

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

**Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Testimony from Young Invincibles and Young Advocates
Friday, October 16, 2020**

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**New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Neha Syeda, Junior, Brooklyn College and
Policy and Advocacy Fellow at Young Invincibles
Friday, October 16, 2020**

Good morning. My name is Neha Syeda and I'm a junior at Brooklyn College majoring in Communications. I am also a Policy & Advocacy Fellow with Young Invincibles. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify.

I'm here before you to share the perspective of a college student who is challenged to pursue their higher education while also juggling the burden of mental health. All of us here can agree on one thing — college is hard. When the demands of college are coupled with the toll of anxiety and depression, it makes the perfect recipe for failure. This is not foreign to CUNY students. A 2018 survey from Healthy CUNY found that more than 40,000 CUNY undergraduates report symptoms of depression. Nearly 50,000 report symptoms of anxiety disorders, and 40,000 have symptoms that are associated with moderate or severe psychological distress.¹ These numbers were staggering even before we were in the midst of a global pandemic — and both research and students themselves suggest that COVID-19 will increase mental health needs on college campuses.

As a Brooklyn College student, I have had numerous encounters with students who are struggling to keep up their grades while managing their depression or anxiety. The impact of their mental health has impaired their college success. Many have expressed that they would like to seek mental health counseling. However accessing mental health services has proven challenging. While mental health services are offered at 21 of the 24 CUNY campuses², it's extremely difficult to access these services, which ultimately impacts our college persistence.

Along with being a CUNY student, I'm also a Policy & Advocacy Fellow at Young Invincibles, where I'm able to work with CUNY students from across New York City. Through my work at YI, I've learned that simply having an office dedicated to mental health counseling doesn't solve the

¹ "Q and A on Mental Health as a Barrier to Academic Success at CUNY." Healthy CUNY, March 2019. https://sph.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Report_01_Mental-Health_Final.pdf

² Ibid.

issue. First, we know that marketing and outreach around the availability of these services is not enough. Students are often unaware of on-campus counseling services and how to access them. Even when they do take the initiative to reach out for help, they are often greeted with an unbelievably long waitlist. Most CUNY campuses are severely understaffed with mental health professionals, forcing students to be put on a waitlist. While they wait, college courses continue, with no leeway to take needed time off *and* stay on course to graduate. Even when students make it through the waitlist and are able to meet with mental health counselors, we have heard that they are met with restricted, timed appointments where everything is rushed.

CUNY's mental health services are not effectively serving its students, and changes are needed to increase student success. We recommend the following.

1. At both the Central and campus levels, CUNY must increase its communication and marketing of mental health services and how to access them. In addition to having the information clearly visible on its websites, CUNY Central and individual campuses should increase communication of mental health services communication to students via email, texting, and social media. Even asking professors to share the information and include them on syllabuses would be recommended. Information about mental health services should also be coupled with information about accessing basic needs supports, such as food pantries and Single Stops.
2. We need to hire more mental health counselors across all CUNY campuses to make sure all students that need these services are served in a timely fashion, reducing long waitlists. Currently, the ratio of counselors to students across NYS colleges and universities is 1:2,400³. The recommended ratio by International Accreditation of Counseling Services is 1:1,000⁴. Support legislation, as that of [New York Senate Bill 7317 to increase on-campus capacity](#).
3. Finally, I would encourage CUNY and the Council to examine the new partnership between SUNY and Thriving Campus to help increase the growing demand of student mental health services. Knowing that capacity is limited, CUNY should consider partnering with an online service provider to help ensure that students receive timely remote therapy options.⁵ I've included details about this program in my written testimony. This could be a model for supporting CUNY students with their mental health and thus ultimately increasing their college success.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

³ "2019-2020 Operating Budget Request and Four-Year Financial Plan", CUNY, January 14, 2019. https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/budget-and-finance/FY2020-Budget-Request_for-OBF-Site-1.pdf

⁴ "Staff to Students Ratio", International Accreditation of Counseling Services, 2019. <https://iacsinc.org/staff-to-student-ratios/>

⁵ "SUNY Expands Mental Health Services," *Inside Higher Ed*. October 6, 2020. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/10/06/suny-expands-mental-health-services>

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New York City Council

**Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Sharon Alam, Freshman, Baruch College
Friday, October 16, 2020**

Good morning. My name is Sharon Alam, and I'm a freshman studying political science at Baruch College. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the New York City Council.

