



**Written Comments for Pennsylvania House Human Services Committee
March 2, 2021**

Good morning. Thank you Chairmen Farry and Cruz and members of the Human Services Committee for the opportunity to testify on mental health funding. My name is Kara McClain and I am the Executive Director with Keystone Human Service's Mental Health division. I received a Master's of Science in Psychology from Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. I have dedicated my career, spanning 24 years, to working in mental health services. Improving the lives of our most vulnerable has always been a passion of mine. Keystone provides mental health services in the following counties: Dauphin, Cumberland, Franklin-Fulton, Lancaster, Allegheny, York-Adams, Huntington, Mifflin, Juniata, Northumberland and Lebanon County. In addition to mental health services, Keystone is also a provider of the following services across the Commonwealth:

- Intellectual Disability services
- Capital Area Head Start
- Susquehanna Service Dogs
- Keystone Autism Services

As part of Keystone's Mental Health division, I have the pleasure of supporting individuals who receive County funded services. Specifically, we support 235 people in residential services and 343 people in community based services. Our goal is to meet the individuals where they are and aim to build their skill set and improve their overall level of functioning. We are encouraging individuals to live as independently as possible in the least restrictive setting while having their psychiatric, medical, mental health and wellness needs met. We aim to build skills, offer education and engage individuals therapeutically so that they can continue on their recovery journey. To do this, we leverage strong clinical expertise, housing supports, nursing support, engagement with our community partners and each person's natural supports as well. It takes a strong and dedicated team to support those with serious and persistent mental illness each day.

In February of 2020, I was honored to offer testimony to this committee and during that testimony I shared that Keystone had closed multiple programs and services due to funding challenges experienced. I am saddened to report to you today that here we are one year later and I am yet again in the process of closing another mental health residential program. We recognize that we can no longer operate County funded services in 2021 with a funding stream that has had no increase since 2009. Stagnant

rates over a dozen years has had a detrimental impact on our workforce, to the services we offer and we are clearly at a critical breaking point. The time is now. We must all feel compelled to strengthen funding and ultimately protect a tremendously vulnerable population.

The population served have complex and challenging needs and we are willing and able to do what it takes to support this vulnerable population, but we providers, need the funding to follow. Examples experienced regarding inadequately funding mental health services include the following:

- Termination of services and programs across various Counties year after year.
- Stagnant hourly wages for employees has made retaining strong employees and recruiting talented new candidates cumbersome at best.
- Employees are working two and three jobs to make ends meet because the pay is insufficient or they are leaving the industry all together.
- Challenges related to staff retention and hiring creates instability and further destabilizes an already vulnerable population.
- Due to increased expenses and flat funding, we have had to lower the professional degree and working experience criteria for staff positions in an effort to fill staff vacancies.
- Increased staff vacancies has led to greater dependence on contracted/agency staff to fill openings which is both costly and can lead to inconsistency in service delivery. We currently have a 24% staff vacancy rate across our programs.
- We have seen a change in our workforce skillset overtime yet have less training resources for workforce development given the flat funding.
- Basic expenses, such as food and household supplies, for our individuals has increased in all of our services yet no cost of living increase has been available to offset these growing expenses.

Ultimately, there are unmet needs across very vulnerable populations and those needs have only exacerbated during this pandemic. I call upon all of you to make this the year that we make a difference. We can meet these needs if we increase funding, hire and support an experienced workforce while supporting those who deserve much more support than they are currently receiving. I urge you to consider the consequences of insufficiently funding mental health services. If Keystone and other providers are not providing treatment, service and support to this population, they are at risk of being homeless, being incarcerated or being institutionalized. This population deserves more. They deserve our compassion, our dedication and protection.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak this morning.

Kara W. McClain, MS
Executive Director, Mental Health Division
Keystone Human Services