

New York Assembly Hearing
Immigrant Access To Health Care

Assembly Committee on Health
Assembly Puerto Rican/Hispanic Task Force
Assembly Task Force on New Americans

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Young Adult Members of the
Mental Health Awareness Project of East New York (MHAP ENY)

A Project of

**YOUTH
ADVOCACY
CORPS**

Good morning Chairs and Members of the Assembly. Thank you for giving us an opportunity to testify on behalf of young adults in New York City. We are the Mental Health Awareness Project of East New York (also known as ‘MHAP ENY’). MHAP ENY, a program of Youth Advocacy Corps, is a small group of high school and college-aged students with a passion for advocacy and making a difference in our communities. Through MHAP, we aim to raise awareness about mental health and reduce mental health stigma by providing resources and educational workshops throughout Brooklyn. People need to understand mental health and wellness; by educating our communities, we hope they will be able to identify various warning signs before it is too late. Raising awareness can help save lives. Also, making sure people understand that there are resources and support out there will ensure they do not suffer alone.

Statement of MHAP Participant, Saddiq Abdul: “Born and raised in an immigrant family in the community of East New York, I have always been disturbed by the limited information and social services available in my neighborhood. I participated in Youth Advocacy Corps’ Summer Institute (‘YASI’) in 2015, and it was there that I learned to understand about advocacy and social justice. I also learned more about mental health issues, and I realized that they were not being addressed at all in my community. There was a misconception about mental health among people in my community, including myself, equating mental struggles with people who are ‘crazy.’ Yet, we all struggle in some form. I am really passionate about improving the status quo in my neighborhood, and so to address mental wellness and focus on creating a more mentally healthy community, I developed the idea for a social justice project while a fellow with YASI. Earlier this year, we were able to officially launch my social justice project as MHAP ENY. Mental health issues affect everyone, especially those living in struggling communities like mine, and we deserve equal access to information, care and resources.”

We thank you for holding a hearing and soliciting testimony on the critical issue of health care access for immigrant communities, and we encourage you to consider more specifically the importance and relevance of mental health care as you evaluate immigrant access to health care, more generally. New Yorkers, particularly those living in struggling communities like East New York, deal with a wide range of mental health issues (including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and PTSD) which often go untreated.

For racially and ethnically diverse communities, and especially for immigrant communities, the problem is quite severe. Mental health stigma, and language, ethnic and cultural barriers, present impediments to care, and finding culturally competent care is a major hurdle. According to the American Psychological Association, only one in three people of color who need mental health services receive them. Why, you ask? Because we are not acknowledging that mental illness is something that is real and exists within our community. We want people to know that “it’s OK not to be OK,” and that asking for help is a sign of strength, not a weakness.

Mental Health Challenges in New York City

Throughout our year working with MHAP ENY, we have discovered that the main challenges facing immigrants in East New York, and likely other communities, stem from a lack of awareness about mental health care and illness, a misunderstanding about coverage and insurance options, a lack of culturally competent care, and the stigma that surrounds mental health.

Statement of MHAP Participant, Hetheru Shango: “I am a member of the Caribbean-American Christian Community, and mental health isn't something that is discussed in my community. We are told that our problems are a ‘white thing,’ that mental health doesn't exist in our community, or that whatever is bothering us, we should go pray about. Mental illness does not only affect the white community. Yes, we can pray about whatever we are dealing with, but it may also be helpful to talk with a professional. If we go talk to a professional, we are not crazy or psycho. We simply realize that we are not always okay, and we want to eventually get better. We need to change the conversation around mental health, and particularly on a local level through religious institutions and CBOs, in order for the community to heal. Those who need mental health services should not be ashamed to seek them out and should have adequate resources to access them.”

We have found that a large percentage of immigrants believe that only people with severe mental illness need to seek care, and that, in most instances, for such care they go to the hospital. People are unaware of other available services and current City initiatives, like NYC Well, which is part of the Thrive Initiative. For those seeking services, many don't know of any local mental health services. Any outreach materials and campaigns do not seem to target low-income, immigrant communities, but instead seem to only be applicable to wealthier communities. And any services that are offered are far away, not provided in immigrants' first language, or provided by individuals with no understanding of them and their communities.

There is also a lot of distrust between immigrant communities, the government and the healthcare system. Communities aren't aware that mental health care does not have to be expensive. Available insurance seems to be a major barrier for those in need, and people have no understanding of available services and what, if anything, is covered. And, quite simply, there are not enough culturally and linguistically competent mental health professionals in New York's health care system, and there is not enough targeted recruitment in low-income, immigrant communities.

Also, the stigma surrounding mental health is pervasive. Many people who may encounter a person screaming their lungs out on the streets would assume they are crazy and label them as such. People don't understand enough about mental illness and instead they use negative labels such as 'insane', 'wacko' or 'stupid.' People living with mental illness should not be labeled; they are all still human like everyone else. And many suffer with mental challenges that are not in fact major illnesses, but simply everyday struggles that need to be addressed. We need to change the way people think and encourage them to open their minds to mental wellness, and mental health treatment possibilities. We need to ensure that New Yorkers view mental health care to be equally important as physical health care.

Our Report with Young Invincibles

Barriers & Opportunities: Accessing Mental Health Services in East New York

Throughout the last year, we partnered with Young Invincibles to research the situation in East New York, Brooklyn and to produce an issue brief, that will be released in two days, on Friday, December 15, 2017. Together we sought to better understand the views of immigrants about mental health and the services available to them. To do so, we engaged in a community assessment through community mapping, conducted surveys to learn about how mental health and mental illness are impacting immigrants from the ages of 16-34, interviewed community stakeholders and experts and conducted a focus group at Linden Learning Center. The final report highlights how young adult immigrants in and around East New York view mental health and how it is impacting the immigrant community.

