



**Written Testimony Prepared for the Senate Committees on Health and Mental
Health and Developmental Disabilities**

On

Suicide Prevention

Albany, New York

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Hearing Room A

Legislative Office Building, 2nd Floor

Albany, New York

As a Past President and Member of the New York State Camp Directors Association, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate standing committees on Health and Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities.

The New York State Camp Directors Association (NYSCDA) represents the children's camp industry in New York State. NYSCDA currently consists of approximately 110-member camps throughout New York, representing those in private, not-for-profit, day, resident and camps that serve special needs populations. In association with member camps from The American Camp Association of NY & NJ (ACA-NYNJ), The Long Island Camps and Private Schools (LICAPS) and Rockland – Westchester Day Camp Association (R/W), we monitor and offer comments on legislation that may have an impact on the camp community and the children and families we serve. NYSCDA is a volunteer-driven organization led by a President, Board of Directors, and Executive Director.

As a camp director for over 12 years, I have seen firsthand the harmful effects of failing to provide professional mental health services to our children while they attend summer camp. Today, kids are subject to a myriad of mental, emotional, and social pressures that manifest in a number of harmful ways. Teens may need professional help to address increasingly common problems such as suicide, eating disorders, bullying, and depression. Likewise, campers experience deeply personal changes at camp, such as gender transitions. Many campers receive mental health services throughout the entire school-year and then experience a disruption when the child enters a summer camp program. While schools are able to provide mental health services, there are significant barriers to this care in summer camps.

My summer camp, Camp Alvernia, has been serving children, youth, and families for over 130 years. Last summer we welcomed 900 children, ranging in age from 3 to 14 years old. We regularly serve children and youth with a variety of mental health needs. We see kids who are cutting themselves, others who struggle with bulimia, and kids who are neglected and mistreated by their parent or guardian. Some are dealing with the everyday challenges of youth, such as a girl last summer who refused to go swimming because she was convinced she was fat. But every summer brings new challenges, such as the 11-year-old girl who was added to a group chat and sent photo-shopped images of her face next to male genitalia. Some campers are dealing with tragedy on a scale that would be difficult for adults to handle without professional help, such as the 6th grade boy whose house burned down, and a few months later, lost his grandfather and aunt in the same car crash. Or the 5-year old boy who found his mother dead on the kitchen floor. These are just a handful of stories from one summer camp in the state. There are many more camps and many more stories. When school is out, these kids come to camp, and we owe it to them to provide the best support and care possible.

In 2011, the state required summer camps to hire or contract with a medical professional to ensure the health and safety of its campers. To satisfy this requirement, the law was amended to allow camps to hire medical professionals such as physicians and nurses. Camps should be given the same opportunity to support the mental health needs of their campers which can be as life threatening as physical injury.

Currently, camps are able to contract with an outside agency for mental health services; however, continuity of care is nearly impossible using an agency. A counselor on staff is much better suited to camps, particularly overnight camps. Staff mental health counselors can live within and absorb a camp's culture and are able to make recommendations and implement cultural changes identified as problematic. They get to know the camp counselors and help them more effectively deal with children with mental health problems. Kids are more likely to build

trusting relationships with someone they see as part of their camp family and not a person who just comes and goes a few days a week. Further, it has been our experience that campers' mental health problems do not happen on a 9-5 basis and incidents often occur at night. Current law prevents camps from providing campers immediate access to care. In fact, due to difficulties in contracting, camps are very often placed in the unconscionable position of having an incident occur on a Friday night and an inability to address it until the weekend is over. Finally, contracting with an agency can be cost prohibitive for many camps and in particular not-for-profits.

The New York State Camp Directors Association has long advocated for the ability to hire licensed mental health providers. On May 22, the New York State Senate passed S.3834, sponsored by Senator Metzger, which would allow summer camps to hire licensed mental health professionals. As youth development professionals, camp directors work with hundreds of thousands of children each year. We are deeply invested in the social, emotional, and physical well-being of all children. We sincerely hope the Assembly will follow the Senate's lead before the current session concludes, and allow camps to employ licensed professionals so that mental health services can be provided at summer camp.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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New York State Camp Directors Association