I'm testifying today to speak about mental health services on my campus. Being a person of color and not having someone understand my problems is an issue. My ongoing issues with post-traumatic stress disorder create barriers to my educational success. I'm concerned about how Baruch's campus does not have enough counselors, compared with students' needs. The counselors can't suffice for every student's needs, including my own, which impact me in my day-to-day life.

When seeking mental health services for myself, it was hard to find where to make the appointment since there were no advertisements for these services. I was told to request an appointment, and they would find me a date. This date was available weeks after I needed it. It is very exhausting, especially when we are doing remote learning in the middle of a global pandemic. I know I'm not the only student with mental health problems that has struggled to get an appointment.

I'm requesting for the New York City Council to prioritize hiring more mental health counselors that can meet students' needs. A report by Healthy CUNY and CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy recommends hiring more mental health professionals to serve in CUNY mental health counseling centers. This way, students can have more flexible time over their busy schedules, and the waiting time would be reduced. Importantly, CUNY should prioritize hiring counselors who are people of color, so the students of color have a safe place to go. Counselors should also be able to speak more languages than English, because not everyone attending college is fluent in English. Last but not least, the LGBTQ community should not be overlooked. City and state funding for higher education should be increased to support these changes.

Investing in mental health will only cause positive outcomes for the student, which means positive results for the CUNY system and New York City. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.



New York City Council

**Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Rosmery Arzu, Sophomore, Hostos Community College
Friday, October 16, 2020**

Good morning, my name is Rosmery Arzu, and I am a sophomore at Hostos Community College studying Liberal Arts and Science. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

As a student, I see a lack of support from CUNY regarding mental health resources, especially from my school, Hostos Community College. We, as students of Hostos Community College, do not have a one hundred percent open mental health system, where we can feel safe in sharing our concerns and problems. The college does not campaign to attract students and give them the necessary help. A great majority of students do not know that we have a mental health department with counselors who are paid to help us. Many others say that the system is terrible because there are not enough counselors and students have to wait long periods of time to see them.

As noted above, many students are unaware that we have these resources. I was one of those students until one day a good friend told me that he was having problems with his grades because he felt overloaded with all the classes due to the pressure of work, family, and online classes in the middle of a pandemic. One day he decided to call the Hostos mental health department. He was told that they could not help him at that time because he had to make an appointment in advance, and if he had problems with the classes, that he could go to the tutoring center. If I am telling you that there is something wrong with my mental health, why are you sending me to the tutoring center?

The fundamental step that must be taken to solve this problem is expanding and improving mental health services, as well as programs and others services that help students complete such college such as CUNY EDGE, Single Stop, food pantries, ASAP, and College Discovery, among others. The hiring of trained staff with a dedication to their work and who show a desire to help students should be a priority. I am also a true believer that all these services should be walks-in. Anxiety cannot wait two weeks. Depression cannot wait for you to put me on hold for 30 minutes and then tell me that you can't help me. These are serious problems. We as students are in the line of fire.

Due to all of the above, I am asking the city to expand mental health programs virtually and in person and to invest in increasing the number of diverse mental health counselors on campus. I also call on our leaders in Albany to invest more into our higher education, and ensure funding for programs that provide help to college students. CUNY is the largest urban university in the United States with 274,000 students in 2018. That same year 2018, Healthy CUNY conducted a survey which reflected that 40,329 undergraduate students presented symptoms of depression, 47,662 showed symptoms of anxiety, and 40,818 showed psychological distress. Students attending four-year colleges are more prone to anxiety, the same pattern is repeated with female students and low-income students. If we implement measures in time, many stories can be turned for the better, and certainly, these tragic numbers can go down. Thank you.



New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Diamilatou Barry, Senior, Hunter College
Friday, October 16, 2020

Good afternoon. My name is Diamilatou Barry and I am a senior at Hunter College studying Computer Science and Psychology. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

Mental health problems such as depression and anxiety are barriers to academic success for some college students at CUNY and other colleges around the country. Depression and anxiety can lead to academic failure. According to the 2018 Healthy CUNY survey of a representative sample of CUNY community college and four-year college students, it is estimated that 40,329 undergraduates report symptoms of depression, 47,662 report symptoms of anxiety disorders and 40,818 report symptoms associated with moderate or severe psychological distress. They also add that white students have slightly higher rates of all three conditions than their peers in other ethnic / racial groups.

