

To: Barbara Guinn, New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

Re: Recommendations regarding next steps on mental health screening

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From:

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We are very appreciative that OTDA undertook to evaluate and validate a mental health screening tool. We strongly believe that the choices that OTDA makes regarding the use of the screening tool will be a major determinant in the degree to which it is effectively administered and utilized by the districts to better serve clients with disabilities. We submit the following recommendations concerning OTDA's instructions and advice to the districts on the use of the "Modified Mini," the screening tool tested and validated by the Nathan Kline Institute for OTDA.¹

1. OTDA should issue an ADM requiring districts to offer the Modified Mini to all current and new adult cash assistance applicants and recipients.
2. If the ADM does not require districts to offer the Modified Mini to cash assistance clients, it should require districts to offer mental health screening with a reasonably equivalent mental health screening tool to cash assistance clients. Districts should be required to submit the reasonably equivalent tool to OTDA.
3. The ADM should state that the purpose of mental health screening by districts

¹ Mary Jane Alexander, Deborah Layman, Gary Haugland, and Dei-In Tang, "Validating the Modified Mini Screen (MMS) as a Mental Health Referral Screen for Public Assistance Recipients in New York State," (January 2013).

should be to identify cash assistance applicants and recipients who have or may have mental health problems that affect their ability to engage in work activities or comply with other DSS program requirements, so they can be referred to mental health providers for evaluation and or treatment.

4. The ADM should strongly encourage districts to use the Modified Mini through a computer-assisted process similar to the one used by Nathan Kline Institute to test the tool, and should assist districts in obtaining the equipment necessary to do so.
5. The ADM should require districts to have a protocol for making referrals to mental health professionals for individuals whose screening indicates a possible mental health problem, and a protocol for handling situations in which mental health screening indicates that an individual is in a crisis situation.
6. The ADM should instruct districts to use a cut-off score of seven for referrals to mental professionals for further evaluation. If the ADM does not mandate a cut-off score of 7, it should mandate a cut-off range of 7-9.
7. The ADM should require districts to provide the following explanation and information when offering the Modified Mini:
 - A) The purpose of the screen is to ask questions that will help DSS and the client find out whether the client is likely to have a mental health issue (such as depression or an anxiety problem) that (I) should be diagnosed by a mental health professional, (II) may require counseling or other treatment; and (III) may require the district to modify program rules and requirements for the client as an accommodation.
 - B) Clients are free to decline mental health screening with the Modified Mini without any adverse consequences - they can still get benefits, and will not be sanctioned for not being screened
 - C) Clients can request or decline mental health screening with the Modified Mini at any time;
 - D) The results of screening will not be shared with anyone outside of DSS, unless the client wants DSS to share them;
 - E) The results of the screen are not a mental health diagnosis, because only a mental health professional can diagnose a mental health problem; and
 - F) If screening indicates that the client is likely to have a mental health problem, DSS will refer the individual to a mental health provider or clinic for further evaluation, and possible treatment, which Medicaid should pay for.

8. The ADM should require districts to develop a list of mental health providers and clinics that can be used to refer individuals for mental health evaluation and/or treatment, and that is made available to applicants, recipients, and others, including individuals who do not participate in mental health screening, and those who do not receive cash assistance.
9. The ADM should encourage districts to track the percentage of cash assistance applicants and recipients who agree to be screened and that decline screening, along with information about how and when the Modified Mini is offered, and share this information with OTDA so OTDA accumulates a knowledge base on best practices that can be shared with the districts.
10. The ADM should encourage districts to seek opportunities to work with local academic institutions, research hospitals, or others to collect and analyze the data on Modified Mini results, as it may provide valuable information about the prevalence of likely mental health problems among cash assistance applicants and recipients.
11. The ADM should contain the Modified Mini as an attachment and provide a name and contact information for obtaining electronic and auditory versions of the tool or tool prompts.