



Testimony of
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At the Town Hall Meeting of
Governor Paterson's Cabinet on Economic Security
York College

on Economic Security for Youth with Emotional Disturbance
and Mental Illness

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Thank you for affording us the opportunity to testify before Governor Paterson's Economic Security Cabinet at today's town hall meeting. My name is Marc Kutner, and I am the Director of Special Initiatives at the Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies' Center for Rehabilitation and Recovery.

The Coalition is the umbrella advocacy organization of New York's behavioral health community, representing 120 nonprofit community-based mental health and substance abuse agencies in every locality of New York City and surrounding areas. Our members comprise a broad cross section of service providers – all sizes from very small to very large; treatment and rehabilitation oriented; outpatient and residential; focused on linguistically and culturally specific populations and on many other special-needs – serving more than 350,000 individuals each day in the five boroughs of New York City and its environs. Our Center for Rehabilitation and Recovery provides consultation to New York City's community behavioral health providers through expert training, technical assistance, information dissemination and special projects. Funded primarily by the New York State Office of Mental Health, The Center guides and promotes systemic change toward the integration of rehabilitation and recovery-enhancing services within New York City's behavioral health care sector.

We would like to begin by welcoming the coordinated interagency approach that The Cabinet has taken toward ensuring economic stability and prosperity for New Yorkers. As our State continues to respond to the current period of economic slowdown and mounting financial pressures affecting us all, we must remain especially attentive to the needs of New Yorkers most vulnerable to the adverse circumstances associated with these difficult times. Among

those most at risk and far too often overlooked, are adolescents and young adults living with emotional disturbance, mental illness and other behavioral health concerns.

Consistent with The Cabinet's objective to establish educational and workforce development opportunities for a highly competitive economy, the one in six New York City adolescents, approximately 170,000 people, currently disconnected from school or employment must be taken into account when planning for our economic future. Further, we must acknowledge and address the fact that 90,000 adolescents and young adults live with serious emotional disturbance and serious mental illness in New York City. Within this context, it is important to highlight that the New York City public school system serves over 40,000 students classified as emotionally disturbed. These students are at high risk of not being able to meet academic expectations, and 75% of students with this disturbance are likely to drop out of high school.

We need to urgently ponder the statistics. These adolescents are at great risk of not attaining an education that prepares them for well-paying jobs as adults. Insufficiently funded and poorly integrated public mental health and educational systems that do not address their complex needs exacerbate the situation. If we fail to act now, we are in essence endorsing the status quo where only 15 percent of New York's working age adults with mental illness are employed: the lowest workforce participation rate across all disability groups.

Through our Youth Initiative, a multi-year program designed to enhance the staff competencies of mental health providers serving adolescents with emotional disturbance, The Center provides training and consultation grounded in nationally recognized, evidence-

based models that help to better prepare youth to achieve educational and employment goals. In conjunction with training and technical assistance, The Center established an interdisciplinary Work Group that greatly informed our comprehensive report, *A Chance for Change: Supporting Youth in Transition in New York City*, detailing 17 concrete recommendations for improved service delivery and inter-agency collaboration. We have made the executive summary available to you today. Building upon many of the recommendations, The Center convened a conference in June, 2008 that sought to address the current crisis facing a growing number of youth, disconnected from school and deprived of the academic foundation necessary to their survival. Experts from mental health, education, criminal justice, and local and state government identified barriers to academic performance and laid out the beginnings of a framework for change. We urge The Cabinet to consider these recommendations within the context of its statewide initiatives designed to increase educational and employment opportunities for all New Yorkers.

Meaningful workforce participation and earning a living wage is exceedingly difficult to attain without pre-requisite literacy skills and at least a high school diploma. Many adolescents and young adults with emotional disturbance and mental illness are dramatically lacking in these areas. It is imperative that we improve the educational level of youth with emotional disturbance if we are to create a more inclusive and capable workforce in the years ahead. To that end, we encourage the establishment of stronger programmatic relationships between continuing education, training programs including job readiness, mental health agencies, VESID, and high schools so that students with a broad range of emotional and cognitive challenges can be better prepared for the world of work. The Coalition and its

member agencies have taken steps in this direction by bringing together behavioral health providers and New York City Department of Education leadership to discuss these issues. Member agencies operate numerous innovative programs for youth addressing long-standing systemic and programmatic barriers. For example, The Children's Aid Society's Generation Center, and the multiple Adolescent Skills Centers emphasizing mental health, educational, and employment needs. Flexible funding mechanisms must be utilized to support these efforts. We must also find ways to reach out to young people when they are not in school or engaged with social service systems. We must think about more than just jobs, we need to think about careers.

While City Hall is now making admirable efforts to reach out to the tens of thousands of students who are seriously behind in their school credits and at risk of dropping out, more needs to be done to analyze the factors of racism and other group prejudices, the strategies used by the Department of Education to manage behavioral problems in students, the impact of testing, the quality of assessment of learning disabilities, and the relationship between trauma and cognition. Only then can we use mental health treatment effectively to support youth who are at risk of or who have already dropped out of school.

We would also like to acknowledge some of the inroads State government has made toward addressing the needs of disconnected youth with and without behavioral health concerns. As supporters of the Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce whose representatives have testified before you, we too applaud the formation of the disconnected youth working group of the Governor's Children's Cabinet. We are hopeful that the Economic Security Cabinet will

collaborate with this working group toward establishing shared priorities and a coordinated approach to developing and funding programs that support disconnected youth, particularly those living with emotional disturbance and mental illness.

In addition to the ongoing efforts undertaken by the Governor's Economic Security and Children's Cabinets, we applaud the complimentary work of The New York State Office of Mental Health under the leadership of Commissioner Hogan toward identifying workforce development solutions for people with mental illness. We urge the Economic Security Cabinet to work closely with Commissioner Hogan and OMH in its work going forward.

Members of The Cabinet, we respectfully ask you to consider these compelling issues and corresponding recommendations as you continue to fulfill your mission. On behalf of the 120 member agencies of The Coalition, and the greater community-based mental health provider community, thank you for your time today. I am available to answer any questions you may have.