

COMMITTEE ON LABOR

Thursday, May 28th, 2020, 9:00 a.m.

Dear Chairperson Silverman and members of the Committee on Labor,

My name is Nathan Luecking, and I am a clinical social worker at Anacostia High School through the Department of Behavioral Health School Mental Health Program. I also sit on the Mayor's Coordinating Council on School Mental Health and was a member of the 2017 Task Force on School Mental Health. I'm here today as both a mental health professional and a member of 1199 SEIU, to express why the Mayor's proposed COLA cuts to essential mental health employees are misguided and dangerous to our city's COVID-19 recovery plan. The Mayor's office has presented a false choice between pay cuts and layoffs, when what we need right now are abundant and well-paid mental health professionals.

As many of us have experienced, the emotional pressures of social isolation and loss are real. Once you factor in housing instability, loss of employment, and grief, we see how maintaining our mental health is essential to surviving this crisis. The social workers at DBH are providing social emotional support to our students, teachers, parents, and to some of the most vulnerable populations across the District at St. Elizabeths Hospital and CPEP. We recently launched a Virtual Family Assistance Center, staffed with DBH social workers to provide crucial support to families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19. In the coming months and years, having a fully-staffed workforce of mental health professionals will be necessary for our city's recovery.

If we fail to provide these critical employees with a COLA, in a region that has some of the highest cost of living, we risk losing our workforce to other municipalities or the private market. Mental health professionals are at a premium, and this area has no shortage of people who will pay top dollar to pull them away from public service. With the rise in teletherapy, a licensed therapist could operate a private practice from home and earn a six-figure income without the overhead of office space.

If we as a community believe in mental health treatment, and we believe that mental health treatment is necessary to heal from unprecedented levels of grief and loss, it would be unwise and irresponsible to let this critical workforce slip away. Let us not be short sighted. Let us provide for the mental health professionals who will be critical to our city's recovery.

With urgency,

Nathan Luecking, LICSW
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