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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 10, 2024

Lack of Access to Behavioral Health Care Adversely Affects New Jersey Residents' Health and the State's Bottom Line

NJAMHAA Calls for Significantly Increased Funding as a Top Priority in the FY2026 State Budget

MERCERVILLE: While waiting several months for an outpatient mental healthcare appointment to begin treatment for depression and anxiety, Juanita lost friendships and her job. She was later stabilized by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton's Early Intervention Support Services and then enrolled in the agency's outpatient program. If Juanita had to endure a much longer delay in treatment, she likely would have experienced further exacerbation of depression and anxiety; needed much more costly treatment in emergency rooms and/or inpatient hospital units; experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviors; and had a higher risk of not being able to secure new employment, which could cause further mental and emotional decompensation.

"Juanita's story is one of many examples of how community-based behavioral healthcare services and supports enable individuals to recover from mental illnesses and achieve a high quality of life," said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, President and CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA). Juanita and others' experiences – both service recipients and providers – are shared in the association's *Untold Stories* campaign to demonstrate why significantly increased funding for the behavioral healthcare system is needed.

As the demand for mental healthcare and substance use treatment services has continued to rise substantially over many years, the network of providers has drastically declined. Many providers left the field during the pandemic due to the health risks that COVID presented and since then, many more sought different careers because of inadequate salaries and the negative health impact of trying to manage more than doubled caseloads while, in some cases, trying to hold second jobs.

"Despite an anticipated budget tightening year ahead, it is imperative that the New Jersey Administration make significant increases in behavioral healthcare funding a top priority for the FY2026 State Budget," Dr. Wentz stressed. "Sufficient investment in our behavioral healthcare system must not be delayed any longer. It is necessary for all New Jersey residents' health and wellbeing, as well as the state's bottom line as delays and lack of services inevitably lead to much more expensive treatment and other situations that harm individuals and the state overall."

"Undoubtedly, Juanita is now working toward continually improved physical and mental health, which will likely lead to additional successes, such as new employment and rekindled friendships. Many people of all ages have realized such achievements because they were fortunate enough to receive the behavioral health treatment and supports they needed," Dr. Wentz added. "Tragically, many others experience suicidal thoughts and behaviors, hospitalizations, imprisonment, overdoses and homelessness because they could not receive services that would have helped prevent these dire consequences."

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NJAMHAA urges Governor Phil Murphy and the State Legislature to keep in mind Juanita's story and others featured in NJAMHAA's campaign, *Untold Stories*, as they develop and vote on the FY2026 State Budget and legislation that impacts behavioral healthcare services — and most importantly, the many children, youth and adults who depend on them.

Please click [here](#) to see details and more success stories, as well as the adverse experiences of service recipients and behavioral healthcare staff, in NJAMHAA's *Untold Stories* campaign.

The New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA) is a statewide trade association representing 164 organizations that serve individuals in all of New Jersey's diverse populations who have mental illness and/or substance use disorders, and their families. NJAMHAA's mission is to champion, support and promote the value of our member organizations. NJAMHAA members may be found in every county and almost every community statewide. They serve more than 500,000 children and adults each year and contribute to the economy through 61,000 direct and indirect jobs.