Therefore, the presence of mental health counselors is essential and it should be advertised enough on campus to make students aware of the mental health services and the advantage of using them. Although the rate of student's mental health is high, the number of mental health counselors available in each college is low : Currently, CUNY's student-to-counselor ratio of 2,400 students per counselor is well above the level of 1,500 students per counselor that is recommended by the International Association of Counseling Services.

In my own experience, I have had both depression and anxiety for many years, and I have seen both a psychiatrist and psychologist for about three years. Since enrolling in college, my depression and anxiety are more related to challenges that I am facing in college, so I was advised by my psychologist to see a mental health counselor on my campus to work on those issues specifically. Unfortunately, I could not see a mental health counselor during the past four years at CUNY due to lack of information about how to access those services on my campus. Consequently, I have been struggling with these challenges since 2016. Fortunately, I started seeing a mental health counselor at Hunter College a few weeks ago because I was able to learn more about these services due to COVID-19. During our first session, however, my mental health counselor started referring me back to a hospital for mental health services. I feel sad because I was excited to finally be able to see a counselor on my campus since they are more familiar with the issues students face in college.

I believe that there should be more experienced mental health counselors available to students at CUNY and other colleges, and students must be aware of these services. It would be also helpful to extend individual appointments. Moreover, I believe CUNY increasing the following strategies would contribute to the increase in access to mental health services in college:

- Hire more mental health professionals to serve in CUNY mental health counselling centers so that more students can be reached and the waiting time reduced.
 - Prepare students to serve as peer health advocates who can promote use of campus and community mental health services. These advocates can educate students about available services and launch a campaign to reduce stigma.
 - Train faculty to provide accurate, appropriate and brief information and referrals to their students who ask for assistance for mental health problems.
 - Develop stronger partnerships with citywide and community-based mental health providers to make it easier for CUNY students to get the help they need and for CUNY to get appropriate feedback to assist students to overcome problems.
 - Develop and promote the use of online mental health services designed for CUNY students.
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Unlike CUNY, SUNY has expanded its partnership with Thriving Campus, a web application that refers students to a network of 6,000 licensed mental health care providers, which will eliminate some barriers students face when seeking help beyond their college counseling center. I believe CUNY should develop a similar partnership for their students to enable broader access to mental health services.

In order to reduce mental health problems in CUNY and other colleges, I am asking the City Council to:

- Increase number of mental health counselors on college campus
- Increase mental health counselors of color, and LGBTQ mental health counselors
- Hire counselors who specialize in working with students with disabilities
- Expand virtual mental health services beyond the pandemic

Thank you.

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New York City Council

Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Anna Compton, Senior, Hunter College
Friday, October 16, 2020

Good morning, my name is Anna Compton. I am a senior at Hunter College. Thank you to the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify.

As a transfer student with a documented IEP, and a history of depression and anxiety, I am very firm on my advocacy for improved and stable mental-health resources on our CUNY campuses. Transferring from a SUNY community college to a four-year CUNY school was extremely hard. My transition last Fall to Hunter was long, and it was not smooth. I felt extremely anxious every single day of my first semester at Hunter. Luckily, I had the stability of the Accessibility Office and was able to speak with a counselor assigned to me who helped me in navigating a new school. However, I was not so lucky when trying to access a mental health counselor at Hunter.

When I called to schedule an intake appointment, the waitlist was 4-6 weeks. I found this to be incredibly alarming as Hunter is the largest CUNY school. Once I finally got into the counseling office, I tried to limit what I shared because friends at Hunter warned me that if you share “too much,” you will be sent off campus. I felt incredibly restricted in what I could share. And while I was lucky enough to have insurance, I knew I could not afford the weekly copays to see someone off campus.

I was referred off campus. I was given a list of therapists who took my insurance. It took me eight months to find a therapist through references given by the counseling center at Hunter College. Eight months. The therapists they referred me to had six to eight week wait lists for an intake appointment which did not guarantee sessions, would take over an hour of transit each way, did not take my insurance entirely,, only had specific days and times that did not work with my schedule, or never even called me back after multiple messages. I went back to the counseling services about three more times asking for new references, only to get the same references or others that would not call me back.

