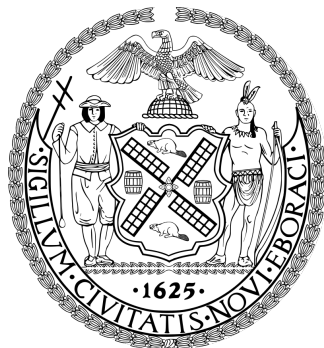


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COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Hon. Inez D. Barron, Chair

September 20, 2021

Oversight: Update on Mental Health Resources for Students at the City University of New York

INTRODUCTION

On September 20, 2021, the Committee on Higher Education, chaired by Council Member Inez D. Barron, will conduct an oversight hearing on *Mental Health Resources for Students at the City University of New York* (“CUNY” or “University”). Witnesses invited to testify include representatives from the CUNY Administration, the Professional Staff Congress at CUNY (PSC), the University Student Senate, the University Faculty Senate, advocacy groups, student groups, and other interested stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

CUNY was established in 1961 pursuant to state legislation that united seven existing municipal colleges and a graduate school into an integrated citywide system of public higher education.¹ Today, CUNY is the largest urban public university in the United States (U.S.) serving more than 271,000 degree and non-degree seeking students and over 228,000 adult and continuing education course registrations across New York City (“NYC” or “City”).² With more than 1,400 academic programs, 200 majors leading to associate and baccalaureate degrees, and 800 graduate degree programs, CUNY offers learning opportunities at every level—from certificate courses to Ph.D. programs—through a system that now includes seven community colleges, 11 senior colleges, the Macaulay Honors College, five graduate and professional schools, and an assortment of research centers, institutes and consortia.³

Following the coronavirus outbreak last year, which led to CUNY transitioning over 98 percent of courses across the University to online modalities, CUNY campuses fully reopened for

¹ CUNY, “Mission & History” (n.d.), available at <https://www.cuny.edu/about/history/>.

² Office of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, Mayor’s Management Report (Sept. 2020), 239, available at https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2020/2020_mmr.pdf.

³ CUNY, “Academics” (n.d.), available at <https://www.cuny.edu/academics/>.

the first time in 17 months at the start of the fall semester.⁴ The University’s offering of in-person, hybrid, and virtual classes officially began on August 25, 2021 with approximately 45 percent of the nearly 50,000 course sections conveyed in a hybrid or in-person format, while about 55 percent are being delivered online.⁵

Accordingly, CUNY announced that it has taken a number of steps to prioritize the health and safety of the University community while remaining fully operational. This includes reviewing and approving comprehensive reopening plans developed by each campus, issuing mask mandates, mandating vaccines for all students enrolled in in-person or hybrid classes, and establishing a University-wide testing program for unvaccinated students, faculty and staff, which will require proof of a negative COVID-19 test taken at least seven days before visiting campus.⁶ Additionally, as part of CUNY’s phased re-opening plans, Counseling Centers will continue providing telecounseling services to students while returning to in-person care, which will likely occur in four stages, increasing capacity in 25 percent increments.⁷

Mental Health Challenges among Young Adults During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with mental health challenges related to the morbidity and mortality caused by the coronavirus and to safety measures, including social distancing and stay-at-home orders.⁸ Data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (“CDC”) June 2020 survey on adult mental health, which reviewed a national sample of 18- to 24-year olds (i.e., “young adults,” who comprise the majority of college students), suggest that young adults’ mental

⁴ CUNY, “CUNY Welcomes Students Back for the Fall Semester” (Aug. 25, 2021), *available at* <https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2021/08/25/cuny-welcomes-students-back-for-the-fall-semester/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ CUNY, “Considerations for Reopening Facilities & Services in Stages” (2021), *available at* <https://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/reopening-guidelines/considerationsforreopening-facilities-services/>.

⁸ U.S. CDC, “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24-30, 2020” (Aug. 14, 2020), *available at* https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm?s_cid=mm6932a1_w.

health may be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.⁹ Moreover, these young adults are in the transitional period of emerging adulthood at a time when many of the adults they would normally reach out to for guidance and reassurance, such as parents, teachers and mentors, were also facing their own uncertainties and anxieties.¹⁰

The CDC survey found that at least one adverse mental or behavioral health symptom was reported by nearly three quarters of young adult respondents (74.9 percent). The percentage of respondents who reported having seriously considered suicide in the previous 30 days (10.7 percent) was significantly higher among young adults (25.5 percent).¹¹ Young adults were also found to be experiencing among the highest levels of anxiety and depression (62.9 percent), which was second only to that of essential workers and unpaid caregivers.¹²

