



Testimony before the New York City Council
**Mental Health Committee and the Committee on State and Federal
Legislation**
Coordination of the State and City in the Provision of Mental Health
Services
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Project Renewal's mission is to end the cycle of homelessness by empowering individuals and families to renew their lives with health, homes, and jobs.

www.projectrenewal.org

My name is Dr. Andrew Pearson, and I am the Medical Director of Psychiatry at Project Renewal, a New York City homeless services nonprofit agency. Thank you to Speaker Adams, Chair Abreu, Chair Lee, and fellow City Council members for giving me this opportunity to submit testimony.

For 55 years, Project Renewal has empowered individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness to renew their lives. Each year Project Renewal serves thousands of New Yorkers through our comprehensive health, homes and jobs programs.

At each of our shelter, housing, and workforce development programs, we offer wraparound support to New Yorkers experiencing or at risk of homelessness who are also living with serious mental health concerns and/or substance use disorders.

Our mental health and drug user health services include:

- psychiatry and telepsychiatry across all housing and healthcare programs
- low-threshold access to critical drug user health services, including medication for opioid use disorder (buprenorphine), or Hep C treatment in all our housing settings
- a certified opioid overdose prevention program (OOPP) that trains staff and clients and dispenses thousands of naloxone kits each year
- OASAS-licensed substance use disorder treatment services at our Third Street location
- Certified Peer Recovery Advocates (CRPAs) who draw on lived experience and extensive training to provide client-centered engagement and ongoing support
- our Assisted Competitive Employment program, which provides rapid job search and placement services to those with serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and PTSD, among others
- our Support and Connection Center in East Harlem, which provides engagement, stabilization, and treatment services for adults with mental health and/or substance use needs referred directly by the NYPD or OCMH, in partnership with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)

Over the past 10 years, drug-related deaths among New Yorkers experiencing homelessness have increased more than 300%. Most of these deaths are attributed to accidental overdoses by sheltered individuals. Even as COVID-19 tragically doubled this population's mortality rate, drug poisoning and overdose was still the leading cause of death throughout FY20. The pandemic also delayed housing placements and further exacerbated challenges among New York City's single adults experiencing homelessness. Enhanced drug user health services are needed now more than ever.

While there are various services available to people in NYC who use drugs and are at risk of overdose, Project Renewal has worked hard to ensure that its services are not only available, but also accessible and acceptable to clients who may have a history of homelessness, complex trauma or mental illness. Many of these clients have had negative prior experiences with treatment providers, and may be reluctant to engage or enroll in services.

We are grateful to the New York City Council and the NYC DOHMH for their support of Project Renewal's mental health and substance use disorder programs. Funding from the New York City Council in FY2023 would help us enhance our low-threshold drug user health services, which incorporate certified peer counselors and a nurse care manager for drug user health to ensure that the care is accessible and acceptable to our clients.

The model leverages the skills of Project Renewal's certified peer counselors to provide outreach to thousands of individuals each year, building trusting relationships through reliability, consistency, honesty, respect, and offers of tangible assistance. Our peer counselors assess client motivation, stage of change, and personal goals; provide overdose prevention and naloxone kits; and reach out to Project Renewal shelter and housing residents following a non-fatal overdose.

Once clients indicate they are ready, peer counselors may introduce them to our Nurse Care Manager for Drug User Health —a specialized role that acts as the main point of contact for treatment planning and coordination. The Nurse Care Manager is typically contacted via telehealth, facilitating rapid access to services and reducing barriers to care. Through client conversation and information gathered at an initial intake, the Nurse Care Manager can perform a professional assessment to best triage and define client needs, explain the most appropriate treatment options, and coordinate next steps.

Using a trauma-informed and harm reduction approach, the Recovery Coaches and the Nurse Care Manager guide clients into one or more treatment options along our continuum that meets the individual where they are. These services include harm reduction services, medications like buprenorphine or methadone, occupational therapy, intensive counseling, recovery groups, and case management.

Our new model is producing impressive results: over the past year, 93% of the 67 individuals who experienced a non-fatal overdose in Project Renewal shelter or housing were successfully engaged by a Recovery Coach; and 91% participated in meaningful engagement like peer counseling, harm reduction counseling, or accepting a referral for treatment.

Additionally, more than 1,000 internal and external staff and clients have been instructed in proper naloxone administration. From our internal data alone, we know naloxone was administered at 14 Project Renewal housing and shelter programs.

This programming is effective, yet underfunded. City Council support would allow Project Renewal to continue strengthening this model, increase the number of clients served, and ultimately reduce opioid-related harms among New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.

Project Renewal is sincerely grateful for the consideration of funding and the Council's partnership in prioritizing the health of under-resourced New Yorkers. Assistance from the City Council would allow Project Renewal to meaningfully address the critical needs of people who use drugs and who are experiencing homelessness in FY23, and we are very grateful for the consideration.

We look forward to working more with the committees and welcome suggestions for greater partnership in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.