When the pandemic hit hard in March, I was at a point of desperation. Distance learning as a student with a learning disability was my biggest nightmare, and I just wanted someone to listen. I called again and met with a counselor saying I was fine with short-term sessions and would take anything I could get. Again, she referred me off campus. From March to August I called and called. In August, I got my first call back and was desperate to start sessions, but the therapist

made me feel uncomfortable and I had to stop seeing him. I went back to searching and finally got a call back from a place I had called exactly a year ago. They immediately scheduled me for an intake appointment. I haven't heard back from them since. It is now October.

Our wellness services are failing students. CUNY campuses need more mental health counselors. We need more counselors to work with students with disabilities, counselors of color, and LGBTQ counselors. We needed this before the pandemic, and we certainly need it now. We need our New York leaders to care about supporting CUNY and SUNY students — from the governor, to the City Council, to the Board of Trustees and campus presidents, and to invest in students' mental health. CUNY students are about to be hit with another tuition hike. Part of this is for our health and wellness fee. Why are students being charged MORE for a failing service? We need to look at how other colleges are addressing mental health, and invest in options that work for all CUNY students, including students of color, students with disabilities, and students who struggle to find a place to sleep and enough food to eat. The money can be found, and it needs to be prioritized for students' mental health. Thank you.

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New York City Council

**Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Hailey DelValle, Freshman, Borough of Manhattan Community College
Friday, October 16, 2020**

Good morning, my name is Hailey DelValle. I am a freshman at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) studying art history. I would like to thank the New York City Council for allowing me to testify here today. As someone who struggles with mental health myself, I understand that access to resources for mental health has always been crucial for any institution to thrive, be it professional or academic. As someone who is living in this day and age, I understand the collective trauma the pandemic, and other aspects of our current life, is having on all of us. According to a study led by CUNY's Graduate School of Public Health and Public Policy, 10 to 20% of New Yorkers experience depression or anxiety since the coronavirus outbreak. Now more than ever, the mental wellbeing of students is necessary for success.

I appreciate that BMCC has staffed a diverse community of counselors, and that the services are still being offered online. I appreciate the anti-racist resources offered, and the fact that it is one of the first things you see when you get onto BMCC's Counseling Center page. I also appreciate the workshops, and the panels, and the virtual events. More than anything, I appreciate the way that my school has worked to destigmatize the treatment of mental health and emphasize its importance for a student's academic success. However, from first-hand experience with my school's Counseling Center, it is hard to get an appointment.

Expansions to programs like my school's Counseling Center are measures that need to be taken in circumstances like this, when success in higher education is at its most unattainable, and access to these programs should be available for all CUNY students, not just at BMCC. SUNY's recent partnership with Thriving Campus, an application that allows students to find mental health care providers beyond the counseling offered at their college, could be of exponential use for CUNY students who don't even know where to start looking when seeking mental health care.

I appreciate your time and consideration today, and would like to thank you again for allowing me to speak.

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New York City Council

Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Ashly Huerta, Senior, Lehman College
Friday, October 16, 2020

Good morning everyone. My name is Ashly Huerta, I am a senior at Lehman College studying English and political science. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

Today I am highlighting the story of Alo, a 20-year-old average college student that commutes to school works a part-time job, and goes back home to fulfill her duties as an older sibling every day. Like many college students, students like Alo and I are constantly running back and forth between our responsibilities without asking, am I taking care of myself? We only realize how far we have taken ourselves until our battery runs out. As a natural response, Alo reached out to Lehman College's mental health resources for a hand. What started as "I need help" quickly flipped to "I will deal with my problems by myself" when Alo realized the limited availability of the mental health resources on campus. The counseling center was booked, the hour availability was not enough, and the center's Saturday hours were very limited, not open after 2 pm. It became clear that limited mental health resources feels like a closed-door when you most need a hand.

Alo is not alone. A 2018 Healthy CUNY survey of CUNY community college and 4-year students found an estimated 40,329 undergraduates report symptoms of depression, 47,662 report symptoms of anxiety disorder, and 40,818 for symptoms associated with moderate or severe psychological distress. One in six CUNY undergraduates experience depression, one in five experience anxiety disorders, and one in six show signs of moderate to severe psychological distress. For students with household incomes lower than \$30,000 a year, they report higher levels of all three conditions than their peers living in households with higher incomes. When our mental health is not appropriately treated, it becomes a barrier to our learning and success as a student.

I am asking the city to invest in the visibility, accessibility, and expansion of our mental health resources here at CUNY.

- I am asking for an increase in licensed full-time mental health counselors at each CUNY campus. CUNY should aim to have one counselor for every 1,000 students, as recommended by the International Accreditation of Counseling Services. Currently, that ratio at CUNY is [one counselor for every 2,400 students](#).