Compared to pre-pandemic estimates, the survey reported three times the prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms and a two-fold increase in suicidal ideation.¹³ A follow-up survey, conducted from August 28 to September 6, 2020, showed an increase in adverse mental health symptoms among 18- to 24-year-olds, indicating that the “prevalence of adverse mental health symptoms among US adults remained elevated.”¹⁴ Notably, this age group reported an increase in experiences of COVID-19 related trauma and stressor-related disorder from 46 percent¹⁵ to 52.2 percent.¹⁶ In June 2020, a troubling 24.7 percent of this cohort reported starting or increasing

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ JAMA Research Letter, Feb. 19, 2021, “Follow-up Survey of US Adult Reports of Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic, September 2020” *available at* <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2776559>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ CDC, Mental Health, Substance Use and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States June 24-30, 2020, from https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm?s_cid=mm6932a1_w.

¹⁶ JAMA Research Letter, Feb. 19, 2021, “Follow-up Survey of US Adult Reports of Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic, September 2020” *available at* <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2776559>.

substance use as a means to cope with the stress and anxiety of the pandemic.¹⁷ By September 2020, reports of substance use among 18- to 24-year-olds increased by 3.8 percent.¹⁸

Feelings of hopelessness among young adults about their personal future and the uncertainty of life during the pandemic was found to be a “big driver of suicide” and, in combination with increased substance use and impulsivity among emerging adults, created a unique risk that exacerbated the typical challenges of aging and academic pressures normally experienced by this age group.¹⁹ Evidence of these sustained adverse mental health symptoms highlight the need to “promote preventive behaviors, expand mental care access, and integrate medical and behavioral health services to mitigate the mental health effects of COVID-19.”²⁰

The Effects of COVID-19 on CUNY Students, Faculty, and Staff

NYC quickly became the national epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic and, at its height, saw upwards of 500 deaths per day.²¹ In June 2020, CUNY reported the loss of 38 individuals from COVID-19.²² According to PSC, CUNY has lost more faculty and staff in the pandemic than any other university in the U.S.²³ As a result, students as well as faculty and staff have been deeply affected by the staggering loss of life and number of infections that upended all aspects of life, including their educations. Almost half (49 percent) of the respondents in a CUNY spring 2020

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *See, id.*

¹⁹ CDC, Mental Health, Substance Use and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States June 24-30, 2020, pg. 12, available at https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm?s_cid=mm6932a1_w.

²⁰ JAMA Research Letter, Feb. 19, 2021, “Follow-up Survey of US Adult Reports of Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic, September 2020” available at <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2776559>.

²¹ DOHMH COVID-19 Data, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data.page>.

²² Inside Higher Ed, June 2020 available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/23/cuny-system-suffers-more-coronavirus-deaths-any-other-higher-ed-system-us>.

²³ PSC-CUNY, “COVID-19”, available at <https://www.psc-cuny.org/covid-19>.

survey reported an increased need for mental health services to help cope with stress, anxiety or depression due to the pandemic.²⁴

In addition to exacerbating mental health challenges, the pandemic has also presented heightened academic and economic concerns for the CUNY community at large, such as the disruption of degree plans, the transition from in-person to virtual modalities and back to in-person, high unemployment, and budget constraints.²⁵ While CUNY has yet to release enrollment numbers for the fall 2021 semester, the University experienced a 5.1 percent decline in enrollment in fall 2020 compared to 2019.²⁶ As CUNY undertakes the significant challenges of resuming in-person operation this fall, the mental health and wellbeing of its students will require close monitoring in the months to come.

Mental Health Resources at CUNY

Prior to the pandemic, CUNY had begun developing a multi-faceted plan to expand campus mental health services.²⁷ Healthy CUNY, a University-wide initiative that seeks to remove health-related barriers to educational achievement, issued a series of surveys to students, which “quantified the significance of mental health concerns among CUNY students.”²⁸ A primary objective of the Healthy CUNY initiative is to “promote mental health awareness and reduce stigma for seeking treatment.”²⁹ This is particularly important as 86 percent of CUNY students with symptoms of

²⁴ Healthy CUNY COVID-19 Work Group, “Guide to Surviving and Thriving at CUNY” CUNY School of Public Health, 2021 (Second Edition), available at <https://www.healthycuny.org/survivingandthriving>.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Megan Kelly, “CUNY Confronts Series of Challenges as University System Nears In-Person Reopening” (Aug. 3, 2021) available at <https://www.gothamgazette.com/state/10666-cuny-uncertain-school-year-reopening-covid-nyc-university>.

