



Celebrating the ADA's 36th anniversary Honoring advocates for their work during National Disability Pride Month

On July 8, OMH joined in a celebration of National Disability Pride Month and the 36th anniversary of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act at Empire State Plaza in Albany.

National Disability Pride Month is celebrated every July to honor the identity, culture and contributions of people with disabilities, while promoting inclusion and accessibility in society. The month coincides with the anniversary of the **Americans with Disabilities Act**, signed on July 26, 1990, a landmark civil rights law prohibiting discrimination based on disability.

The day featured entertainment and craft vending by people with disabilities, as well as a program to award nine advocates for their dedication to people with disabilities or mental illness. Joining OMH in organizing the celebration were the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities, Office of the Chief Disability Officer, and the Office of General Services.

Protecting rights in New York State

Noting that the rights of people with disabilities and mental illness are being threatened elsewhere in the nation, **Governor Kathy Hochul** said: "New York's strong community-based support will continue to be prioritized as we reaffirm everyone's right to live lives of dignity, independence and inclusion."

"OMH will always fully support policies that ensure people with disabilities can live and thrive in their communities and receive comprehensive community-based services," added **OMH Commissioner Dr. Ann Sullivan**. "Thanks to Governor Hochul's \$2 billion investment in strengthening all aspects of the mental health system, individuals and families can access services and support whenever and wherever they are needed."

Upcoming book to feature disability community

During the awards recognition, a collaborative project was announced with **Rick Guidotti**, an award-winning international photographer and Founder and Director of Positive Exposure to produce and publish a book titled *Beauty and Richness: Celebrating New York State's Disability Community*.

This book will feature 100 to 150 New Yorkers with disabilities from throughout the state. It was also announced that anyone who is interested in nominating themselves or another person with a disability for the book should visit the Office of the Chief Disability Officer's [website](#). Every person will be featured with their photos alongside a brief biography or highlight sharing their story.



New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities Commissioner **Willow Baer** at the podium with OMH Executive Deputy Commissioner **Ben Rosen**. "I encourage all New Yorkers to celebrate the diversity of our communities, challenge outdated assumptions and recommit ourselves to creating a future where every person belongs," Baer said.

"I see beauty absolutely everywhere around me," Guidotti said. "It's always about working with individuals and communities at risk of stigma and exclusion; seeing the beauty in human diversity and celebrating differences on a daily basis."

Recognizing advocates' dedication

The anniversary of the ADA and National Disability Pride Month offer an opportunity to celebrate all the ways individuals with disabilities contribute to our state — and to recognize those who go above and beyond in their advocacy for their fellow New Yorkers living with disabilities or mental health challenges. Nine advocates were presented with awards:

'Voice and Choice' Awards, presented by OMH

- **Adult Advocacy Award** - Recognizing an adult whose actions, recovery, leadership or mentorship has had positive effects on others. Awarded to **Henry Brigham**, Founder of Devin's Rec Room in Syracuse.
- **Family Advocacy Award** - Recognizing a family member, caregiver or support person who has promoted the rights, opportunities and recovery of an individual or individuals. Awarded to **Elida Green**, Family Support Services Supervisor at INTandem, a nonprofit organization in Western New York.
- **Youth Advocacy Award** - Recognizing a young person who has advanced awareness, inclusion, recovery or system change. Awarded to **Shantia Scofield**, a former member of OMH's Youth Mental Health Advisory Board.



OMH award recipients: **Henry Brigham**, **Shantia Scofield**, and **Elida Green**.

Presented by the Office of the Chief Disability Officer

- **Judy Heumann Lifetime Advocacy Award** - Created in the memory of Judy Heumann, the Mother of the Disability Rights Movement, to recognize an exceptional advocate who has been a bold, transformative voice in the field of disability advocacy. Awarded to **Susan Scheer**, Senior Director for Healthcare Access at VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired.
- **2026 Advocate of the Year Award** - Recognizing an individual who has demonstrated individual or systemic advocacy and advanced the rights, inclusion, and well-being of people with disabilities. Awarded to **Darby Racy**, Program Manager, Canals Planning and Public Programs at New York State Canal Corporation, New York Power Authority.
- **2026 Curb Cut Effect Award** - Recognizing an individual who has demonstrated that removing barriers for people with disabilities creates solutions with universal benefit across New York State government. Awarded to **David Whalen**, Special Assistant, Emergency Management Policy Office of Emergency Management at New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services.