- I am asking for an increase in accessibility for mental health resources beyond the current school hours. Mental health counseling must extend to accommodate students who take classes at night and during the weekend.
- My final recommendation is to prepare students to serve as mental health advocates to increase the visibility of mental health resources and to destigmatize experiencing mental health struggles.

Limited access to mental health resources is a crisis and our most vulnerable students are at risk. We must take action now. Thank you.

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New York City Council

Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Aileen Luna, Senior, John Jay College of Criminal Justice
Friday, October 16, 2020

Good morning everyone. My name is Aileen Luna and I am a senior at John Jay College of Criminal Justice studying Law and Society, and double minoring in Philosophy and English. I am also the Secretary of the student government at John Jay. I would like to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

While I have enjoyed my time at John Jay thus far, and love representing my fellow peers through student government, the rise in the demand for better mental health and counseling services at our Wellness Center has become very evident. Many students, myself included, have battled with mental health issues and have been unable to clearly navigate the process in order to receive the help they actually need. When I was seeking counseling services at John Jay's Wellness Center, I was given an intake appointment and then put on a waitlist- a waitlist that took over a month before I could see any counselor. In my initial intake appointment, I had requested a female counselor, possibly one of color, because I wanted a counselor I could relate to, and feel comfortable sharing certain information with. When I finally reached the top of the waitlist and was assigned to a counselor, the counselor was a white male. After addressing the issue and explaining my original request, I was told that if I wanted to see a female counselor, I would have to be put on the waitlist again and not be able to see a counselor in the meantime. This experience made me worry not only for myself but the number of students who might've requested the same as I did, and might have been in a situation worse than mine and still asked to wait. This needs to change. Students in distress should not have to wait for months in order to receive counseling or any mental health services.

I am asking the City to increase the number of mental health counselors on CUNY campuses and to increase mental health counselors of color, LGBTQ-identifying, etc. From 2015 through 2016, SUNY was able to form and execute a "SUNY Mental Health Task Force," where they were able to meet regularly in order to take a deeper look into what SUNY campuses lack in terms of mental health services, and make action plans to address them. I believe having the equivalent Mental Health Task Force on the CUNY level, with a student representative from each CUNY school would be extremely effective in gathering information needed to create plans to address these student needs. Thank you for your time.



New York City Council

Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction

Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY

Submitted by Khaled Miah, Graduate, Brooklyn College

Friday, October 16, 2020

Good morning all, my name is Khaled Miah, and I am a recent graduate of the Koppelman school of business at Brooklyn College. My major studies were Consumer & Organizational Behavior and then Finance, while my minor studies are Business Law and Human Resource Leadership & Management. I am much obliged to be here with you the New York City Council, for having the opportunity to testify in front of you all.

As a student who went to community college and then transferred into a senior one, I have seen the vast difference in the support that students of disabilities receive. I firsthand witnessed the experience of students of disabilities and mental challenges as a student and professionally. During my studies, I worked as a Disability Scholar Support at BMCC, a role I am still working in currently. At this position, I support various students to which I am assigned each semester through their college journey by mentoring, tutoring, scribing, and proctoring exams when needed. With my experience, I strongly urge the support and resources to be fortified for students with disabilities and mental challenges. I am a strong advocate for this cause, not because of my professional work, but the powerful connections I made with my students. Witnessing their great strides of determination and aspirations has truly opened my eyes to the good and the bad.

When I was at BMCC, the ease of access to resources for the disabled were extensive, where the staff were dedicated to make sure the college journey is seamless. The main hub of resources falls under the Office of Accessibility, which has plenty of resources for academic success. Students of disability and mental challenges not only need assistance with academics, but as well their mental health. They go through mental stress of being ridiculed, sometimes ignored, and lack of social circles. BMCC being a community college does a good job at this with the Mental health office being on the same floor with the accessibility. Students are given a judgement free safe zone and multiple appointment options

