

Priorities for Westchester's Children & Youth

Recommendations for the New York State Legislature Westchester Delegation on the Executive Budget for SFY 2022-23 February 1, 2022

Westchester Children's Association (WCA) would like to thank the members of the New York State Legislature Westchester Delegation for the opportunity to submit our testimony on the 2022-2023 New York State Executive Budget as well as your enduring support for Westchester's Children. We are fortunate to have less restrictions in this budget year through gains made in property taxes as well as federal funding through the American Rescue Plan and Infrastructure spending that allow for strategic, bold social spending on children's issues that have been ailing for too long.

*WCA works to ensure every child is healthy, safe and prepared for life's challenges. Many children and their families are struggling to recover from the extended COVID-19 pandemic. Children's mental health lags as tensions in schools and our communities persist. In 2021, New York enacted the **Child Poverty Reduction Act**, committing the State to reducing child poverty by 50% in the coming decade with attention to racial equity. This requires recognition of and astute attention to structural inequities, as well as sustained action for each and every budget decision.*

Child & Youth Homelessness

Ensure all children and families have adequate, safe, and stable housing that is affordable and sustainable to reduce the rate of homelessness among children and families based on the most inclusive definition. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the importance of each household having adequate housing to protect the health, learning, and safety of children and youth during the most urgent times and beyond. We must ensure that Westchester County has the means and policies to:

- **Adopt a more inclusive definition for homelessness** to address the "hidden" homeless trends of overcrowded housing in Westchester County and provide housing solutions that are family-focused.
- **Ensure that the criteria for affordability are in line with the cost of living** and median income of local families.
- **Create a legal assistance program that prevents evictions** that lead to homelessness.
- **Increase a housing supply that is affordable, safe, and sustainable to meet the housing crisis** by providing a variety of housing options to meet the needs of families escaping homelessness and for rent-burdened households.
- **Prioritize provisions for a comprehensive 5-year housing plan.**

Youth Justice

- **Protect gains made in Raise The Age legislation** and bail reform to ensure that children and youth continue to be dealt with in age-appropriate ways and maintain the focus on community safety over increasing unnecessary incarceration
 - **Fully fund RTA and increase funding to community-based organizations** with strong ties to youth.
 - **Expand protections for young people age 25 and younger** who face the threat of permanent criminal convictions and adult prison sentences with the **Youth Justice & Opportunities Act**.
 - **Show strong and unwavering support for landmark Raise the Age legislation** and resist any rollbacks to the law.
 - **Reduce recidivism and improve re-entry outcomes** through programs like "Jail to Jobs" that will expand vocational and re-entry support and refocus parole officers on career planning and job placement.

- **Pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act** and curb the serious racial inequities in school discipline across New York State.
 - **End the use of suspensions for students in kindergarten through 3rd grade.**
 - **Promote the use of restorative justice** and other successful discipline techniques in place of punishments that remove students from their learning environment.
 - **Limit the amount of time that a student can be out of school to twenty (20) school days each academic year**, and guarantee access to appropriate work and instruction so that students who are suspended can stay on track academically.
 - **Prohibit suspensions for minor infractions** such as tardiness, dress code violations, or insubordination which are better addressed in school.
 - Require charter schools to follow state education law on student behavior and school discipline.

Early Childhood Supports and Home Visiting

New York must target the root causes of child abuse and neglect by supporting solutions such as early childhood home visiting for maternal and infant health; early care and education; and supports for family economic stability.

- **Invest \$11million in Healthy Families New York.**
- **Invest \$4million for ParentChild+.**
- **Increase overall funding for home visiting** as a best practice to advance health equity and improve access to quality prenatal and postnatal care for low-income households.
- **Find legislative pathways to offer universal home visiting** services through increased reimbursement rates, increased community awareness, and programs that promote broader access for infants and parents.

Digital Access

- **Ensure every school-age child has access to adequate and affordable internet broadband year-round** to foster equity in digital access beyond the school term through investment in **New York’s Digital Infrastructure**.
- **Ensure every school-age child has access to adequate quality and number of computer devices year-round** to support remote learning and digital equity through access to online resources for learning beyond the school term.
 - **Support needs for training and technical support** for school-age children and their families.
 - **Support continuous monitoring** of the distribution of internet broadband and electronic devices through surveys and other means.

Mental Health

- **Increase funding and access to mental health services for every child and youth in New York.**
 - **\$10 million for student mental health support grants** and the \$3 million for alternatives to school discipline, continues.
 - **\$2 million for grants** to school districts to support programs designed to **improve school climate**.
 - **\$50 million per year for the next two years in state matching grants for school districts** that use federal COVID-19 relief funding for (i) the employment of mental health professionals, the expansion of school-based mental health services, or other evidence-based mental health supports for students and school staff; or (ii) the creation or expansion of summer learning, after school, or extended day and year programs for students.
- **Improve monitoring of mental health status and service quality for school-age children in New York.**
 - Establish a **task force** to develop guidelines for tracking mental health outcomes of children and youth in the state.
 - Establish a system that regulates the quality of services available in and out of the school.

Child Care, Afterschool, and Youth Development

Develop a model child care system that provides all New York families with access to quality, affordable child care, afterschool, summer, and expanded learning opportunities in New York.

- **Make a \$5 billion investment to move New York towards universal child care.**
- **Increase access to child care that does not cost more than 20% of household incomes.**
- **Expand access to state child care subsidies for children from infancy to school-age** regardless of employment or immigration status.
- **Restore \$5 million to preserve funding for the Advantage After-School Program.**
- **Invest an additional \$1.5million in Youth Development Program (YDP) funding.**

Child Poverty

There are over [20,000 Westchester children and 700,000 children across New York State](#) living at or below the federal poverty line. An *additional* [14,000 Westchester children and 325,000 NYS children and counting](#) slipping into or near poverty during the pandemic.

- **Create the Child Poverty Reduction Act Advisory Council** to hold New York accountable for implementing strategies to cut child poverty in half by 2030 and reduce racial inequities.
- **Expand the Child Tax Credit (CTC) to cover New York's youngest residents** (including children under age 4) along with children facing deep poverty and **increase the maximum available credit.**

Child Welfare

- **Fund the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP)** independent of Foster Care Block Grant (FCBG).
- **Support \$7.9 million in funding for the Fostering Youth Success Initiative (FYSI).**
 - **Support transition-age and former foster youth housing initiatives.**

We support the 2022 agendas of many coalitions and partners, including CHAMPS NY, Child Care Council of Westchester, Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Fostering Youth Success Alliance, New York State Child Welfare Coalition, NY State Network for Youth Success, Prevent Child Abuse New York, Raise the Age NY Campaign, Schuyler Center for Analysis & Advocacy, Nonprofit Westchester and Westchester Women's Agenda which include many of the priorities outlined above.