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Executive Deputy Commissioner

January 20, 2022

Brian Reilly
Audit Director
Office of the State Comptroller
Division of State Government Accountability
110 State Street – 11th Floor
Albany, NY 12236-0001

Dear Mr. Reilly:

In accordance with Executive Law § 170, the following are the Office of Mental Health's (OMH) responses to the Office of the State Comptroller's (OSC's) final audit report entitled, "*Benefits Advisement Services for Individuals with Disabilities Seeking Employment*" (2020-S-41).

OSC's final report fails to acknowledge that recommendations made within the Employment First Commission Report (Report) came without any additional resources or funding. The Employment First Commission Report issued in March 2015 made eleven recommendations, including one for improving benefits advisement services to individuals with disabilities in making informed decisions about going to work. Although benefits advisement encompasses several State agencies including the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, the Department of Health, and the New York State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped, OMH willingly took on the task of implementing the entirety of this recommendation without any additional resources or funding.

OMH believes in Employment First principles, supports the Executive Order, and agrees that its overall goals of improving outcomes and reducing poverty are imperative for OMH and our partner agencies. OMH also commends the Commission for the vision of what may be possible pertaining to the development of a pre-emptive and comprehensive benefits advisement system. However, the challenges of creating an unfunded system that encompasses *every* aspect of this vision are many. Additional funding and resources are necessary to fully implement the suggested recommendations within the Report. Without this context, any review of what has been accomplished up to this point is incomplete. Nonetheless, OMH will continue to commit its resources to improve the Workforce Incentive Navigator Reports (WINR) and overall benefits advisement for all New Yorkers experiencing a disability and is committed to being a leading ambassador for Employment First principles and practices.

OMH's responses to the recommendations are as follows:

OSC Recommendation 1: Formally assess the current benefits advisement system and make improvements, where possible, to address the Report's recommendation. The assessment should consider key system features recommended in the Report including:

- An interactive benefits calculator that allows individuals to assess how employment will affect access to publicly funded benefits;
- Automated life coaching triggers sent to professional life coaches; and
- The addition of information for other benefit types including SNAP and housing assistance

OMH 180-Day Response: OMH will continue to assess and explore the implementation of each of the features OSC identified in their recommendation. To satisfy this goal in the short term, OMH is investigating a basic benefits calculator link which will be accessed through the NYESS website and in the WINR application. The target date for determining what resource to link and ensuring its availability in both locations is by the end of March 2022.

The long-term goal is to either develop or partner with a more complex calculator which incorporates all necessary benefit types. OMH is collaborating with a group in Rochester that is currently in the development phase of a calculator tool that, in theory, will satisfy this goal. OMH is working directly with this group on the initial phase and is exploring the feasibility of statewide scalability. OMH is committing both IT and subject matter experts to this collaboration. Current projections indicate that the first phase of calculator testing will occur in the first quarter of calendar year 2022.

Additionally, OMH will continue to explore the following options in 2022:

- trigger or alert mechanism for the most effective and efficient triggers which will be sent to Work Incentives Navigators (former “life coaches”) as outlined in OMH’s response to recommendation 2; and
- other benefit and work incentive types which may include:
 - investigating what benefit types would have the greatest impact on job seekers facing disability; and
 - deciding whether additional data is required to make benefit determinations and, if so, working with the appropriate parties to see if data sharing is feasible.

OSC Recommendation 2: Develop a network of professional life coaches who are educated in public benefits and work incentives for individuals with disabilities, collaborating with other State agencies as necessary.

OMH 180-Day Response: OMH recognizes the systems-wide need for additional improved benefits advisement capacity, and will continue efforts to provide training, technical assistance, and develop resources to address this need. OMH will utilize the term Work Incentives Navigator (WIN)¹ in lieu of Life Coach and will establish a formal WIN network by the end of calendar year 2022. Additionally:

- OMH provider affiliates with benefits advisement capacity will receive a WIN designation;
- gap areas will be identified, and additional partnerships developed as needed; and

¹ WIN is a draft title for this role.

- OMH will continuously seek to improve and strengthen the WIN Network by leveraging both existing and emerging resources.

OSC Recommendation 3: Evaluate the feasibility of expanding WINR to include all individuals with disabilities, even those who are not currently working with an employment services provider, collaborating with other State agencies and external entities as necessary.

OMH 180-Day Response: Expanding WINR to include all individuals with disabilities presents significant challenges related to PII and PHI. The baseline data threshold to be included in WINR is participation in the NYESS system, for which all participating individuals sign a consent. Obtaining PII and PHI data for individuals beyond that scope (i.e., for individuals with a disability who are not NYESS customers) is not achievable based on current data agreements and access. However, OMH will:

- continuously seek to grow the NYESS customer base, which at no point will be comprised of the entire population of individuals with disabilities in New York for the reasons detailed above; and
- leverage data initiatives through the Most Integrated Setting Coordinating Council (MISCC) or a similar group to strategize how to address this statewide challenge of reaching beyond the NYESS sub-population. For example, OMH is currently participating in the MISCC Data Sub-Committee and will continue to leverage this and similar opportunities for expanded data access in 2022.

OSC Recommendation 4: Work with the email notification vendor to capture historical notification data and use that data to assess the effectiveness of WINR notifications, making improvements to the notifications, as applicable, and collaborating with other State agencies as necessary.

OMH 180-Day Response: OMH does not consider e-mail notification analysis an effective method for measuring impact; however, OMH is currently investigating whether building our own notification application will add value. A decision will be made by March 31, 2022. Regardless of whether a tool is purchased or built, OMH will put in place a structured analysis of WINR e-mail notifications.

Please let us know if you have any questions or require additional information concerning the above.

Sincerely,



Ann Marie T. Sullivan, M.D.
Commissioner

cc. Honorable Kathy Hochul, Governor of the State of New York
Honorable Thomas P. DiNapoli, State Comptroller

Honorable Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Senate Majority Leader and President Pro Tempore
Honorable Robert G. Ort, Senate Minority Leader
Honorable Carl E. Heastie, Assembly Speaker
Honorable Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes, Assembly Majority Leader
Honorable William A. Barclay, Assembly Minority Leader
Honorable Liz Krueger, Chairperson, Senate Finance Committee
Honorable Thomas F. O'Mara, Ranking Minority Member, Senate Finance Committee
Honorable Helene E. Weinstein, Chairman, Assembly Ways and Means Committee
Honorable Edward P. Ra, Ranking Minority Member, Assembly Ways and Means Committee
Robert F. Mujica Jr., Division of the Budget