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Testimony Before NYC Council Committee on Finance, jointly with the Subcommittee on Capital Budget

(5/21/20 Hearing) – Cal Hedigan, CEO of Community Access, gave this written testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Finance, jointly with the Subcommittee on Capital Budget, addressing funding to the human services sector:

“Greetings Chair Dromm and distinguished members of the City Council. My name is Cal Hedigan and I am CEO of Community Access. Community Access is a New York City based mental health and advocacy organization serving thousands of New York residents each year. Our mission is to expand opportunities for people living with mental health concerns to recover from trauma and discrimination through affordable housing, training, advocacy, and other healing-focused services.

We provide affordable and supportive housing to over 1,300 households across three boroughs (the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan) and serve 3,500 New Yorkers each year through a range of services – including crisis respite, peer specialist training, supported education, intensive mobile treatment and ACT teams, as well as psychiatric rehabilitation and treatment services.

Every one of us is vulnerable to experiencing mental health difficulties, and the economic and personal stressors brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic will only increase the number of New Yorkers in need of the supportive and affordable housing and mental health services Community Access offers. This pandemic has unfolded in an economic and social context, and it is exposing many of the inequities that live within our systems and institutions. It has certainly laid bare some of the particular dangers of homelessness. Funding to the human services sector, a sector that serves communities most severely impacted by this public health crisis, cannot be cut if New Yorkers are to continue to have access to the support and mental health services they need to successfully navigate these difficult times.

While many New Yorkers have lost their jobs, and many are working from home, many of Community Access’ staff continue to work at our housing sites and on New York City’s streets delivering essential services to some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers. This work has been critical to lessening the impact of COVID-19 on our community. Frontline nonprofits in the human services sector, including Community Access, had to quickly adapt service delivery so that we could continue to provide essential services to our tenants and participants, many of whom are at high risk for being severely impacted by COVID-19.

These adaptations included transitioning to remote service delivery wherever possible, implementing essential staffing patterns and incentive pay for on-site service delivery, intensive outreach to recipients to monitor their health status, changes to service sites to encourage social distancing, increased cleaning of shared spaces, procurement of personal protective equipment and emergency supplies for our workforce, and procurement of telephones and service plans for service recipients who had previously lived without phones.

All of these changes were required to respond to the needs of our constituency during this public health crisis. Many of them involved previously unbudgeted expenses. We are projected to spend over \$450,000 in incentive pay by May 30th. We have also had to invest more than \$100,000 in supplies and equipment, including technology to support telehealth services for our participants and remote working capabilities for our staff. In addition to increased expenses, we face revenue losses due to the cancellation of our annual fundraising gala, losses in Medicaid revenue and rental income shortfalls. We, like the city, are grappling with the multi-layered economic fallout of this pandemic.

Long before COVID-19, the human services sector, Community Access included, has advocated for more funding from our city and state partners to secure the financial sustainability of the sector, so that we can continue to provide the essential services desperately needed in our city. We are not in a position where we can have funding cut and maintain service delivery.

Our organization receives over \$11 million each year in city contracts with DOHMH, DHS and HASA. Our four-hundred strong workforce supports 3,500 individuals and families, including people being discharged from psychiatric centers and other institutions, and individuals who are experiencing homelessness and living in the shelter system or on the streets. Without this funding, we would not be able to deliver these services, and New York City – as such – would not have the infrastructure it needs and relies on to support the most vulnerable people in the city.

We understand that the City Council faces difficult choices in this new economy as budgets shrink and needs increase. Community Access joins with our colleagues to respectfully urge you to prioritize an investment in this city's vital safety net services including affordable and supportive housing and community based mental and behavioral health support services. These investments pay dividends over time in decreased healthcare utilization, less need for emergency shelters and a more equitable city for us all.

Community Access is committed to helping New York City recover from COVID-19. We will work tirelessly to help individuals work through the grief, depression, anxiety and economic hardship brought on by this pandemic, and we will continue to develop and advocate for more affordable housing — because all New Yorkers deserve a home. Access to stable affordable housing is an absolute necessity for the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of our communities.

I thank the committee for considering our testimony.”

About Community Access:

Community Access' mission is to expand opportunities for people living with mental health concerns to recover from trauma and discrimination through affordable housing, training, advocacy, and healing-focused services. We are built upon the simple truth that people are experts in their own lives.

www.communityaccess.org

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