Presented by the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities

- **Bernard Carabello Self Advocacy Award** - In appreciation of a lifetime of tireless self-advocacy and peer support to people with developmental disabilities. Awarded to **Stephanie Speaker**, Self-Advocate.
- **Willie Mae Goodman Family Advocacy Award** - In appreciation of a lifetime of advocacy as a family member for all people with developmental disabilities. Awarded to **Bin Feng**, Family Advocate.
- **Edward R. Matthews Lifetime Advocacy Award** - In appreciation of an unwavering dedication and commitment to people with developmental disabilities, their families and advocates. Awarded posthumously to the family of the late **Edward R. Matthews**, former CEO of ADAPT.

Participating state agencies

Canal Corporation
 Council on Developmental Disabilities
 Department of Civil Service
 Department of Corrections and Community Supervision
 Department of Health
 Department of Health - Disability Health Program
 Department of Labor
 Department of Public Service
 Department of Transportation
 Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services
 Division of Human Rights
 Education Department/Adult Career and Continuing Education Services - Vocational Rehabilitation
 Housing and Community Renewal
 Insurance Fund
 Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs
 Office for People With Developmental Disabilities
 Office for the Aging
 Office of Addiction Services and Supports
 Office of Children and Family Services/Commission for the Blind
 Office of General Services
 Office of Mental Health
 Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance
 Office of the Chief Disability Officer
 Office of the Comptroller - Diversity Management
 Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation

LGBTQ+ youth

Increasing access to care, reducing suicide risk

The statistics are troubling. Nearly 39 percent of LGBTQ+ youth in New York State report seriously considering suicide, including 45 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth, according to a [2024 survey](#) by The Trevor Project.

The need for appropriate mental health care is clearly there. Yet, LGBTQ+ youth continue to face persistent barriers in getting it.

The most recent obstacle is the suspension in July 2025 of the 'press 3' option for referral to specialized services through the federally funded 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. This service was providing aid and referrals to more than 50,000 young people per month before it was discontinued.

In response, OMH has been working to increase capacity of New York State's current 988 system by providing training for hundreds of local crisis counselors who answer calls, with a specific focus on the needs of the LGBTQ+ community. OMH will also work with a provider to offer a specialized line and insulate the state if the 'press 3' option isn't restored in the future.

Tailored supportive services

New York State and OMH are going further by supporting innovative community projects aimed at reducing suicide risk among young LGBTQ+ people:

- The **Youth Resilience, Education, and Advocacy for Children's Health program**, through Access: Supports for Living Inc., focuses primarily on suicide prevention for youth and young adults from historically marginalized or underrepresented communities, with a special focus on LGBTQ+ individuals. Youth REACH serves rural and urban communities in Dutchess, Orange, Rockland, Sullivan, and Ulster counties. It has connected 323 individuals ages 15 to 24 with help. It partners with schools and community providers to provide evidence-based training, including Teen and Youth Mental Health First Aid, and naloxone delivery.
- The **Identity and Acceptance program**, through The NY Foundling, is now serving 46 youths identifying as transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-binary up to age 21. It has seven locations in New York City offering individual supportive counseling featuring peer mentors with lived experience. The program has created a youth advisory council to inform programming and runs a community closet providing free gender-affirming clothing and other items.
- The **Prism Transcend program**, through Albany-based Rainbow Access Initiative, has enrolled 52 people ages 16 to 24 from the Capital Region who identify as transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary. The program has established links with Albany High School, Skidmore College, and the State University of New York at Albany, facilitating workshops, suicide prevention awareness, and referrals for services.
- The Buffalo-based Gay and Lesbian Youth Services of Western New York's **Transgender Youth Pathway program** has connected with 412 individuals and family members in Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming counties. The program offers individual one-on-one sessions with credentialed youth peer advocates who have lived experience. The program also provides a helpline that connects family members with parents and caregivers of transgender youth to provide mentorship and support.



