

Good morning everyone. I am Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz. On behalf of the residents of Erie County, welcome to Attorney General Letitia James, and thank you for holding this public hearing on the very, very important topic of access to mental health services for all.

As County Executive, I have made it priority of my administration to increase access to mental health services for all throughout my tenure. While the importance was never lost on me, I know recent events – both local and worldwide – have exponentially increased the needs for mental health services for Erie County residents.

Between the COVID-19 pandemic, the May 14th mass shooting, and, most recently, the Christmas Blizzard of last month, the needs for governments, nonprofits, schools, places of worship, and every other venue of support to create, share, and coordinate resources to increase access to mental health services for all has never been more important.

I would like to use my brief time today to share what steps my administration has taken recently to help our residents in case others in attendance would like to join our cause locally, or take back to the communities they serve. I will also speak in support of several initiatives currently being discussed that have my full support.

First, our newest initiative is Erie County SMART Collaborative. SMART, Supporting Mental Health by Advocating for Resources Together, is a professional learning community that brings together pre-school through 12th grade educators, community agencies, and Erie County representatives to collaborate on available Mental Health and Social Emotional Learning tools within our community.

The goal of Erie County SMART is to provide opportunities for school districts and service providers to network, share resources, and plan together to meet the needs of the whole child through integrated student supports for students, families, and communities. For example, one of the immediate tools SMART will be able to use this year is a smartphone app that schools can promote to parents to access

Mental Health services specifically for their children that will be launched later this year, with the information they are able to bring together.

This region wide approach will provide the opportunities, identify emerging needs and build the capacity to meet them, and develop the resources and processes to access these services. Thank you to all partners involved, including Erie 1 and Erie 2 BOCES.

Next, Erie County's Office of Health Equity will begin offering Mental Health First Aid training for 2,000 members of our community in the coming weeks. This first aid training is to help peers, teachers, coworkers, supervisors, or anyone else in our community to have the knowledge on how to recognize and respond to signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use challenges in adults and youth throughout Erie County. We know so often that the first steps to helping someone suffering is identifying the signs and beginning the conversation with them, and this training will equip more individuals with the necessary tools to do just that and assist those in need.

These are just a few ways Erie County is working together to help address the mental health crisis in our community that is affecting all types of residents. However, we know there are no silver bullets in public policy to address a crisis like this, and that is why I support many of the initiatives unveiled recently by Governor Kathy Hochul at her State of the State address.

From the address, as County Executive, I wholeheartedly endorse the Governor's call to increase the operational capacity by 1,000 beds for inpatient psychiatric treatment that will create 3,500 units of housing to serve New Yorkers with mental illness, her call to increase insurance coverage for mental health services, expand outpatient Mental Health services, and create system of accountability for hospital admissions and discharges to better address the needs of those suffering from mental illness.

These are just a few of the necessary steps necessary to begin addressing this crisis that Erie County would not be able to do on its own. I ask all New York State partners in government to support these initiatives to build a stronger, better, and healthier Erie County and New York State for all.

Thank you again to Attorney General Letitia James for hosting this hearing and raising awareness on ways we can work together to help those suffering to get the help they need.