When I transferred over to a four-year college, the support and resources differed, and I noticed this across the board of four-year colleges. There are over 9,000 students with disabilities enrolled in CUNY that we are aware of, who demonstrate the ability to meet the academic and technical standards for colleges. But when it comes to four-year colleges, the need for the students are not met. Four-year colleges underestimate the number of students with disabilities

that will enroll and the various needs they might have. The disabilities offices lack the budget to entice auxiliary aids for the students, which can prove essential for students to pass the course they are in. Students tend to even fall off from four-year colleges and sometimes make their learning disabilities unaware. This creates mental distress on the students and the mental health clinics need to step up their game. The process of obtaining mental health services is quick: fill out an intake form, do a quick interview and then get assigned a counselor. The issue here is that there needs to be more tailored professionals that can address the issues the students face. Campuses across the board need to hire more trained counselors, who are familiar with students of disabilities. I want to take this a step further and have two or more counselors who are stationed at the Office of Accessibility. This allows dedication and commitment to an underserved population on both sides, for students do not have to be fearful of seeking help and counselors being passionate. I know that numerous meetings of different individuals are required to make changes on CUNY campuses. I say we work our way up starting with the directors of these offices, to the President of the college, all the way to the governor. We need to figure out a way to reallocate our funds and budget in the cost for extra counselors. We need to make it safer for students with disabilities to come forth and utilize the services to prosper in their college journey.

Now more than ever with the introduction of the COVID-19, we need to fortify our resources and continue with any new solutions developed from this pandemic. Our mental health counselors need to be diverse and trained for students from all backgrounds and disabilities. CUNY is by far one of the largest academic institutions within the United States, boasting a population of 275,000 and nearly 40% of the population who is willing to admit the services is undergoing some type of mental distress such as depression or anxiety. CUNY can look over SUNY's plan to expand their mental health services and spin the wheel in their favor based on services or budgetary. CUNY is also planning to raise tuition costs and with this raise comes from a portion of mental health services. If this is the case, CUNY should enrich their services, retain qualified professionals, advertise the service, and host more workshops to make the college journey a rich experience.

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Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction

Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY

Submitted by Elisa Rojano, Junior, Lehman College

October 15th 2020

Good morning, my name is Elisa Rojano. I am a Junior at Lehman College majoring in Latino Studies and minoring in Human Resources management. Thank you to the New York City Council for meeting with myself and my fellow CUNY students today and for allowing us the opportunity to testify on behalf of our student body and the concerns we have.

I have never used the mental health services because being a first-generation student, my mother never thought that it was important to talk about how someone is feeling. Especially being a Mexican-American student, being raised by a single parent: in our culture, parents don't ask their children to talk about their feelings. My mother was never the type of person to ask us how we are doing, or how school was going so far. She didn't talk about emotions because she thought that having emotional problems didn't affect kids. She thought kids didn't suffer from mental breakdowns or suffered from anxiety. So growing up I never attended therapy, or spoke to a counselor in school and in college. I always kept my emotions away and tried to not talk about them. I know Lehman College offers these kinds of services, but I also never had the opportunity to go and talk to someone because of everything going on in my life. I always had to work, and go to school so I felt like I never had the time to see a mental health counselor. There are students who have tried using these mental health services on campus, but for some reason don't really have a good experience. I've learned that students feel like the person who they are speaking to doesn't relate to them in a sense of the counselor not being of color, or just don't simply find that connection or comfortableness to speak to them.

Lehman College is a college that is known for being diverse. The majority of students who attend there are Hispanic and Black students: 53% of the students are Latinos, and 30% of Lehman's students are black. Overall, 56% of Lehman College students are first-generation students. So if we have such a huge percentage of students of color, then why is it that we can't have counselors of diverse backgrounds that are going to be able to relate to students on campus? I think Lehman College students would feel more comfortable speaking to a person of color. We should hire people of color as these campus counselors — counselors that have gone through problems our students face and can help students overcome them by letting students feel comfortable to explain how they feel and remind them they are not alone.

I am asking the City Council to improve the mental health services that are being offered in the colleges across CUNY. This would help improve students' mental health problems, and help avoid dropping out of school. These services should be free to students, to support the low-income students who attend our college. We should also prioritize Black and Latino mental health counselors at Lehman, which can help students be more open to speaking to counselors, especially students who might face stigma for attending mental health services. Finally, CUNY should team up with other organizations that can help students see a professional counselor sooner rather than later. If the mental health service center on campus cannot see them, then students should know their school is able to help them get an appointment somewhere else efficiently.

