Collaborative for Community Wellness Response to 2022 Budget

The Collaborative for Community Wellness has been fighting against disinvestment from public mental health services and the closure of Chicago’s public mental health clinics for over 5 years. The work of the Collaborative builds on the valiant campaign of advocates and organizers of the STOP Chicago, Mental Health Movement and many organizations over many decades. In 2009, the movement resisted Mayor Daley’s attempt to close five of the city’s remaining twelve clinics with a day-long sit-in at City Hall. In 2012, despite significant community protests, Mayor Rahm Emanuel oversaw the complete closure of six clinics. Emanuel’s administration brazenly stated that the closures were part of an effort to “build more active partnerships with private mental health organizations”. In 2019, then candidate for mayor, Lori Lightfoot, pledged to spend $25 million to restore Chicago’s public mental health clinics. Lightfoot has overseen two budget cycles as our Mayor and taken no meaningful action to reopen the clinics. As Mayor she has reneged on her promise and continues to privatize our public mental health services, making them inaccessible to poor and working class Chicagoans. Today, only five public mental health clinics remain and the consequences of closing our public mental health clinics has been disastrous both for clients and clinicians.

Privatized community mental health clinics have six to eight month waitlists and offer shamefully low salaries and benefits. Workers report salaries for Master's level positions as between $35,000- $41,000-without raises for supervising interns or obtaining licensure. The result is that many nonprofit mental health organizations have high turnover rates and lack senior staff to mentor new clinicians. Furthermore, privatized mental health centers employ a largely non-union labor force and expend resources that could go to direct services on suppressing unionizing efforts. Private health centers also lack accountability to the public, evidenced by their repeated failing to pay staff on-time while receiving state contracts to assist the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through extensive community-based research and professional experience, the Collaborative for Community Wellness firmly maintains that the privatization of our mental health services does not address the mental health needs of Chicagoans and only creates further disparities when accessing care.

The Collaborative for Community Wellness is pushing for a $100 million dollar investment in public mental health to recover all that we have lost. In this year’s budget cycle, we supported an amendment proposed by Alderperson Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez to allocate $10 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to our public mental health clinics. In response, Commissioner of Public Health, Dr. Allison Arwady, protested by delivering a letter to every Alderperson using misleading claims to urge members of City Council to go against our
amendment. You can read our response to Dr. Arwardy’s October 15th letter here. Upon final negotiations, the budget will include funding for 29 new, permanent, and unionized clinical, support, case management, administrative and other positions in public clinics by allocating $2.1 million from the Corporate Fund to be established for years to come. After a decade of disinvestment across multiple administrations, this is the most meaningful investment in public mental health services and the most significant shift away from privatization that our movement has won. Our collaborative recognizes this as a step in the right direction—but not nearly enough to address the pressing mental health needs of Chicagoans.

Every year the City of Chicago secures more funding for police and corporate banks. Our campaign and everyday Chicagoans have every right to demand not just the re-opening of our shuttered clinics but an accessible public mental health clinic in every ward. Our coalition and the broader movement for accessible, public mental health will continue to push for transparency and input into how this year’s budget funds will be used. We will continue to hold government officials accountable when they intend to defund public mental health services, and we will continue to push for mental health access for all. Join us in the campaign for #TreatmentNotTrauma at this link.