OMH staff taking part in Pride celebrations, supporting their local LGBTQ+ communities. **Above:** Capital District PC staff marching in the Albany Pride Parade. **Below:** Decorations for the Pride Day celebration at the Hillside Children Center's Finger Lakes Campus Residential Treatment Facility in Auburn.

Mental health first aid

Training to help youth in crisis

Studies have shown that young people often turn to their peers for support during emotional distress and that early intervention is crucial, something that was confirmed during Governor Hochul's 2023 statewide youth listening tour.

This is why mental health providers and agencies around the world have turned to a training program called **'Mental Health First Aid.'** Developed in Australia in 2001, MHFA teaches participants to recognize the common signs of mental health challenges and substance use and give them the basic skills they need to provide support.

A growing success

There are two types of MHFA programs – **Youth MHFA** is for adults who work with youths, while **Teen MHFA** is designed for young people ages 14 through 18. Both teach participants about the importance of self-care, the impact of bullying and school violence, how to initiate conversations with youths or classmates, and how to encourage them to seek help.

MHFA has grown significantly since it was introduced in the United States in 2008, with New York State and OMH providing increasing support over the years. As of June, more than **6,100 teens** and **3,100 adults** in New York State have received MHFA training. Twenty-one school districts throughout the state have taken part in the programs so far, training 122 new Youth MHFA instructors and 73 new instructors for Teen MHFA.

Inroads these programs have made at high schools in Lansingburgh and Rensselaer are highlighted in a [promotional video](#) developed by OMH, featuring staff and students from both.

Now, with the passage of the 2027 State Budget, the state is expanding the programs so that all 10th graders statewide will be able to get it.

Protecting kids online

These investments build on Governor Hochul's ongoing efforts to help keep kids safe, especially when they're online:

- The **SAFE for Kids Act**, restricting addictive features of social media for kids.
- The **Child Data Protection Act**, preventing online operators from AI-Generated collecting and monetizing children's data without informed consent.
- **AI Companion legislation**, setting first-in-the-nation safeguards, diverting user conversations about self-harm to mental health resources and interrupting unhealthy addictive behaviors. The Governor also outlawed Child Sexual Abuse Material.
- The **Unplug and Play Agenda**, encouraging healthy socialization and child development by funding social infrastructure, physical sites like playgrounds, community centers, and pools, and expanded youth programming.
- New York's **Distraction Free Learning Policy**, requiring statewide, bell-to-bell restrictions on smartphones in K-12 schools, which is already resulting in greater academic achievement, improved student wellbeing, and safer schools.
- The **Warning Labels Bill**, requiring social media companies post warnings about the platform's potential impact on mental health.



Interviews from OMH's Mental Health First Aid video.

New York State initiatives in youth mental health

- In 2023, Governor Hochul established the **Youth Mental Health Advisory Board**, a 30-member advisory board which includes youth ages 11 to 17 and meets quarterly.
- The state now supports more than 1,300 **School-Based Mental Health Clinics**, which help students get a licensed mental health care provider on their school campus.
- New York created 43 new **Youth Assertive Community Treatment Teams** to provide youth and family therapy, medication management, peer support, and skill-building for young people with serious emotional disturbances who are at risk of entering or are returning home from inpatient settings or residential services.
- The state now operates 66 **Home Based Crisis Intervention Teams**, which provide intensive individualized services for youth 5 to 20 to help families support young people recovering from mental illness in their own homes. Eight more teams are in development, including six that will serve youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Youth Safe Spaces

Developed with input from the Youth Mental Health Advisory Board, the Youth Safe Spaces program provides places for young people ages 12 and 24 to access resources and foster positive relationships with their peers. Seven such programs have been funded:

- **Scaling youth safe spaces.** OMH will designate two community organizations to provide non-clinical, supportive, and non-judgmental environments where teens can find help.
- **Recognizing schools.** A new 'Schools of Distinction in Supporting Strong Mental Health' designation will recognize schools that meet high benchmarks in crisis prevention, stigma reduction, and mental health screenings.
- **Hosting a youth-led substance use prevention symposium.** OASAS will host a peer-led symposium for students to learn about the dangers of substance use and mental health maintenance.
- **Expanding training for clinicians.** OMH will publish a 10-year training roadmap ensuring all child-serving clinicians in agency settings are fully trained in evidence-based practices.
- **Opening 15 new youth clubhouses.** OASAS will open up to 15 new youth clubhouses with existing Recovery Community and Outreach Centers, focusing on underserved counties.
- **Increasing support for Indigenous youth.** The state will partner with Tribal Nations to increase transitional support workers and peer advocates in Indigenous-serving school districts. A new Indigenous School Mental Health Workforce Center will be created to support SUNY students pursuing careers in school-based mental health.