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

New York City Council

**Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health,
Disabilities and Addiction**

Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY

**Submitted by Abigail Rojas, Sophomore, Borough of Manhattan Community College
Friday, October 16, 2020**

Good morning. My name is Abigail Rojas, and I am a sophomore at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) studying Psychology. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

There are multiple issues going on in my school when it comes to the student's mental health. There is a limited level of advertisement and awareness of mental health services on our campus. In fact, ads are only present in one of the three BMCC campuses, significantly limiting the number of students the Wellness Center can reach. I recall my first semester of college, when I did not have classes in BMCC's main campus. The main campus is where most of the mental health advertisement is held, so I was completely unaware of the services that were provided by the school.

My school has good intentions and plans to address the mental health issue that is affecting a large amount of the student body. The only issue is that they do not hold the staff nor funding that's necessary to do so. Our Wellness Center is understaffed, and the students are not well accommodated because the number of students that are requesting services exceed their capacity. My college aims to hold different mental-health workshops but can only serve 5-10 students in these workshops. They continue to provide counseling sessions but there's not enough time slots to accommodate everyone on the waiting list. This is evidently a result of understaffed mental health counselors across CUNY. These are just only a few of the issues that are affecting our college community.

I personally experienced a delay in getting services. Not long ago, I was dealing with my anxiety disorder and I was couch surfing at the time. I could have really benefited from the services provided on campus, preventing my academic failures. I have experienced not being able to schedule a meeting with a counselor within less than a three week period due to their packed schedule.

I am asking the city to better fund CUNY's counseling centers and urge the Council members to advocate for the passage of New York State bill, S7317, which would allow for "at least a ratio of one clinical, non-student mental health staff member per one thousand students."

We would like for you to call on our leaders at the city to increase the number of mental health counselors on campus and maintain the diversity reflecting on the student body as we increase our mental health counselors, and ensure that virtual mental health services continue beyond the pandemic.

So many students are currently being impacted negatively by these issues. It's time to turn their college into a positive experience rather than a negative one. Thank you for this opportunity.

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

New York City Council

**Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Natalie Rosales, Junior, CUNY City College
Friday, October 16, 2020**

Good morning. My name is Natalie Rosales and I am a junior at CUNY City College (CCNY) majoring in English. I would first like to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify in today's hearing.

In my personal experience, I've witnessed many problems on my campus, but for today I'd like to focus on one in particular: the lack of mental health resources. My school has a counseling center that is open to all students that attend CCNY, but there are only three counselors that are available for over 16,000 students that are on campus. I believe that there should be more counselors added to the center, mainly ones that are more focused on helping students of color and those who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Although my school offers many ways of counseling such as individual, group counseling, and workshops, I feel as though the lack of staff within the counseling center hinders the ability to help the students who are only seeking individual counseling. These services are also temporary. Students aren't guaranteed help for more than a semester or so. Although my university offers short-term counseling to CCNY students for free, not all CUNY schools are the same. Some of my peers I've heard from have said they couldn't get counseling because of a long wait list, as well as payments that need to be made in order to get counseling within the school. For students who don't have the funds to afford such payments, I find this very disheartening to hear. Because of COVID-19, things have only gotten harder for students both mentally and emotionally. CUNY should try harder to reach out and help those students who need a mental health center now more than ever.

I am asking the city to invest in counseling centers in New York universities, and aid colleges in providing for their students — now more than ever. I suggest expanding on present programs in CUNY schools as well as other universities and colleges in New York to help. We need more staff available, greater awareness that these programs exist within the schools, and more funding to the schools so that students have access to this resource. We must also give students access to more mental health counselors of color, and those that focus on LGBTQ+ mental health, as well as expanding on virtual mental health services, even after the pandemic. Recently, SUNY announced a new partnership to expand on their mental health services, by creating a platform where students are connected to off-campus providers and university-provided teletherapy.

SUNY students are able to be referred to a network of 6,000 licensed mental health care providers. I would encourage the same type of system to be done at other universities, especially at CUNY schools.

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

New York City Council

**Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Diana Valenzuela, Sophomore, Bronx Community College
Friday, October 16, 2020**

Good morning. My name is Diana Valenzuela, and I am a sophomore at Bronx Community College (BCC) studying Political Science. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

As a student currently attending counseling sessions, I believe that there is room for improvement in the way that mental health services are administered on campus. Based on my experience, personal counseling has helped me with the anxiety that I am experiencing. However, I think that there are some ideas that students would benefit from if they were implemented. In my case, it was not necessarily difficult to access the services, as my CUNY campus, BCC, often advertises the availability of mental health counseling to students via email or on the website, which allows more students to be aware of the resources.

