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Behavioral Health Groups Demand Opioid Settlement Funds Be Invested In Prevention, Treatment, Recovery & Harm Reduction

*Multiple Coalitions, Representing Hundreds of Providers,
Joined Together for Meeting with Office of Attorney General Letitia James and Call on
Legislature and Governor to Protect the Funds*

March 9, 2020 (ALBANY) – The Coalition for Behavioral Health, ASAP, the NYS Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, COMPA, NAMI – NYS, The New York State Coalition for Children’s Behavioral Health, MHANYS and NYAPRS have joined together to ensure that any funds from opioid settlements are invested into helping individuals with opioid use disorder, and do not enter the general fund. The groups held a meeting with the Office of Attorney General Letitia James today, and are also urging the Legislature and Governor to include language in this budget to set the funds aside.

“With thousands of New Yorkers dying each year from opioids, we cannot afford for this money to be wasted. Some of New York’s tobacco settlement dollars were spent on golf carts – that simply cannot happen with opioid funds,” said Amy Dorin, President & CEO of The Coalition for Behavioral Health. “We hope to see language in the settlement requiring that funds to be spent on prevention, treatment, recovery and harm reduction.”

The groups made several recommendations. The first, and most important, is that language in the settlement require the full balance of funds to be spent on prevention, treatment, recovery and harm reduction. If the funds enter state coffers, the groups recommend that the majority of the funds go to the Office of Addiction Services and Supports, with the Office of Mental Health also receiving a portion to serve individuals with co-occurring disorders. Funds must be readily available to community-based nonprofits that are most aware of the needs of impacted children and adults and should be targeted to the communities that were most impacted.

As an alternative to funds entering state coffers, the groups recommended language in the settlement that would enable the creation of an independent nonprofit to oversee settlement dollars. A nonprofit organization, with dedicated revenue and a clear separation from state revenue or budget shortfalls, would ensure the opioid settlement dollars are spent on preventing and treating opioid use disorder. Two nonprofits that were created as a result of the tobacco settlement were very successful in ensuring funds were used for tobacco control. The Truth Initiative has been credited with driving a reduction in youth smoking nationally. ClearWay, a Minnesota nonprofit that receives tobacco settlement funds, is estimated to have prevented more than 4,000 smoking deaths.

The groups are also urging the State Legislature and Governor to take action now to ensure the funds are protected. Language should be included in the budget that sets these funds aside and ensures that money will be used to combat the opioid epidemic. It is critical the funding not supplant existing substance use and mental health funds, but go to expanding access, increasing the workforce, and other needs.

“Funds from fines and lawsuits associated with the pandemic of overdose and addiction related to opioids should be utilized to address the consequences of the corporate behavior of companies that contributed to the crisis. Priority should be given to using funds for substance use disorders prevention, treatment, recovery and harm reduction services,” said John Coppola, Executive Director of ASAP.

“This is an amazing opportunity to ameliorate the effects of a modern day crisis that has strained every component of New York's behavioral health continuum of care and will likely continue to do so for decades to come. Families and communities have been devastated by opioids and every available dollar should be invested into prevention, treatment, recovery and harm reduction services that will remediate the damage, and protect New Yorkers statewide,” said Lauri Cole, Executive Director, New York State Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare.

“COMPA urges New York State to direct ALL settlement dollars to treatment,” said, Allegra Schorr, President of the Coalition of Medication Assisted Treatment Providers and Advocates of New York State (COMPA). "As pharmaceutical companies linked to the opioid epidemic face ongoing lawsuits, any settlement money must be used to expand behavioral health treatment services. This funding should not be used to supplant money for treatment or be used to balance other parts of the state budget. It is important to codify such language in the final state budget."

“We recognize that the opioid crisis is also a mental health crisis in our communities. Too often, the crisis starts when individuals self-medicate because of existing mental health related issues. We need every existing resource to stop the opioid crisis. Utilizing settlement money for prevention, treatment, recovery and harm reduction is the best and most appropriate use of this funding,” said Glenn Liebman, CEO of MHANYS.

“The planning of effective interventions should take into account the varied perspectives and circumstances of the children impacted,” said Andrea Smyth, Executive Director of the NYS Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health. “Children often believe that they are in some way responsible for what is happening to their family, and those adverse childhood experiences of neglect, incarceration or loss of a loved one or placement out of the home, all contribute to the need for trauma informed treatment and support.”

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About The Coalition for Behavioral Health: The Coalition for Behavioral Health serves New York's behavioral health community by providing policy, advocacy, training and technical assistance to more than 100 community-based behavioral health providers. The Coalition trains 4,000 behavioral health workers annually, and our membership serves over 600,000 individuals each year, providing mental health and substance use prevention, treatment and recovery services.

About ASAP: The Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Providers of New York State (ASAP) is committed to working together to support organizations, groups and individuals that prevent and alleviate the profound personal, social and economic consequences of alcoholism and substance abuse in New York State. ASAP represents the interests of the largest alcoholism and substance abuse prevention, treatment, research and training providers in the country.

About the NYS Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare: The New York State Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare represents 100+ mental health and substance use disorder/addiction care organizations located in local communities across New York. Our mission is to protect and enhance access to care and the continued availability of effective behavioral health services designed to meet the unique needs of individuals and families seeking our assistance.

About COMPA: The Coalition of Medication-Assisted Treatment Providers and Advocates of New York State (COMPA) is a non-profit membership organization dedicated to treating addiction through the use of pharmacotherapy as a part of a comprehensive bio-psycho-social approach to treatment. COMPA-member programs, numbering more than 45 organizations across New York State, treat more than 41,000 New Yorkers from every corner of New York State and help them to overcome their dependence on illicit opioids and other drugs. COMPA, along with its member treatment programs, affiliate members, and corporate members works to improve all aspects of the lives of patients. This involves advocacy with federal, state, and local governments as well as a variety of educational activities. COMPA's program members provide Medication Assisted Treatment and include both Opioid Treatment Programs (OTPs) and Office-Based Opioid Treatment (OBOT) providers.

About MHANYS: MHANYS is comprised of 26 affiliates in 52 counties throughout New York State. MHANYS members provide community based mental health services as well as advocacy, education and support.

About The NYS Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health: The NYS Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health provides a unified voice for children's mental health care providers and the families they serve. Strengthening the array of services, improving family and youth involvement in treatment planning, and leading public policy development and advocacy for funding of children's behavioral health services are the Coalition's priorities.