



Testimony

of

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Executive Deputy Commissioner, Division of Mental Hygiene of the

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

before the

**New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Developmental Disability,
Alcoholism, Drug Abuse & Disability Services**

on

Oversight: Examining ThriveNYC's Mental Health First Aid Training

September 22nd, 2016
250 Broadway, 16th Floor Committee Room
New York, NY

Good morning Chairman Cohen and members of the Committee. I am Dr. Gary Belkin, Executive Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Mental Hygiene for the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the ThriveNYC Mental Health First Aid initiative.

Before I start I'd like to thank you - Chairman Cohen - for all the support you and your fellow council members have shown to changing the mental health culture in this City. I also want to thank you for organizing your Council colleagues and staff to attend a Mental Health First Aid training last month. We're happy to report that it was a success and want to invite your colleagues who didn't have a chance to attend to sign up for a training in the future.

Last year, the First Lady of New York spearheaded a campaign to address the mental health of our city. Through her leadership, we launched ThriveNYC a comprehensive approach to improve population mental health, with six key organizing principles and 54 initiatives designed to make them real. These principles are: change the culture, act early, close treatment gaps, partner with communities, use data better, and strengthen government's ability to lead. At the heart of each ThriveNYC initiative is a focus on destigmatizing mental illness, increasing access to services and changing the way New Yorkers think about and talk about mental health in their homes, their communities and even where they work.

In order to achieve these goals, the City has taken on an ambitious campaign to train 250,000 New Yorkers over the next five years in Mental Health First Aid. Mental Health First Aid helps people identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. The program is offered in the form of an interactive 8-hour course that presents an overview of mental illness and substance use disorders in the United States and introduces participants to risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems, builds understanding of their impact, and outlines common treatments. Those who take the 8-hour course practice using the skills along with a five step action plan. Studies have shown that these trainings can greatly improve participants' knowledge and reduces stigma associated with mental health problems.

The course, called Mental Health First Aid USA, is managed, operated, and disseminated by the National Council for Behavioral Health. This course was developed for a general adult audience and is appropriate for both paraprofessionals and laypersons wishing to have an introduction to mental health and substance use concerns. Individuals who complete this course receive certification from the National Council for Behavioral Health

Since we launched this initiative more than 5,000 New Yorkers have been trained along with 173 individuals who are now certified as Mental Health First Aid Instructors, meaning they can now lead trainings in their communities. I'm happy to say that we are on track to reach our goal of training 10,000 Mental Health First Aiders and 240 Instructors by the end of 2016. City agencies, community-based organizations and faith-based organizations are currently participating in this initiative and represent both "First Aiders" and Instructors.

For ThriveNYC to reach every pocket of NYC, we are ensuring that our training and services are culturally competent. That's why we have placed particular emphasis on training

instructors and scheduling trainings in diverse and underserved communities. The Mental Health First Aid training and materials are currently offered in Spanish, and by early November, in Mandarin. We have also trained bilingual instructors who can offer trainings in the following languages: Chinese, Korean, Russian, Arabic, Bengali, Urdu, and Hindi. And we are actively recruiting instructors who are fluent in: Polish, French Creole, Italian and Yiddish.

One of the six guiding principles of ThriveNYC is “Partner with Communities.” To reach a quarter million New Yorkers, we have embarked on a citywide outreach strategy to engage community based organizations in hosting Mental Health First Aid trainings and become instructors. To date these organizations include, the Esther Ha Foundation, Red Hook Initiative, New York Disaster Interfaith Services, Hetrick Martin Institute, Buddhist Council of New York, the Muslim Center of New York and the South Asian Youth Action leaders from the South Asian Muslim community.

To guide this effort, we have identified community-based and social service organizations that are located within the Neighborhood Health Action Center catchment areas. These neighborhoods have been deprived of sufficient resources and attention as a result of racial and social injustice, and thus bear the highest burden of disease. With a strong partnership with the Health Department’s Center for Health Equity we are working to further integrate Mental Health First Aid into the collaborative community health planning process. Additionally, using existing American Community Survey data, we are prioritizing outreach to areas with a high need for mental health support.

Oftentimes, stigma deters New Yorkers from accessing critical mental health treatment for themselves or loved ones. In spite of these challenges, faith leaders have moved to destigmatize mental health treatment by opening their houses of worship to trainers throughout our city. The Mayor’s Community Affairs unit and Health Department’s Office of Faith Based Initiatives have led numerous training initiatives for clergy and faith based organizations, most notably in advance of the Weekend of Faith, where over 1,000 faith leaders participated in a weekend dedicated to raising awareness around mental health and destigmatizing mental illness. And on September 29th, we will be offering the first ever Mental Health First Aid training conducted entirely in Spanish with faith leaders. This effort will continue with trainings for faith leaders in other commonly used languages in New York City.

Another guiding principles of ThriveNYC is “Change the Culture.” To truly transform our approach to mental health and shift the culture from within, we are engaging city staff throughout New York City government to get trained in Mental Health First Aid – many will also be trained to be instructors. Our large and diverse City workforce interacts with New Yorkers every day, in every Borough and neighborhood. They are key ambassadors for this work.

