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Addressing NY's youth mental health crisis starts with an investment in our workforce

3-minute read

Samra G. Brouk and Aileen M. Gunther Special to the USA TODAY Network

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The number of children and teens grappling with severe mental health needs in New York is skyrocketing while access to care stagnates. Families with children across the state face wait times that can range from weeks to over a year before getting access to treatment.

We have to address this issue as the life and death crisis that it is. Death by suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth age 15-19 in New York. Too often, children have to get really sick to get help, but an overwhelmed system means that care ends up being delivered in emergency rooms and hospitals, rather than through the ongoing, high-quality outpatient services children need to be and stay healthy.

Gov. Kathy Hochul is right to prioritize the state's mental health needs as a key issue in her fiscal year 2025 executive budget. Her commitment to overhauling New York's mental health care system has come with sizable capital enhancements and programmatic investments statewide in last year's budget and in this year's proposed budget. But far more needs to be done to ensure timely access and pay for the true cost of providing high quality care to every child.

According to a study from Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids, the administration must invest \$195 million in the FY 2025 state budget to address severe challenges that have undercut the healthcare system's ability to meet the behavioral health needs of children statewide. Data shows there's an urgent need for targeted investments to improve the system's stability and service access through a focus on increasing the capacity of care providers.

Providing quality mental health care to children — particularly those with complex needs — requires close collaboration between parents and psychiatrists, therapists, care coordinators and social workers, insurers, and so many others. The lack of access to adequate mental health

care that so many New York families with children face is exacerbated by a shrinking workforce.

To start solving these systemic problems, we must prioritize four key steps. First, we must amend children's clinic rates to reflect the expertise needed and complexity of serving children and families. Second, we must immediately increase pay for providers across the board to recognize the time spent coordinating services and care with a growing array of care managers and remediate a worker shortage driven by low wages. Third, the system's resilience necessitates adjusting outpatient rates annually to keep pace with inflation to help maintain the children's behavioral health delivery system over the long term. And finally, we have to increase funding for home and community-based services to address the gap between anticipated volume and actual number of children served.

We stand at a turning point. Now is the time to be bold and to address skyrocketing unmet mental health issues for New York's youth and children. We call on the governor to seize this opportunity to invest \$195 million in the outpatient mental health system and to lay the foundation for healthier and more resilient future generations of New Yorkers. If these reforms are enacted, New York's outpatient mental health system could add 1,300 additional practitioners and serve over 26,000 additional children.

Without these commitments in outpatient behavioral health services, the workforce will continue to disappear, the capacity to care for children will continue to shrink, and New York's children will sit on longer waitlists – or risk going entirely without getting life-saving care.

State Sen. Samra G. Brouk represents the 55th Senate District and serves as chair of the Senate Committee on Mental Health. Assemblywoman Aileen M. Gunther represents the 100th Assembly District and serves as chair of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health.