



Testimony

of

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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.