



The testimony of  
The Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies, Inc.

before the  
New York City Council  
Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation  
Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Disability Services

Delivered by  
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Chairwoman Lopez and Committee members, I bring greetings. I am pleased to be here before the City Council's new full committee to talk about pressing mental health concerns. We congratulate you on your appointment to the Chair. Your long involvement in mental health policy and service delivery makes you keenly positioned to understand our issues and to be a champion of consumers, families and providers of mental health services.

My name is Philip A. Saperia and I am the Executive Director of The Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies. The Coalition is the umbrella advocacy organization of New York City's mental health community, representing more than 100 not-for-profit, community-based providers of mental health services. Collectively, more than 500,000 clients are served by our members in all five boroughs and virtually every neighborhood in our very diverse New York City.

These are tough times for community mental health. Even if September 11 has been an ordinary day, the circumstances facing our sector would have been extraordinary enough. The infrastructure that supports the fragile web of services has slowly been crumbling and as a result of chronic under-funding, our staff turnover rates average as high as 54%. Of those who leave, as many as 3 of 4 have been with their agency longer than a year. This means that the most experienced, best qualified people are leaving the community mental health sector. The loss of these experienced staff is difficult for agencies, but the most significant impact is on those who depend on them for care. Studies consistently show that the bond between care givers and consumers is vital to full rehabilitation and recovery. Turnover this high destroys the trust that is so important for recovery. Such turnover impedes consumer access to care and it is bad for the quality of care.

The Council's oversight of the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Alcoholism Services (DMH) has always been important, but now more than ever, this role is especially vital. The soon to be realized merger of DMH with the Department of Health has created a new and uncertain reality for the mental health community. This merger creates a risk that the needs of the much smaller mental health community will be utterly overwhelmed by the louder voice greater clout of the health sector. We are asking the Committee to be diligent in its oversight functions. The Charter revision provides only for two reviews, at year two and at year four, by the Mayor's Office of Operations. With all the respect and patience due the new Administration, we think the City Council must be watchdog for the public and for the community mental health sector as this complex and potentially thorny merger goes forward.

Regarding City contracts, we are calling upon this committee to work with your Council colleagues and the Mayor's office to streamline procedures in the Mayor's Office of Contracts so that money is put into services in an expedited and efficient manner. We are asking you be an enemy of red tape and unnecessary bureaucracy in the contracting process.

Historically, the Council has been a strong supporter of mental health issues. But ever more insistently, the mental health needs of New Yorkers need special attention. From counseling for victims of domestic violence, to mental health service for HIV+ citizens, to services for under-served minority communities, to services for troubled children and youth, the City Council has been at the forefront of timely and important issues facing New Yorkers. With your exemplary history of promoting community mental health, we have every confidence that you will continue to push for these and other necessary services.

Finally, the single biggest cause of our huge rates of staff turnover is stagnant contract rates and the rising cost of doing business. In the last ten years, the community mental health sector has received almost no increase while the consumer price index has risen by 39%. Although we regularly plead our case in Albany, we need you to be our strong voice and advocate. We ask you to use the bully pulpit of your position to bring the message to Albany that community mental health needs help to survive.

Thank you Chairwoman Lopez. Again, we congratulate you on your appointment as chair of the Mental Health committee. We eagerly look forward to working closely with you.