Maternal mental health

More funding for HealthySteps and Collaborative Care

OMH has made more than \$18.4 million available to expand [HealthySteps](#), a successful early childhood mental health initiative that provides tens of thousands of critical depression screenings for new mothers each year by integrating behavioral health professionals with pediatric practices to provide early childhood mental and physical health care.

The additional funding will provide 38 new awards to the 152 sites now funded, increasing statewide capacity of the program by about 25 percent once all are fully implemented. In 2025 alone, HealthySteps sites completed more than 108,000 screenings for perinatal depression.

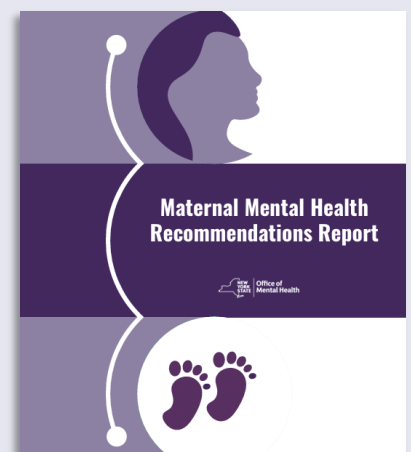
Altogether, these sites conducted more than 500,000 screenings, helping to track food insecurity, housing instability, substance misuse, tobacco use, transportation, utility, and interpersonal safety.

OMH also awarded seven \$50,000 one-time Collaborative Care grants to help OBGYN and family medical practices implement evidence-based integrated healthcare for patients and decrease racial disparities. Award recipients are:

- **Jamaica Hospital**, Queens
- **Jericho Road Ministries**, Buffalo
- **Montefiore Medical Center**, Bronx
- **Neighborhood Health Center of WNY**, Buffalo
- **Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center**, Niagara Falls
- **William F. Ryan Community Health Center**, Manhattan
- **WMC-NY Inc**, Valhalla

This funding will help to increase perinatal depression and anxiety screenings and integrated treatment, a recommendation included in the state's first-ever [maternal mental health report](#) (at right), released by OMH in November 2025.

Governor Hochul previously secured \$2.9 million to expand [Project TEACH](#), an initiative to assist maternal health providers with screening and treatment of maternal depression and related mood and anxiety disorders during pregnancy and the postpartum period within their scope of practice.



Housing

ESSHI is helping to provide stable environments for recovery



Commissioner Sullivan, fourth from left, and Governor Hochul, taking part in the groundbreaking for Sparrow Square in Brooklyn.

Supportive housing has long been a major component in New York State's efforts to ensure individuals living with mental illness are able to succeed and thrive in the communities of their choice.

Vital to this effort has been the [Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative](#), a state-funded grant program administered by OMH. ESSHI serves unhoused individuals, families, or youth who have unmet housing needs and face life challenges like mental illness, substance use disorders, or other disabling conditions. Grants cover the cost of running the housing units and providing non-medical wrap-around support like case management, vocational training, and healthcare access. In June, the Governor announced [a new round](#) of ESSHI grants to fund additional projects.

Utica Crescent and Sparrow Square, Brooklyn

ESSHI is providing funding for operating expenses and on-site social services for **Utica Crescent**, a 322-unit complex built on a former Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center parking lot. Completed in June, the project includes fully accessible and adaptable apartments. Eighty-nine apartments are set aside for on-site supportive services for eligible elderly residents, 17 will accommodate residents with mobility disabilities, and seven units will accommodate residents with sensory disabilities.

Joining OMH in funding and developing the project are Empire State Development and New York State Homes and Community Renewal. Catholic Charities Neighborhood Services is providing the on-site support services.