However, once the sessions begin, it feels like we are going through a scripted dialogue of what a session should be like — instead of addressing my stressors one by one so that I may effectively eliminate them. To a certain extent, these counseling sessions are failing to address that the circumstances during a regular semester do not compare to what we are currently experiencing. Being in the midst of a pandemic, midterms are not the only issue we are stressing about; rather, facing eviction or the fear of potentially contracting a deadly virus by simply doing something as essential as grocery shopping is elevating students' anxiety.

As a student at BCC, while speaking with others who have sought counseling, I've noticed that their experience is even more discouraging than mine. Due to COVID-19, more students are seeking counseling. Many of my peers have pointed out that there are not enough counselors to address the rising needs of all of the students that are currently in need of services. CUNY mental health services are severely understaffed, which leaves students on their own when navigating their mental health. This is undoubtedly taking a toll on students' health and their academic career.

My recommendations for CUNY to increase mental health services include the following:

- More referrals to departments that are better suited to address the needs of students that are identified during the sessions, such as loss of income or food insecurity, by providing information about food pantries and emergency grants. There should be better collaboration between departments on campus that provide aid, such as Single Stop. This would deliver more structured sessions with counselors that are trained beyond counseling.
- Instead of a more one-size-fits-all approach, we would benefit from more personalized experiences that acknowledge how cases change from one student to another based on how they're particularly affected during the pandemic. Sessions should be more goal-oriented with tangible solutions that address the circumstances that are causing the stress.
- CUNY should increase the diversity in counseling services because, as I researched with the rest of my peers, I've found out that equal representation is something that has also affected student's willingness to get help. More research into the way that students are coping with COVID-19 is necessary to give our respective institutions better insight into how to properly serve their students as they become more aware of what difficult circumstances the students are facing.
- Furthermore, I urge CUNY and the City Council to acknowledge these unprecedented circumstances that we are facing when establishing grading policies and academic standards. When students are expected to adjust to the changes that the institution has made while not only paying full tuition but also maintaining our grades, it takes a toll on their mental health which inevitably affects their academic performance.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my story and recommendations.

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

**New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY
Submitted by Claudia Wallen, Junior, New York City College of Technology
October 15th 2020**

Good Morning. My name is Claudia Wallen, and I am a junior at CUNY New York City College of Technology studying Law and Paralegal Studies. Thank you for allowing me to give my testimony today.

Throughout my ongoing college experience, my mental wellbeing has faltered quite often. Some of the reasons being difficulty with my courses, lack of direction in career and personal development, and lack of resources and guidance in school. I have seen countless peers leave school because it was emotionally draining, and there was an absence of support. When I did my student interviews, both students from different schools mentioned how lacking counseling resources are. When I listen to my schoolmates, I hear them tell stories of breaking down because of the pressures of tuition, difficulties at home, difficulties with classes, and faltering mental health. The recurring trend in my previous statements is the absence of care and efforts toward mental health awareness and counseling.

I recall attending a hearing on the health and wellness fee. I was baffled by both the lack of care and attentiveness by the CUNY trustees and also by the hardships that students expressed. At the time I was dealing with anxiety, along with the weight of 5 classes, an unpaid internship, and a part time job. It was a challenging semester, that would have been better if the counseling office was not hidden, understaffed, underfunded, and lacking. Several counseling centers have the same issue.

Although I can not speak for all campuses, I can speak on the behalf of my peers and say that obtaining a higher education is tough. It is also even more taxing to deal with food insecurities, homelessness, child care, and some cases abusive environments. CUNY needs to do better. We need to invest more into counseling centers. We need to make mental health awareness and counseling pivotal to our success as students and as growing people. Countless students are suffering with mental health issues and we do not create a space to unload that weight. If we do create a space it is small and unreachable.

A few solutions that I can offer are to expand these counseling centers. We must increase the funding for counseling centers so that students can get access to better resources. Increasing

funding does not mean increasing tuition. That means that we should better allocate state funding so that people pursuing higher education can also be supported. At the City Council, the Council must reevaluate where our city budget goes and how it can be allocated equally. We must also place people who are passionate about helping people in these positions. We must bring more awareness to mental health and teach people that is not taboo. Although I acknowledge that some CUNY colleges have made strides to provide better counseling for students, this needs to be a CUNY wide condition.

Thank you again for listening to me and I hope you take what I said into consideration as you make decisions that affect the lives of over 200,000 students.