



Two Florida Legislators Honored for Work in Mental Health



July 5, 2022 - State Representative Christine Hunschofsky (D-96) and Senator Jason Brodeur (R-9) received Legislator of the Year awards from the Florida Mental Health Advocacy Coalition (FLMHAC) for their legislative work to improve behavioral health services in Florida.

Representative Hunschofsky was recognized for sponsoring bills with Senator Gayle Harrell and Senator Joe Gruters in the 2022 session to improve public school students' access to and treatment for behavioral health conditions, and to expand mental health training among safe-school officers and other school personnel. In the 2021 session, Representative Hunschofsky co-sponsored a bill to create the Commission on Mental Health and Substance Abuse with Senator Darryl Rouson. She now heads the Business Operations Subcommittee of that Commission to study the overall system of behavioral health care.

FLMHAC honored Senator Brodeur for his work in the 2021 session to support equity in insurance coverage of behavioral health conditions. He co-sponsored with Representative Cyndi Stevenson a bill to study complaints of consumers regarding coverage for behavioral health treatment by private insurers and HMOs. Senator Brodeur also introduced a bill in the 2022

session to study the state's readiness for the roll-out of 988, the new, national three-digit number for suicide prevention and behavioral health crises. State support for the coordination of 988 response remains a legislative priority for FLMHAC.

"The Florida Mental Health Advocacy Coalition is grateful to Representative Hunschofsky and Senator Brodeur for their efforts to improve Florida's behavioral health system. We believe that Floridians of all ages who experience behavioral health challenges should have easy access to effective treatment and services, and their work supports this goal," said FLMHAC President, Gayle Giese.

About the Florida Mental Health Advocacy Coalition

FLMHAC is a non-profit, non-partisan coalition of 31 organizations throughout Florida that represent the voices of peers and families. The Coalition advocates for policy changes to improve the lives of individuals and families affected by behavioral health conditions. FLMHAC partners with NAMI Florida to provide behavioral health advocacy in the state.

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Florida Mental Health Advocacy Coalition (FLMHAC) presented, for the first time, State Senate and House Legislator of the Year Awards. The House award went to Representative Christine Hunschofsky of District 96, part of Broward County. The Senate award went to Senator Jason Brodeur of District 9, Seminole and parts of Volusia Counties. Both legislators have sponsored several bills in 2021 and 2022 to improve behavioral health for all Floridians.

Among other bills, Rep. Hunschofsky (D) sponsored, with Senator Gayle Harrell (R), the Mental Health of Students bill (HB899/SB1240). The bill provides parents of students receiving mental health services with information regarding other services available through the student's school or local community-based mental health providers; and provides other individuals living in the same household as a student receiving mental health services with information about other services the student may qualify for that would contribute to the student's improved well-being. The bill amends s. 394.463, F.S., requiring the DCF to include data received from the Department of Education (DOE) on Baker Acts of students from both public and charter schools in preparing its biennial report on the involuntary examinations of minors. Additionally, the bill amends s. 1002.33, F.S., subjecting all charter schools to the same reporting requirements regarding Baker Acts of minors that currently apply to public schools and amends s. 1006.07, F.S. requiring the DOE to share Baker Act data annually with the DCF no later than July 1 each year. The bill also provides a behavioral health district manager to oversee behavioral health for each school district.

Rep. Hunschofsky also sponsored, in the House with Rep. Hawkins (R), and in the Senate by Senator Gruters (R), the School Safety bill (HB1421/SB802). The bill requires safe-school officers that are sworn law enforcement officers to complete mental health crisis intervention training, requires safe-school officers that are not sworn law enforcement officers to receive training on incident response and de-escalation, and requires that school districts annually certify, beginning with July 1, 2023, that at least 80 percent of school personnel received the mandatory youth mental health first aid training.

In 2021, Rep. Hunschofsky and Senator Rouson (D) sponsored the Commission on Mental Health and Substance Use bill (SB1488/HB1447), which was inserted into SB96, a Child Welfare bill by Rules and Children, Families, and Elder Affairs; and Senators Book (D) and Brodeur (R).

This bill creates a Commission on Mental Health and Substance Abuse and requires the DCF to provide administrative support. It requires the commission to submit an annual report to the Legislature and Governor. The Commission of 19 people includes a family member of someone with a behavioral health condition and a peer who is receiving publicly-funded mental health services. The Commission has the power to call in various agencies to provide assistance in a timely manner. As required by 394.9086, F.S., the Commission must examine the current methods of providing mental health and substance abuse services in the state, make recommendations to improve the effectiveness of current practices, procedures, programs, and initiatives in providing such services; identify any barriers or deficiencies in the delivery of such services; and recommend changes to existing laws, rules, and policies necessary to implement

the Commission's recommendations. New legislation in 2022 allows the Commission on MHS to meet in person and covers their travel cost, and extends deadline for final report to January 1, 2023.

The Commission on Mental Health and Substance Abuse has four subcommittees: Business Operations, Finance, Data Analysis, and Criminal Justice. Rep. Christine Hunschofsky chairs the Business Operations subcommittee.

Among other bills, Senator Brodeur (R) sponsored CS/SB478, which was the highest priority bill for FLMHAC. While it did not pass, it shined a light on 988, the new behavioral health, suicide prevention, and veteran's hotline. The bill would have directed the Commission on Mental Health and Substance Abuse, adjunct to the Department of Children and Families (the DCF), to conduct a study examining the following services and programs relating to suicide prevention: • The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (the NSPL); • Crisis response services; • Strategies to improve linkages between NSPL infrastructure and crisis response services; • Available mental health block grant funds; • Funding sources available through Medicaid; and • Strategies to ensure that managing entities work with community stakeholders in furtherance of supporting the NSPL and other crisis response services. The bill would have required the Commission to include the findings in a report due September 1, 2023, to • The Governor; • The President of the Senate; and • The Speaker of the House of Representatives.

In 2021, Senator Brodeur sponsored, with Rep. Stevenson, the bill Increasing Access to Mental Health Care/Behavioral Health Care Services Coverage and Access (SB1024/HB701). By promoting a toll-free number and hyperlink, this bill provided an easy method for reporting consumer complaints about private health insurers and HMOs. An annual report detailing the complaints is public record. The bill requires that consumers receive direct notice on the federal and state requirements for coverage of mental health services to understand what treatment should be available to them. The bill also promotes the toll-free phone number to report complaints: 1-877-693-5236 (1-877-MY-FL-CFO) M-F 8am-5pm as well as a weblink: <https://apps.fldfs.com/ESERVICE/Newrequest.aspx>

FLMHAC is very grateful to Representative Hunschofsky and Senator Brodeur for their commitment to improving behavioral health in Florida.

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