Meanwhile, construction is now underway on nearby **Sparrow Square**. More than 100 of its 261 units will be reserved for eligible vulnerable households and those struggling with homelessness who are eligible to receive on-site supportive services. Seventeen of the accessible and adaptable apartments will accommodate residents with mobility disabilities, and 10 units will accommodate residents with sensory disabilities.

Capital funding is coming from OMH through Governor Hochul's \$1 billion mental health initiative and the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance's Homeless Housing and Assistance Program. Operating expenses and on-site social services are funded through an ESSHI award administered by OTDA and through OMH's Supportive Housing Single Room Occupancy program. The project is being developed by Douglaston Development and Breaking Ground.

Frederick Shack Residence, Bronx

ESSHI is also providing funding for services at the Frederick Shack Residence, a 79-unit affordable and supportive housing development in the Bronx's Crotona Park East neighborhood. OMH took part in its ribbon-cutting in April. Developed by Urban Pathways, the project was built on the former site of a 29-unit supportive single-room occupancy facility that was demolished in early 2024 to make way for a larger building that could serve a wider population.



Fifty-five apartments are reserved for eligible individuals who will receive on-site support services. Eight units will accommodate residents with mobility impairment and four units will accommodate residents with sensory disabilities. Other state funding is through HCR and OTDA. The new building is named after the late **Frederick Shack**, Urban Pathway's longtime executive director and a tireless advocate for supportive housing and homelessness services.

Estella Housing, Hempstead

Work was completed in June on Estella Housing, which features 95 affordable apartments, including 42 supportive homes for vulnerable individuals and veterans experiencing homelessness.

Eleven apartments are fully accessible and adapted for residents with mobility impairments, while four apartments are equipped for residents with hearing or vision impairments.

Thirty apartments are supported through OMH's Community Residence Single Room Occupancy Program and 12 apartments are supported through ESSHI. Supportive services will be provided by Concern for Independent Living, including case management, assistance accessing medical and behavioral health care, employment services, substance use treatment and other community-based resources. Joining OMH in funding Estella Housing are HCR, OTDA, and ESD.

The project transformed a long-vacant bus parking lot into much-needed affordable housing within walking distance of the Long Island Rail Road Hempstead Station and the Nassau Inter-County Express bus terminal.



Apartments at Mill & Main, Watertown

In June, work was completed on the Apartments at Mill & Main, an affordable and supportive housing development in downtown Watertown that will provide 63 affordable apartments and 31 supportive units for vulnerable individuals, including those struggling with homelessness. Supportive services are provided on-site by THRIVE Wellness and Recovery Inc., and include case management, wellness programming and housing stability services designed to help residents maintain long-term independent living.

Seven apartments are fully accessible and adapted for residents with mobility impairments, while three apartments are equipped for residents with hearing or vision impairments. OMH is providing support through an ESSHI award. Other funding is coming from HCR and the Clean Energy Initiative partnership between HCR and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. This project redeveloped deteriorated residential and commercial buildings that had been vacant since 2010.



30 West, Haverstraw

Construction started in June on 30 West, an 81-unit affordable housing development in the village of Haverstraw. Nine units will be for residents with mobility disabilities and four units will accommodate residents with sensory disabilities. Twenty supportive units will be reserved for eligible tenants struggling with homelessness. Services provided by Westhab include case management, referrals to community-based resources, advocacy, life skills development and emotional support.

OMH is providing operational funding for the supportive units through ESSHI. Other funding is through HCR; ESD; the New York State Community Resiliency, Economic Sustainability, and Technology Program; and Rockland County. The project is being built on the site of an underused municipal parking lot, complementing the community's Downtown Revitalization Initiative.



Governor's five-year plan

Projects such as these not only support their residents, they help to strengthen the local economy by turning unused buildings into a modern asset for the surrounding neighborhood. Under Governor Hochul's leadership, the state steadily increased its supply of supportive housing.

The 2027 State Budget completes the Governor's comprehensive [five-year housing plan](#) to create or preserve 100,000 affordable homes statewide, including 10,000 with support services for vulnerable populations plus the electrification of an additional 50,000 homes. More than 81,000 affordable homes have been created or preserved to date. The budget also invested \$250 million in capital funding to accelerate the construction of thousands of new affordable homes.