For example, the Department of Corrections has trained over 1,800 staff members at their training academy and 13 instructors. They have also recently started offering Mental Health First Aid trainings to inmates on Riker’s Island. The Department of Parks and Recreation are also conducting numerous trainings at their Academy and have trained over 250 staff members and

10 instructors. They plan to offer Mental Health First Aid trainings to community members in the near future.

We are also working with city agencies that provide services to the adolescent population, such as the Department of Education and the Administration for Children Services, to enhance the knowledge of typical and atypical adolescent development by offering the Youth Mental Health First Aid module to their staff.

The City's leadership is key to this culture shift within the workforce. Beginning with First Lady Chirlane McCray and Deputy Mayor Buery, senior leadership at City Hall have been trained. And in addition to the training held for City Council, City Hall staff have been trained and the Public Advocate's office has hosted a training for staff and community members.

While we are making progress towards our goal, we still have a long way to go, and need everyone to join us in order to truly shift the cultural norms around mental health. Mental Health First Aid is available at no cost to all New Yorkers. The Health Department hosts three trainings weekly that are open to the public at our offices in Queens, and regularly host trainings on request across the five boroughs. To sign up for a training, or find more information, please visit www.thrivenyc.cityofnewyork.us.

I want to thank the City Council for their continued support of ThriveNYC. I look forward to working with all of you to connect all New Yorkers to this important training and change the culture around mental health. For anyone who has not yet been trained, Department of Health staff are here today to help you sign up for a training.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to take questions.



The Coalition for Behavioral Health

Formerly The Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies, Inc.

**REMARKS OF CHRISTY PARQUE, MSW
CEO & PRESIDENT**

-and-

**MELISSA THOMAS, LCSW
SENIOR PROGRAM ASSOCIATE
CENTER FOR REHABILITATION AND RECOVERY**

THE COALITION FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

OVERSIGHT - EXAMINING THRIVE NYC'S MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TRAINING

September 22, 2016

Good Morning, Chairman Cohen and members of the NYC Council Committee on Mental Health, Developmental Disability, Alcoholism, Substance Abuse and Disability Services. I am Christy Parque, CEO & President of The Coalition for Behavioral Health ("The Coalition"). I am joined by Melissa Thomas, Senior Program Associate of The Coalition's Center for Rehabilitation and Recovery.

The Coalition is the umbrella advocacy organization of New York's behavioral health community, representing over 140 non-profit community-based behavioral health and substance abuse agencies that serve more than 450,000 clients/consumers throughout NYC and surrounding counties. Our members serve the entire continuum of behavioral health care in every neighborhood in New York City, Westchester, and beyond. Coalition members provide access to the whole range of outpatient mental health and substance abuse services, including supportive housing, crisis, peer, employment, Personalized Recovery Oriented Services (PROS), Club Houses, education and food nutritional services, as well as many other supports that promote recovery. Our members have been providing these types of services in the community since the dawn of the deinstitutionalization movement.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our thoughts on ThriveNYC's Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training.

MHFA is an 8-hour course that teaches participants how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. The training gives you the skills you need to reach out and provide initial help and support to someone who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem or experiencing a crisis.

It is the first step that will ideally lead to referral or even a “warm handoff” to a community-based provider that will have the expertise to identify and propose a course of treatment that will lead to recovery.

More than 680,000 people across the United States have been trained in MHFA by a dedicated base of more than 10,000 instructors.ⁱ

The administration will appreciably increase these numbers with its ambitious plan to train 250,000 individuals in MHFA over four years. The funding for this plan is supported by a portion of the \$111million in new spending allocated through 2019 that is dedicated to expanding and training of the behavioral healthcare workforce.ⁱⁱ This funding will stabilize communities and help individuals in need of behavioral health services. It also prioritizes the person-to-person connection that MHFA embraces that we know is the most effective approach to recovery.

I want to thank Council Member Cohen for organizing MHFA training for Council Members and staff. It will be invaluable in serving your constituents and the community as a whole. And, again, the more individual’s who have their consciousnesses raised about behavioral health, the more we will begin to fight stigmatization of individuals living with these issues.

Although The Coalition does not receive any direct funds to offer this training, we have embraced the spirit and goals of MHFA and have trained two staff as trainers on the curriculum, one of whom, Melissa Thomas, is here with me today and will share a brief statement following me. Since April 2015 we began offering this training free of charge to our members and the community at large because we believe the skills obtained through MHFA compliment the strong professional backgrounds of our member agencies and their staff. We have two more MHFA trainings scheduled later this year.

I have personally gone through the two-day MHFA training with my staff and Coalition members. Although, I am trained as a social worker, I found the experience extremely educational and rewarding. It is also a transformational experience for those getting trained to speak openly, maybe for the first time, in a safe setting, about their own experiences with mental illness and substance abuse, either personally or with a loved one.

