

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you briefly, as the Government Action Chair of the New York Art Therapy Association. My name is Lesley Achitoff.

As a Creative Arts Therapist currently focusing on trauma, a primary point I'd like to make today is the importance of Medicaid benefits for those seeking Creative Arts Therapy treatment. Excluding some clinicians and mental health practitioners from treating Medicaid beneficiaries for untreated mental illness, anxiety, depression, etc., disproportionately puts them at risk of engagement with the criminal justice system. I can attest to this with confidence as the Director of the largest Creative Arts Therapy program within a jail in the country. The City of New York has invested in this program, and I've seen it grow from 2 to 14 clinicians over the nine years I have been working on Rikers Island...and we all know that the City cannot afford to invest easily and without evidence of efficacy. I have personally witnessed growth in the ability on the part of traumatized individuals to find hope, dig within themselves to discover their healthy strengths, and find the motivation to use this hope and strength to move forward with their lives educationally, professionally and as leaders and caretakers of their families. Many of you may see what we do as 'fun', or 'restful', or perhaps 'containing', but it is so much more than that. It is evidence-based therapy that works.

Creative Arts Therapy must not be limited to only those with money. Medicaid coverage would provide many more people with the opportunity to work, stay off drugs, appreciate their inner resilience, and be productive in ways that would benefit them, their families, their communities, and all of us as citizens of this state; so please support this kind of treatment and the amending of the current law.

Along similar lines, NYATA is moving forward to assist the children hugely traumatized due to separation from their families due to the recent immigration action, as well as with the families themselves. We are reaching out to non-profits and schools, in an attempt to help ward off the potentially disabling trauma affecting these children, and supporting them to avoid future emotional and behavior problems associated with abandonment and isolation. We all know that psychological problems have been shown to have a negative impact on a child's ability to fulfill his or her educational and developmental potential. Schools are often ill-equipped to provide necessary psychological support for the growing number of children in need of mental health care; they need supportive structures that would help them avoid being disruptive and destructive towards themselves and others.

Officially including Creative Arts Therapists within the category of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel, clunkily known as SISPs, would provide us with an important role in the educational system, as opposed to conferring with staff support as volunteers. SISPs work on a wide range of issues related to school and student safety such as violence prevention, crisis abatement, suicide prevention, and anti-bullying measures that support non-discrimination. If and when a crisis does occur, SISPs are on the front line of crisis management, evaluation and treatment for PTSD, as well as bereavement support. While we are accepted on the Federal level, I hope for your support for the inclusion of art therapy services in the NY ESSA plan. I feel I can say with confidence that had some of the young people I've met on Rikers had these services more available to them while struggling with poverty, broken families and historical patterns of incarceration, I might never have met them.