Acts of kindness

A simple gesture can foster connection, hope, and a sense of purpose for people in recovery. Here are two recent stories of how acts of kindness made a big difference.

Sending messages of hope

In 2024, **Aleena Zeejah**, a student at Oceanside High School on Long Island, started a non-profit organization called 'Cards for Mental Health' to send messages of encouragement to individuals receiving psychiatric care.

"I believe in the power of small gestures to make a big difference in the lives of those struggling, especially with their mental health," she said.

Aleena reached out to OMH, asking if the agency would be interested in holding cardmaking sessions at some of its facilities. So earlier this year, OMH brought the program to Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens Village and Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in West Brentwood. Staff and individuals in care spent the days creating handmade cards for others facing comparable challenges. The activity offered clients an opportunity to express encouragement and selflessness through creative engagement.

"This was a great way to allow our clients to do something positive for other people who are in a similar situation," said Creedmoor Rehabilitation Director **Kelly McClean**. "Messages from clients were uplifting and focused on encouraging people to hang in there and stay hopeful."

"When we asked the clients about this project, they felt as they were truly making an impact on other people who were going through the same thing and that it helped them feel that they weren't alone," added Pilgrim Rehabilitation Director **David Barhome**. "Staff who took part said they were inspired and amazed by the amount of effort, compassion, and empathy that clients poured into the cards."

For more information about Cards for Mental Health, visit: <https://www.cardsformentalhealth.org>.



Long Island high school student and founder of Cards for Mental Health **Aleena Zeejah** (center), with **Mondyna Prévot** and **Umer Moughal**, RNs from Mount Sinai South Nassau Hospital, one of the facilities that received the cards.

Let's put on a fashion show!

Very few things in life can be as dull as waiting in line to have one's photo taken for a driver's license or an identification card.

As Buffalo Psychiatric Center was preparing to convert to the 'ObservSmart' electronic monitoring system this spring, staff knew that they would have to take photos of clients for their system profiles.

So, they decided to have a little fun with the process. To get clients ready, Rehabilitation Department staff helped them prepare as though they were starring in a fashion show.

"Clients could style their hair and makeup or try on perfumes to prepare for their time to shine on the runway," said Treatment Team Leader **Bianca Hartway**.

Staff took fun photos with a tablet that was connected to a portable printer for clients to keep, so they could remember their time on the runway. "We had several days of dancing, glam, and of course, getting to the important business of taking serious profile pictures," she added.

Buffalo PC is the second psychiatric center in the state system to implement ObservSmart. Hutchings PC in Syracuse switched in January 2025.



Buffalo PC staff who made the fashion show possible: From left: **Bianca Hartway**, **Shannon Durant**, **Amanda Duve**, **Elizabeth Wolf**, **Ashley Allen**, **Suzanne Hoisington**, **Brenda Martin**, **Kimberly Karalus**, **Mimi Schultz**, and **Alexander Glenfield**.

On the road

Grand opening of St. Hilda's

Commissioner Sullivan cut the ribbon at the grand opening in May of St. Hilda's House, a congregate treatment community residence in Manhattan.

St. Hilda's House offers 36 units for chronically unhoused adults with a serious mental illness or with a co-occurring substance use disorder and individuals referred by state psychiatric centers and adult homes.

The facility is operated by ACMH Inc. OMH played a major role in financing and developing the project.



From left: Community of the Holy Spirit President **Sr. Faith Margaret**, ACMH Resident, OMH NYC Field Office Director **Najwa Awad**, OMH Director Community Budget and Financial Management **April Wojtkiewicz**, Commissioner Sullivan, OMH Facilities Planner **Tsachai Simpson**, ACMH CEO **Dan Johansson**, ACMH Resident, OMH Bureau of Housing Development and Support Deputy Director **Suzanne Cook**, OMH Facilities Planner **Robert Zaccarelli**, and OMH Bureau of Housing Development and Support Director **Julie Duncan**.



National Council for Mental Wellbeing

In April, OMH joined with colleagues from the Mental Health Association in New York State in giving a presentation at the annual National Council for Mental Wellbeing convention in Denver on local and statewide approaches to Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid.

