



The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NY State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

We are writing to urge you to identify community based mental health and substance use staff as essential frontline workers as you work to finalize a plan for distribution of COVID-19 vaccines for New Yorkers. These staff are essential healthcare workers who are at a high risk for COVID-19 due to their job, similar to those who work in nursing homes. Prioritizing these staff for the vaccine will significantly mitigate the risk to both staff and clients served in mental health and substance use settings, and put our system of care on a path that allows us to best serve the complex needs of our clients.

The community provider organizations we represent and the essential workers they employ deliver critical services to the vast majority of New Yorkers – both children and adults - who are diagnosed with a serious mental health or substance use condition. Many of these individuals have at least one co-morbid condition such as COPD, heart disease, diabetes, Hepatitis B or a serious respiratory condition that puts them at great risk for serious complications should they contract the virus.

A significant percentage of the individuals we employ and who work with our clients are persons of color who live in communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Many live at or close to the poverty line and reside in housing situations where families are doubled up. Our staff often have two or sometimes three jobs that do not permit them to work from home in order to minimize exposure to the virus. The staff working in our congregate settings as well as those working in ambulatory, community and home settings where face-to-face contact is a requirement for care, report to work each day, dedicated to ensuring the individuals in their care adhere to their treatment plans to achieve and maintain wellness and stability amidst the pandemic. They have been 'on the job' since the beginning of the pandemic, responding to the needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens. They have earned the right to be categorized as essential frontline staff for purposes of priority immunization.

It is well documented that mental illness and substance use have been on the rise here in New York and around the country. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation Tracking Poll conducted earlier this year, 53% of adults in the U.S. reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted by worry and stress related to COVID-19. According to the White House Office of Drug Control Policy, overdose fatalities were up nearly 12% compared to last year. Also, the Association for Community Living conducted a survey specific to residential programs in NYS. The survey found that over 40% of individuals living in mental health housing that tested positive for COVID-19 were hospitalized. In addition, over 12% of the individuals died.

Our frontline staff have been in the middle of a public health tornado that includes COVID-19, rising overdose rates and increased rates of suicide attempts and completions in certain populations. By ensuring these individuals remain engaged in community services, the behavioral health workforce keeps individuals out of emergency rooms and hospitals. Like other healthcare workers and first responders, our staff are increasingly reporting that they are dealing with new mental health conditions that are related to the trauma they experience on the jobs. These stressors make them particularly vulnerable to illness. They need and deserve to be vaccinated early in the process.



In order to protect our state's mental health and substance use workforce and the vulnerable individuals we serve, our staff must be treated as frontline workers and included among the early vaccine distribution groups that appears to include frontline healthcare workers and other first responders. We stand ready to assist the state in its continuing efforts to protect the citizens of New York in any way possible. We are calling on your administration to prioritize the needs of our workers and clients so we can return to a level of normalcy that permits us to ensure the high quality care we have always provided to New York State residents.

Sincerely,

Sebrina Barrett, Executive Director,
Association for Community Living

Amy Dorin, President and CEO, The
Coalition for Behavioral Health

Allegra Schorr, President, Coalition of
Medication-Assisted Treatment Providers
and Advocates of New York State

Paige Pierce, Chief Executive Officer, Families
Together in NYS

Glenn Liebman, Chief Executive Officer,
Mental Health Association in New York State

Wendy Burch, NAMI-NYS

John Coppola, Executive Director, New York
Association of Alcohol and Substance Abuse
Providers

Harvey Rosenthal, New York Association of
Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services

Jackie Negri, Director, New York State Care
Management Coalition

Andrea Smyth, Executive Director, New
York State Coalition for Children's Behavioral
Health

Lauri Cole, Executive Director, New York
State Council for Community Behavioral
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Laura Mascuch, Executive Director,
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Cc:

Kerri Neifeld, Asst Secretary, Human Services & MH
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