

NJAMHAA Advocates for Mental Health and Substance Use Treatment in State Budget

NJAMHAA CEO Debra L. Wentz, Ph.D. testified before the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee in Paramus about the needs of the non-profit mental health and substance use treatment system and the 500,000 children and adults it serves.

Speaking about the value of individual lives touched by the mental health and substance use treatment system, Dr. Wentz depicted the stories of several individuals who had achieved recovery from their disorders through treatment. Dr. Wentz thanked Governor Christie and the State Legislature for "recognizing the value of the services our members provide by maintaining mental health and substance use treatment funding levels and for increasing funding for Drug Court treatment services, Involuntary Outpatient Commitment and the Children's System of Care."

Noting that the roles of providers are growing as they are addressing the physical healthcare needs of the people they serve at a time when demand is significantly increasing from Medicaid Expansion and the Health Insurance Marketplaces coming online, Dr. Wentz said, "It cannot be overstated that reimbursement rates under a fee for service system must not only be adequate to ensure the continued viability of community based organizations, but must also support their growth to meet increased demand. This is true for Medicaid rates as well, which are among the lowest in the nation, and must be increased to support the delivery of services to children and adults."

Additionally, the issue of workforce development and employee retention was addressed. As there are significant wage disparities between the private sector and the non-profit system, a 3 percent Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) is being requested. Underscoring that community providers save New Jersey taxpayers \$1 billion a year, Dr. Wentz explained that savings is dependent on "a workforce that has become increasingly difficult to recruit and maintain due largely to the ever-widening compensation gap between our providers and the state. The value of the non-profit community based provider system as an economic engine should not be lost to a lack of recognition of the value of its workforce."

Responding to Dr. Wentz's testimony, Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, Senator Paul A. Sarlo (D-36) said, "We recognize that people with mental health disorders face stigma and many times they also have substance use issues. We are finally moving beyond that stigma and it is incumbent on us to ensure that services are there for people with mental health and substance use issues so they can get treatment and that treatment needs to be paid an adequate rate."

NJAMHAA member Earl Lipphardt, Senior Director at Integrity, Inc. spoke to the benefits of treatment over incarceration. Lipphardt spoke of an individual named Jerry who at 43 years of age (in the 1980s) entered long-term residential (LTR) treatment at Integrity. Jerry completed 244 days of LTR followed by 272 days in a half-way house, finishing with 245 days of outpatient treatment. The total cost would be slightly over \$45,000 for Jerry's treatment in today's standards. "Jerry was clean and in recovery for 26 years following those treatments. He was always employed and helped thousands of others to recover," Lipphardt said. He finished with asking the committee, "When you consider the FY 2015 Budget...commit funding to access to the entire treatment continuum for all, not just those mandated by the criminal justice system."

Several other advocates testified about substance use and mental health issues, as well as housing, including:

* Gail Levinson, Executive Director of the Supportive Housing Association (SHA), testified about the need to increase access to affordable housing via establishing new affordable housing, rental vouchers and other services, which help individuals live independently. Levinson noted that "Rental Vouchers have declined by over 1,000 in the past year."

* Mariel Harrison, Young People in Recovery, spoke of the epidemic of substance use, particularly opiates. She noted that "substance use is a public health issue, not a moral failing and only 2 percent of the \$3.8 billion cost of substance use goes to treatment and prevention."

* Ed Martone from the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence spoke on the fact that less than 10 percent of people who want treatment actually receive it. Martone reinforced that New Jersey should promote "healthcare approaches to substance use."