With one in five individuals living with a behavioral health issueⁱⁱⁱ, the increase in the suicide rate in NYC (particularly among white males, seniors and young latinas)^{iv} and the ongoing opioid epidemic, together all strongly illustrate the need for MHFA training.

Of course, last week’s bombings are a poignant reminder of how crucial this training can be. Having first responders trained in MHFA will allow for faster identification of symptoms of trauma or shock and speed access to both physical and behavioral health care. Building resiliency in individuals builds healthy and resilient communities.

MHFA will also ultimately reduce the stigma for those living with mental illness and substance use disorder issues. That is because as more and more people are trained, the understanding that behavioral health issues are a naturally occurring part of human existence will achieve far greater acceptance.

CONCLUSION

On behalf of our over 140 members in the metro region, we want you to know that we appreciate the Council’s, the Mayor and First Lady Chirlane McCray’s focus on behavioral

health services for individuals in need. We look forward to working with you on the implementation of this and other ThriveNYC programs in the future.

Again, thank you again for the allowing us to testify before you today. Following Melissa's statement, we would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

**Statement of Melissa Thomas, The Coalition for Behavioral Health
Senior Program Associate
Center for Rehabilitation and Recovery**

My name is Melissa Thomas. I am a Senior Program Associate with The Coalition for Behavioral Health's Center for Rehabilitation and Recovery. I have been a licensed social worker for sixteen years.

Since becoming a certified Mental Health First Aid USA instructor in March 2016, I have taught approximately 100 New Yorkers to recognize the signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety, psychosis, and substance use disorders. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) does not teach individuals to diagnose others but rather equip them with the knowledge and skills to identify and help friends, loved ones, colleagues, and/or a stranger in distress through encouragement and support.

We know the more we talk about the hidden issues of mental illness and substance the easier it is for our loved ones, friends and neighbors to ask for help and goes a long way to end stigma and saves lives. Mental Health First Aid not only gives New Yorkers the tools to handle a crisis but creates a language and forum of support for "First Aiders" who will take this out into the world.

Each class I have taught has brought eye opening information and discoveries to the attendees including signs of symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders in a parent or child. What I have found to be the most crucial is helping individuals assess for signs and confidently respond to risk of suicide.

A few months after completing the MHFA training course, a close friend experienced a loss in her life due to suicide. Although I am a LCSW, MHFA specifically helped me to better explain to her risk factors and signs of suicide using the information I learned. I also used MHFA with her to assess for her own reaction to the loss and how she could support her other friends and loved ones during that time. Regardless of one's professional background, MHFA provides vital skills to help further the goal of helping others understand, listen, and encourage individuals to seek appropriate professional support without stigma, fear, or further harm.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

ⁱ <http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/cs/about/>

ⁱⁱ NYC Independent Budget Office, "Focus on the Preliminary Budget." March 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/myths-facts/>

^{iv} <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/about/press/pr2016/pr075-16.page>



**MENTAL
HEALTH
FIRST AID®**

Mental Health First Aid

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a public education program that introduces participants to risk factors and warning signs of mental illnesses, builds understanding of their impact, and overviews common supports. This 8-hour course uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to offer initial help in a mental health crisis and connect persons to the appropriate professional, peer, social, and self-help care. The program also teaches the common risk factors and warning signs of specific types of illnesses, like anxiety, depression, substance use, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

MHFA teaches participants a five-step action plan, ALGEE, to support someone developing signs and symptoms of a mental illness or in an emotional crisis:

- **Assess** for risk of suicide or harm
- **Listen** nonjudgmentally
- **Give** reassurance and information
- **Encourage** appropriate professional help
- **Encourage** self-help and other support strategies

Like CPR, Mental Health First Aid prepares participants to interact with a person in crisis and connect the person with help. First Aiders do not take on the role of professionals — they do not diagnose or provide any counseling or therapy. Instead, the program offers concrete tools and answers key questions, like “what do I do?” and “where can someone find help?” All trainees receive a program manual to compliment the course material.

Certification establishes that all trainees have been trained to provide initial help to people experiencing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, and substance use disorders. After being certified, a Mental Health First Aider will be able to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. Studies of MHFA participants have shown that these trainings can greatly improve participants’ knowledge and reduces stigma associated with mental health problems. The first aid is given until appropriate treatment and support are received or until the crisis resolves.

MHFA in New York City

In NYC, the goal is to train 250,000 New Yorkers as Mental Health First Aiders by the end of 2020. To achieve that goal, DOHMH is hosting several MHFA instructor trainings a year every two months to train over 500 instructors. These instructors will train individuals from different city agencies, community-based organizations and faith-based organizations, working together to achieve the goal 250,000 First Aiders trained. In addition, DOHMH hosts three weekly trainings open to the community at no cost to the participants and responds to requests for external trainings from the community.

The course is available at no cost to all New Yorkers. For more information or questions about Mental Health First Aid, please contact us at NYCMHFA@health.nyc.gov or at (347) 396-7927.

To find a course, please visit www.nycmhfa.eventbrite.com

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