Proposals for Change

We urge you to consider the following four steps to ensure all NYC Immigrants receive education about and have access to vitally important mental health care services.

- **Raise Awareness about the Importance of Mental Health Care and Increase Conversations Happening throughout NYC to Decrease Stigma**

While 81% of our survey respondents reported that they'd accomplished less than desired due to emotional stress, like anxiety or being overwhelmed, in the previous four weeks, only 16% reported that they had considered seeking mental health services. And, 42% of our survey participants disagreed with the statement: "I am familiar with the NYC Well Initiative, free confidential mental health support in the city." Further, 40% reported that their cultural beliefs make them less likely to seek mental health services, and almost one-quarter of respondents indicated they would be too embarrassed to tell anyone if they had mental health concerns.

We hope that the State will help to address these issues by raising awareness about mental wellness and ensuring that conversations are happening throughout New York about the importance and necessity of mental health care. We suggest that the State work to: improve outreach efforts and develop campaigns to promote and normalize mental wellness discussions; encourage people to seek treatment for mental health issues; and, ensure that all messages are clear and accessible, in multiple languages, and that they reach immigrant communities.

We also encourage the State to hold more events and public gatherings promoting mental health awareness and making available resources like services providers, hotlines, and State initiatives known. Communities need to be aware of mental health care options, and the State should be diligent to ensure that there are adequate numbers of professionals spread throughout *all* NYC neighborhoods. In addition, we hope the the State will work with primary care providers, encouraging them to inform patients about mental health providers and services, and to provide general education about the value and importance of acknowledging problems and seeking help when needed.

- **Increase Mental Health Care Options and Information about Insurance Programs**

Many in New York do not seek out mental health help because of the fear that they do not have the financial means and do not know where to get care. About 62% of people surveyed reported that they did not know whether their health insurance covers any mental health services they would need. Yet, the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act mandates that health insurance providers provide mental health coverage comparable to medical and surgical benefits.

To address this issue, the State should work with medical insurance providers to ensure members of the immigrant community are made aware of their mental health benefits as part of their insurance. Further, any future legislation or regulation promoting health care for immigrant communities should include comprehensive and accessible mental health care options, which are communicated to communities.

- **Provide Education about Mental Wellness and Incorporate Mental Health into Schools**

We have learned that most young people assume mental health is equated to severe mental illness. Young people feel that only those with serious disorders need treatment or care. Young people need to be educated on mental wellness and all it encompasses. Conversations about mental health in everyday life can help to normalize concepts of mental wellness and ensure people ask for help when needed.

It is great that many of our public schools have health classes, which include nutrition, sex-ed, and physical illness prevention. But these classes are only teaching our youth about physical health. Maintaining good mental health is just as important as maintaining proper physical health. We encourage the State to consider educating students, through the school system, about mental health and various ways to cope. Also, counselors in schools should be equipped to answer questions about insurance options and refer students for mental health care if needed. And the State should support an initiative to ensure that specialized and trained counselors partner with schools, CBOs and the community more generally.

- **Ensure An Adequate Number of Culturally and Linguistically Competent Mental Health Professionals**

There are many cultural barriers that prevent people from seeking care (such as stigma), but there is also a scarcity of mental health professionals who can provide culturally competent care. Research has shown that while people are reluctant to seek mental health care, they are even less likely to seek care from someone who doesn't look or act like them and who doesn't understand them, their culture, religion or ethnicity. Having representatives who truly understand the cultural norms and values of a community can help and inspire people to seek support without feeling ashamed or embarrassed.

In 2011, the NYS Office of Mental Health issued a report acknowledging the need for culturally competent care, which we found online and thought was quite useful; however, we believe that the State needs to do more training of professionals in cultural competency and language to be sure appropriate care is effective and spread throughout NYC communities. We also believe the State should focus on training professionals from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and there should be deliberate recruitment from diverse communities with high populations of immigrants.

Hetheru Shango, one of our MHAP participants, is currently looking to join a Mental Health Masters Program, and she found that while a majority of schools within the SUNY and CUNY systems offer mental health programs, only four schools are actually accredited. This means that only students who attend these four schools will be able to be licensed and become a professional counselor. We need to do more!

We thank you for your time and hope that you will consider mental health as a vitally important component of overall health and help to ensure all immigrants have adequate information and equal access to services that support mental health and wellness.

These are just some of our suggestions, but please feel free to contact us to ask any additional questions you may have or to learn more about our work in East New York.

Also, please feel free to contact us for a copy of our Issue Brief. We can be found at www.advocacycorps.org or email us at info@advocacycorps.org.

About Youth Advocacy Corps: Youth Advocacy Corps (“YAC”) works to provide social justice service, leadership and development opportunities to youth from communities impacted by poverty. YAC believes that to make both incremental and system-wide change, advocates and activists must work collectively, in partnership with communities, community leaders and locally-run nonprofits, and particularly with youth. YAC has two current programs and will implement a third college access program in 2018.

Youth Advocacy Summer Institute is a training and service program for youth from communities impacted by poverty. YASI focuses on health justice, teaches youth how to advocate and provides them the tools to identify inequity and serve their communities. Participants extern with local partners and work in community institutions to educate and provide resources to their communities; develop individual campaigns; and tackle complicated issues including race, immigration, sexuality, gender identity, and religion.

MHAP ENY engages young adults in East New York to serve as Peer Advocates (PAs), particularly for immigrant youth. The PAs undergo training in advocacy, community organizing, social justice reform, and mental health literacy; identify, organize, and map mental health services; spread awareness through educational workshops and the provision of resources at community-based help desks; and, conduct field research and produce a report to inform programming and current mental health policy conversations happening throughout NYC.