From left are MHANYS Senior Director of Training and Programs **Katie Oldakowski**, OMH Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Community Program Policy and Management **Bob Moon**, OMH Mental Health Program Specialist 2 **Davia Plusch**, and MHANYS Director of Mental Health First Aid **Stephanie Sullivan**.

Behind them is 'ALGEE' the koala, the mascot for the Mental Health First Aid program. Its name comes from the steps involved in mental health first aid: **A**ssess, **L**isten, **G**ive, **E**ncourage professional help, and **E**ncourage self-help.

Community living symposium

OMH staffed an information table at the Association of Community Living Management Symposium in Saratoga Springs in May. The event brings together state agencies and providers to focus on collaboration across systems serving individuals with behavioral health needs, IDD, housing challenges, and other vulnerable populations. Throughout the conference, OMH promoted awareness of crisis response resources.

From left: **Gregory Redmond**, Central NY Field Office Mental Health Program Specialist 2, Western NY Field Office Director of Adult Community Services **Kylee Criscione**, WNYFO Unlicensed Housing Specialist **Stacey Smith**, CNYFO Mental Health Program Specialist 2 **Carolyn Austin**, Albany Safe Operations Support Liaison **Kalan Mayhue**, **Suzanne Cook**, and Albany SOS Liaison **Joseph Cooper**.



Resources

Guide to plain language and accessibility

Clear language is fundamental to recovery. When information is easy to understand, people can engage in their care, make informed decisions, and exercise autonomy. Complex language, on the other hand, creates avoidable barriers.

This is especially important when it comes to discussing care plans. When people have a greater understanding of their plans and rights, they feel more in control and involved. This helps reduce stress and prevent conflict.

OMH has developed readability guidance to strengthen how we communicate with the individuals and families we serve. It establishes a standard for readability across all individual-facing material to ensure information is clear, accessible, and usable. OMH encourages you to start applying this guidance to individual and family-facing materials, such as forms, instructions, and program information.

Readability standards

- Use active voice (for example: 'We will help you' instead of 'Help will be provided').
- Use common, everyday words instead of clinical or legal terms.
- Aim for a 6th- to 8th-grade reading level.
- Explain acronyms the first time they are used.
- Keep sentences short and clear.

Writing for clarity

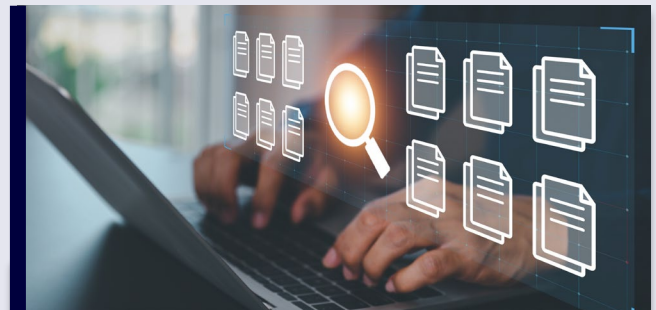
- Write as though you are speaking directly to the reader (for example: Use 'you' and 'your').
- Be clear about what the reader needs to do next.
- Use bullet points and headings to break up text.
- Keep paragraphs short.

Examples

- Before: We maintain the confidentiality of your protected health information in accordance with state and federal regulations.
After (plain language): We keep your health information private. We follow all state and federal laws to protect your records.
- Before: In the event of a behavioral health crisis, please utilize the designated emergency contact numbers provided below.
After (plain language): If you are having a mental health emergency, call one of the numbers listed below right away.

Formatting and accessibility

- Use at least a 12-point font.
- Leave space between sections.
- Use clear, bold headings to organize content.
- Avoid large blocks of text.
- Underline only hyperlinks – use bold and or italics for emphasis.
- Provide translations in the reader's preferred language.



Tools and Resources

Check your score

Use Microsoft Word's [Readability Tool](#) or the [Flesch-Kincaid Scale](#) to find your document's grade level.

New York State guidance

Review New York State's [Plain Language: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Use It](#) (Screenshot above).

Federal standards

Visit the U.S. government's Plain Language Guide page at [Digital.gov](#).

Need a review?

OMH's Recovery and Resilience Office can help you review your materials. Contact: Julie.Burton@omh.ny.gov, Recovery.Resilience@omh.ny.gov.