

Good morning,

Two weeks ago, we circulated a notice to all members regarding an upcoming Webinar (held on 2/6) hosted by the Cornell Industrial Labor Relations School and the Public Employees Federation (PEF) on the topic of privatization and its impact on the NYS mental health workforce. In case you missed it, the Report is linked in the content below and I have pasted a link (below) that allows you to watch the Webinar.

In my opinion, Cornell ILR conducted some research, gathered some data and used it to make specious arguments and damaging conclusions about privatization that does not pass the smell test. And, despite the immediate focus of PEF advocacy on the loss of jobs in the state hospital system, the message could not be clearer - - privatization of services has led to a degradation in wages and quality of care for the mental health workforce.

If you have the time, please watch the Webinar and let me know if you are interested in working with your NYS Council colleagues on a response to the Report and to the release of this information to the public.

You can view the entire webinar [here](#).

[Click here to view the full report.](#)

(Below from the Cornell ILR Institute and its Worker Institute:

PEF partners with Cornell ILR School to discuss report about the impact of privatization on New York's mental health workforce

By KATE STICKLES

February 14, 2025 — President Wayne Spence and Vice President Randi DiAntonio made the case against austerity and privatization of wages and employment of New York’s public mental health workforce during a webinar hosted by The Worker Institute and ILR School at Cornell University on Feb. 6.

“In the last decade, New York state mental health agencies have outsourced work traditionally done by public sector employees to private sector contractors,” said Patricia Campos-Medina, the executive director of The Worker Institute. “In this webinar, we will discuss how changes in the investment in this workforce have impacted the quality of mental health care provided to New York state residents.”

The Institute’s director of research presented the key findings of a report that focused on the mental health care sector, exploring the changes in the size of the mental health care workforce over time, changes in the composition of that workforce by employer type, and worker demographics. The study also delved into wages by employer type.

“I’m not surprised by some of the data,” President Spence said. “I knew, as PEF President since 2015, under the Cuomo administration, public sector jobs in mental health were drastically cut. What was surprising to me was the impact on African Americans. I didn’t expect to see such a dramatic impact on those workers.”

Between 2013 and 2023, the state lost 1,600 employees at the Office of Mental Health, he said, and facilities like Riker’s Island,

which aren't meant to be in the mental health business, are being forced into that role.

PEF fought against the closure of Western New York Children's Psychiatric Center and Rockland Psychiatric Center – both campaigns highlighting the need for data to back up the union's arguments.

Vice President Randi DiAntonio spoke about how reviving mental healthcare statewide is a key goal of the union's Fund Our Future for a Thriving New York campaign.

“The purpose of this campaign was not to focus on the jobs that we do, but on the services that are critical to New Yorkers, especially vulnerable New Yorkers,” she said. “When we looked at what we were seeing, this undercutting of the workforce, we realized it had ramifications that really magnified through the course of COVID-19.”

DiAntonio discussed the impact of losing thousands of inpatient psychiatric beds, the lack of job security and good benefits and wages for private sector employees, and how it all adds up to gaps in continuity of care.

“This study shows many communities were harmed by the transformation,” she said. “From just a civil service standpoint, these jobs are legs up to the middle class. Civil service jobs allow for advancement. This data has helped us make the case that these jobs are not just about the employees, but also about the impact on services.”

The union is already hard at work helping shape the State's 2025 budget, pushing for additional forensic beds and staff at mental health agencies, as well as more Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams, and further changes to Tier 6 of the pension plan, to improve staff recruitment and retention.

That's why partnerships with legislators and agency commissioners are so vital.

Sen. Robert Jackson, a former PEF member himself who chairs the Senate's Civil Service & Pension Committee, said this is not just a crisis, it's also a political failure that is hurting communities all over the state.

"You watch the news, you listen to the radio, and you see this person is being pushed on the train tracks without any warning," he said.

"People are basically having some mental health issues, and they are around the communities without the help that they need.

Austerity is a choice. Privatization is a choice. And both are failing the people who need the services the most."

Sen. Jackson heralded state-operated mental health services as the most effective at delivering care.

"Positions in state psychiatric centers, hospitals, community clinics, and crisis response teams have been cut and outsourced to private entities," he said. "And this shift has led to lower wages.

Precarious employment conditions for health professionals who once had job security and union representation now face temporary contracts."

Sen. Samra Brouk, chair of the Senate Mental Health Committee, said additional data will be key as she and Senator Jackson push for change.

“Anecdotes cannot change policy alone,” she said. “So, seeing data, irrefutable data around trends that have occurred because of privatization, because of divestment from our mental health sector, from our public sector here in New York, is absolutely crucial so that we can be thoughtful and deliberate about how we move forward.”

Sen. Brouk added it was the wrong time to be cutting services.

“It seemed so contradictory to me to be cutting the mental health budget in the midst of not just the COVID pandemic, but a mental health crisis,” she said. “The truth is government is there to serve. We are there to serve regardless of profit, regardless of margin. When you take away those supports, when you close facilities, when you don’t invest in that workforce, you end up with large groups of people who will not be served.”

Aspiring to work toward a solution, Department of Civil Service Commissioner Timothy Hogue said his agency aims to bolster the ranks of the state workforce and has seen some success.

“Building the New York State workforce has been one of Governor Hochul’s top priorities,” he said. “Right along with making sure that mental health was something that she continued to invest in and fight for.”

Commissioner Hogue talked about the New York Hiring for Emergency Limited Placement Statewide (NY HELPS) program, and

said it has brought more than 22,500 individuals into State service, some of whom work in the mental health sector.

“These positions are a great pathway into the middle class and they support the economy,” he said. “I’m excited about the direction we are going. I agree that mental health is a priority.”