-seen crisis. The Senate must enact a short extension of the practice exemption so the last details of implementation can be taken care of without interruption to the overburdened mental healthcare delivery system. A system that is highly regulated and includes psychiatric supervision," said Health I. Bloch, President and CEO of Andrus.

"The pandemic has negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for service for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders. Yet due to bureaucratic infighting and the lack of understanding of how mental health professionals are educated and prepared to work with clients, thousands of mental health professionals will lose their ability to provide services thereby creating a further crisis in obtaining vital services. There are critical workforce shortages in the public mental health and substance use disorder systems of care across New York State," said Bill Gettman, CEO, Northern Rivers Family of Services.

"The licensure exemption that is set to expire on June 24, 2021 requires some administrative infrastructure that is not yet supported by state agency or the State Education Department. Due to that circumstance, we support the one-year continuation of the exemption as included in S.6431 (Brouk). The short extension will ensure that the thousands of individuals who need mental health and addiction treatment and care might be served instead of remaining endlessly on waiting lists because of staffing shortages which currently exist and will get worse if the extension is not enacted," said Andrea Smyth, Executive Director, NYS Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health.

"These agencies are drowning due to workforce shortages the depths of which we could never have imagined. Senators, we ask that you stand behind our sector and pass the one-year extender bill so we can continue to serve New Yorkers who desperately need our care," said Lauri Cole, Executive Director of the NYS Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare.

With just one day left in the regularly scheduled legislative session, stakeholders from across the state are calling on Senate Leadership to ensure passage of S6431, a bill that will ensure these essential services are not completely destabilized for New Yorkers.

The following organizations have signed on in support of passage of S.6431 before the end of the regularly scheduled 2021 legislative session:

NYS Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, Lauri Cole, Executive Director
NYS Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health, Andrea Smyth, Executive Director
The Coalition for Behavioral Health, Amy Dorin, CEO & President
New York Association of Alcoholism and Substance Use Providers, John Coppola, Executive Director
Northern Rivers Family of Services, William Gettman, CEO
Association of Addiction Recovery Care Homes of NYS, Roger Glasgow, Chair
Central New York Alcoholism and Drug Association, James Scordo, Chair
Coalition for Community Services, Seep Varma, Chair
Coalition of Medication-Assisted Treatment Providers and Advocates, Allegra Schorr, President
Consortium of Alcohol & Substance Abuse Services, Patrick Seche and Jennifer Faringer, Chairs
Council on Addictions of NYS, Angela Sullivan, Chair
Nassau Alliance for Addiction Services, Patricia Hincken, Chair
North Country Behavioral Health Network, Barry E. Brogan, Executive Director
Northern Tier Providers Coalition, Larry Calkins and Bill Bowman, Co-Chairs
Quality Consortium of Suffolk County, Kym Laube, Chair
Queens Consortium on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, Beth Covelli, Chair
Recovery Net, Jennifer Carlson, Chair
Therapeutic Communities Association of New York, Norwig Debye-Saxinger, Exec. Director
Westchester/Putnam Coalition of Alcoholism & Substance Abuse Programs, Ellen Morehouse, Chair
Western NY Chemical Dependency Consortium, Matthew Smith, Chair