²⁷ CUNY, “CUNY Plans Expansion of Mental Health Services to Address Escalating Needs of Students Struggling with Effects of Pandemic” (Oct. 16, 2020) available at <https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2020/10/16/cuny-plans-expansion-of-mental-health-services-to-address-escalating-need-of-students-struggling-with-effects-of-pandemic/>.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Health CUNY, “Mental Health,” available at <https://www.healthycuny.org/mental-health>.

depression, anxiety disorders, or serious psychological distress have reportedly not visited a campus mental health center in the last 12 months.³⁰

Each college provides free and confidential services to anyone who is currently enrolled and registered as a student of that school through its campus Counseling Center.³¹ Some schools provide tailored counseling services for their student population. The Baruch College Counseling Center, for example, now offers Black Mental Health Matters, weekly support sessions led by two Black psychologists to foster and support the growth, networking, collaboration, success, and well-being of Black students, in response to an outcry for support in light of recent events of racial violence and injustice towards people of color.³²

Students generally have to call their Counseling Center in order to schedule an appointment, most of which are conducted through telecounseling, phone and video consultation, or virtual group counseling.³³ For faculty and staff, CUNY's Employee Assistance Program is available to assist with wellness and mental health concerns.³⁴ Presently, CUNY's "Coronavirus Updates" webpage encourages "students who feel anxious or worried about friends and family because of the coronavirus" to contact campus-based Counseling and Health Services.³⁵

At the October 26, 2020 Higher Education hearing, CUNY's interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management testified that the average ratio of mental health staff to students at CUNY is one counselor for every 2,595 students, with one campus at a ratio of

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ CUNY, Campus Counseling Centers (n.d.), available at <https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/counseling/#counseling>.

³² Baruch College, Counseling Center, "Current Support Sessions" (n.d.), available at <https://studentaffairs.baruch.cuny.edu/counseling/support/>.

³³ CUNY, *Campus Counseling Centers* (n.d.), available at <https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/counseling/campus-centers/>.

³⁴ CUNY, "Health Screening & Wellness" (Aug. 26, 2021), available at <https://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/health-screening-wellness/#resources>.

³⁵ CUNY, "Health Screening & Wellness" (Aug. 25, 2020), available at <https://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/health-screening-wellness/#resources>.

1:6,009.³⁶ In comparison, “the mean staffing-to-student ratio for mental health services according to the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey in 2019 was 1:1,362 and the International Accreditation of Counseling Services organization recommends a ratio of 1:1,500.”³⁷

Coronavirus Relief Funding

In October 2020, CUNY announced plans for a \$5 million expansion of mental health services, using funds allocated to the University through the Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (“CARES”) Act, to address the escalating needs of students struggling with the effects of the pandemic.³⁸ Pursuant to this plan, CUNY’s 18 senior and community colleges will receive allocations to expand the clinical staff of their health and wellness centers.³⁹ Some funding will also be used purchase technology to improve student access to support services, and to train and certify 120 campus clinical counselors in providing teletherapy services.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

At today’s hearing, the Committee will seek to gain a better understanding of mental health resources offered at CUNY, including issues and ongoing concerns that emerged or were complicated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes student experiences and the impact that campus-based mental health services, or the lack thereof, has had on their pursuit of a college education during the pandemic, as well as how the University and campuses promote

³⁶ Committee on Higher Education, Hearing Transcript, p. 53 (Oct. 16, 2020), *available at* <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4652505&GUID=79C03453-E1AA-45F0-A506-EF511E129854&Options=&Search=>.

³⁷ PSC-CUNY, “CUNY Needs More Mental Health Counselors” (Dec. 2020), *available at* <https://www.psc-cuny.org/clarion/december-2020/cuny-needs-more-mental-health-counselors>.

³⁸ CUNY, “CUNY Plans Expansion of Mental Health Services to Address Escalating Needs of Students Struggling with Effects of Pandemic” (Oct. 16, 2020) *available at* <https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2020/10/16/cuny-plans-expansion-of-mental-health-services-to-address-escalating-need-of-students-struggling-with-effects-of-pandemic/>.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

available mental health services to students. The Committee will also seek to understand utilization rates as well as how to better serve students in a post-pandemic world. Finally, the Committee is interested in understanding how CUNY ensures its counseling services are culturally competent and responsive to the University's diverse student population.