



Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction

Oversight – The State of NYC’s Health and Plans to Address the Mental Health Crisis February 25, 2022

Introduction and thanks:

My name is Thea Jandzio, and I am the Vice President of Business Development and Program Services at Volunteers of America-Greater New York. We are the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. (VOA). I would like to thank Chair Lee and the members of this Committee for the opportunity to delivery my testimony.

About Us:

VOA-Greater New York is an anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in Greater New York by 2050. As one of the largest providers of services to families and individuals experiencing homelessness in the Greater New York area, we deliver services to more than 11,000 adults and children annually through 66 programs in NYC, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester. We are also an award-winning non-profit developer of affordable and supportive housing.

Our programs include four shelters where data indicates at least 30-40% of clients report having a mental health disorder. We also have a number of additional housing programs that offer a range of on-site services for residents who experience persistent mental and behavioral health issues, including frequent hospitalizations, serious physical health diagnoses, and substance use issues. We thank the Council for its support of our programs. And we speak from experience when we discuss the state of the City’s mental health services.

Testimony:

Like many other providers, VOA-GNY has seen a significant spike in clients presenting with mental health needs over the past several years. There are a number of issues that make the current mental health crisis in the City so acute. For one, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing issues with the lack of availability of inpatient psychiatric beds in our hospital system. Prior to the pandemic, the mental health system was already losing vital beds, which are a temporary respite but critical aspect of treatment. During the pandemic, the problem worsened, as beds understandably had to be used to meet the immediate public health emergency.

This is one example that speaks to the need of a collaborative community response to societal mental health issues. Despite all efforts and attention to this crisis over the years, there remains a need for a streamlined systematic approach so that street outreach teams, law enforcement, mental health advocates, hospital systems, and providers like VOA-GNY can work in concert to see a client through psychiatric crises to stability to recovery. In too many ways, our current system is fragmented, siloed and fails to address the underlying needs of individuals living in our communities.

Our trained and compassionate staff work to meet the clients' needs and work toward lasting solutions that break the "revolving door" effect that too often is the result of intervention at every level. There are steps that can be taken that would greatly improve our ability to do that job effectively. First, is to follow the recommendations of the Just Pay campaign and end the poverty wages paid to nonprofit human service workers across the City. Organizations like ours deal with high levels of staffing vacancies, turnover and morale issues due to low pay rates for employees, which are set by government and which we are powerless to change. If this Council and Administration sees fixing our mental health crisis as a serious priority, this is a step that cannot be ignored.

Second, like many organizations working in this space, we are very concerned at planned budget cuts to agencies such as DHS, HPD, HRA and MOCS, which all have a role to play in addressing this crisis and in supporting organizations like ours. Stable and permanent affordable housing is key in addressing mental health issues as it is a proven stabilizing force; meanwhile, homelessness and housing insecurity exacerbate mental health issues for those suffering from a variety of diagnosis. Seriousness about tackling this crisis means bolstering the work of agencies, not reducing their footprint and leaving staffing vacancies unfilled.

Closing and thanks:

On behalf of VOA-Greater New York, I would again like to thank the Chair and this Committee for providing us with a platform to discuss the mental health crisis. We stand ready to be a partner with this Council as it moves forward.

Respectfully submitted by:

Volunteers of America - Greater New York

135 West 50th Street, 9th Floor

New York, NY 10020