May X, 2020

Dear Senator/Assembly member:

I/we write to urge you to oppose any cuts to the NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports and, instead, fortify addiction prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery programs as they face a dramatic increase in demand for services directly attributable to the COVID-19 public health emergency and increasing overdose and addiction.

The stakes could not be higher. Any funding cuts will lead to decreased staffing and program closures, resulting in more preventable overdoses and overdose deaths, greater use of expensive hospital care, increased arrest and incarceration costs, and less access to life saving and deficit reducing substance use disorders services.

According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, every 1% rise in unemployment results in a 3.5% increase in addiction. Recent spikes in overdose in Suffolk County, Erie County, and other counties reflect this alarming trend. With unemployment now at levels unseen since the Great Depression, businesses shuttered, and millions of New Yorkers in an extended lockdown, the conditions are in place for an influx of people needing substance use disorders prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery services. These services are vital for communities to prevent further increases in alcohol use, the continued spiking in the number of overdoses and overdose deaths, and the danger of relapse for people in recovery.

With a ballooning multi-billion-dollar budget deficit, decision-makers are on a hunt for cost savings and efficiencies. They should look no further. Addiction prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery programs have proven their ability to save millions by reducing costs associated with unnecessary hospitalizations, arrests and incarceration, homelessness, domestic violence, unemployment and more. 82% of NYS Medicaid dollars spent on unnecessary readmissions to hospitals are for individuals who have untreated substance use and mental health disorders. Most of these re-hospitalizations are for medical conditions that go ignored when people are in the midst of an untreated addiction or mental health issue

A recent report from the Society of Actuaries shows the unbelievably high costs nationally (over $660 billion) of the opioid epidemic on the private sector and government, demonstrating the incredible societal costs of this epidemic that go well beyond expenditures for substance use disorder interventions. A recent study by the Fiscal Policy Institute found that the economic impact of the opioid epidemic on Long Island alone was a staggering $8.2 billion. The NYS Department of Health found that approximately 60% of the total cost of care for Medicaid beneficiaries in New York State is spent on individuals with an untreated substance use or mental health disorder.

Advocates have heeded the advice of administration officials including Governor Cuomo, Lt. Governor Kathy Hochul, and OASAS Commissioner Arlene Gonzalez-Sanchez to advocate at the federal level. The New York Association of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Providers (ASAP) has been in regular contact with members of Congress and federal officials. We have communicated that funding must be included in the Stimulus IV package to help substance use and mental health disorders services. If we and advocates from across the country are successful, we ask for your commitment to ensure that federal funds are not used to supplant funds in the budget passed by the legislature.

Investing in the community-based substance use and mental health disorder service delivery system will help individuals access life-saving services, improve health outcomes, and drive down significant costs for New York State during this uncertain time. With an increase in alcohol and drug use, overdose, suicide, and mental health issues, now is the time to increase NOT decrease funding.

ASAP has promised to assist the legislature in identifying solutions that address the epidemic of overdose and addiction that is spiking and continues to cause alarming numbers of deaths and helps to simultaneously reduce the state’s deficit. It is critical that we not step over dollars to find pennies while attempting to solve New York’s fiscal crisis.

Sincerely,

John Smith