

Ensuring every child is healthy, safe, and prepared for life's challenges regardless of race or zip code.

Making Noise for Youth Justice

Just under 100 youth speakers and justice advocates joined together on February 27th for a Youth Justice Rally presented by WCA and The Youth Shelter Program of Westchester (YSOW). This event served as a platform to raise young voices and highlight their experiences, framed in the context of four major NY State legislative bills: **Solutions Not Suspensions Act, Youth Justice and Opportunities Act, Right 2 Remain Silent,** and **Clean Slate**. Approval of these bills would expand on WCA's past success in advocating for the passage of Raise the Age Legislation.

The push to reform harsh school suspensions comes just three years following the start of the COVID pandemic, which forced students into remote classes. Though there has been a return to in-school learning and a recognition of the need to combat education loss, efforts have not been applied to defend youth facing suspensions. In New York State, students can be suspended for an entire school year, 180 days, often forcing them to fall behind in school, repeat a grade, or even drop out. Speaking as a member of the Solutions Not Suspensions (SNS) Coalition, WCA's Program and Policy Manager Angel Gray stated at the Rally, "Youth are being ripped out of classrooms and black and brown children are high in those numbers." Supporting these remarks, Psycho, a speaker for the organization Youth Represents, told of his chronic suspensions which carried from 5th grade through 12th grade: "I missed learning decimals, fractions, and percents and to this day I don't know decimals, fractions, and percents." The impact of harsh disciplinary actions in schools extends beyond the time of a suspension, and drastically alters the ability to thrive in school and beyond.

School disciplinary action can translate to arrests and incarceration. Known as the school-to-prison pipeline, youth who experience harsh disciplinary actions in New York State are more likely to have contact with the justice system later in life. Although existing policies urge systemic change to begin in the classroom, this change should carry into the justice system.

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Marisa Ragonese (FSW, Westchester County Youth Councils)



White Plains Youth Bureau members and other partners



WCA's Executive Director, Allison Lake, making some noise!

Westchester Children's Association presents

Ground Truthing

Insights from the ground up

Check out the latest episode of our podcast, "Ground Truthing," at [wca4kids.org/podcast!](https://wca4kids.org/podcast)

Season 4, Episode 1 spotlights the lived experiences of youths Ja'Quan Wallace and Jasmine Cabrera with discipline, alternative programs and community advocacy. Hosted by WCA intern Gabby Nanna, this interview was recorded in the lead up to the Rally for Youth Justice on February 23, 2023.

SPOTLIGHT ON Children's Mental Health

On March 7th, WCA hosted our second **Children's Mental Health Roundtable** focused on the mental health needs and trends of youth in the county. Twenty-five agency partners attended the invitation-only roundtable thanks to our lunch sponsor, Morgan Stanley. Attendees included many people working directly with children and families: County mental health professionals, service and support providers, and representatives from local health clinics and school districts.

The issues that arose in this roundtable seem, unfortunately, to be many of the same ones that came to light at the last roundtable in 2021. Attendees of both events agreed that there was:

- A lack of consensus on key indicators for measuring mental health outcomes
- Low public and private insurance payments for mental health services that contribute to limited availability of those services, staffing shortages, staffing retention and program development issues
- Increase need for services due to the growing mental health crisis of children and youth

Prior to the roundtable, a meeting with five County Youth Bureaus representatives on March 1st reinforced the need for data, specifically related to COVID and its impact, to help identify opportunities for systemic change and the need to shed insight on ways to maintain youth engagement. All voiced concern regarding young people's lack of social and critical thinking skills and their inability to communicate emotions, thereby influencing their ability to reach out for support.

Most of the participants at the roundtable acknowledged the increasing prevalence of anxiety and depression with children and youth. Additionally, participants reported seeing and treating youth with increased risky behaviors, negative ways of coping, suicidal thoughts, poor social skills, domestic violence issues and trauma. Requests for neuro-psychological evaluations have increased tremendously as have the number of school suspensions — especially at a younger age. Overall, there is an increased need for services.

Like the 2021 Roundtable, providers and organizations reported struggling to manage many challenges, including staffing and retention. Every agency has openings for mental health workers — especially for bi-lingual and culturally competent individuals. Low pay is driven by poor



Above: WCA's Programs and Policy Manager, Angel Gray, and Glenda Bryan (Westchester Department of Social Services)

Right: Jonathan Morgenstern (The Guidance Center), WCA Intern, Gabriella Nana, and Katrina Mosely (Westchester Department of Probation)



reimbursement from private and public insurance. Recent cost of living (COLA) increases are simply not enough to maintain and/or hire staff. Families are struggling to find the services they need and often they are either uninsured or underinsured. Even with insurance, agencies find that the ability of mental health service providers to meet the full needs of their clients is limited. The additional funding that came because of COVID is short-termed and while some schools have increased staffing, there is concern that once this funding ends, they will be unable to retain staff and the need will still be there.

Anecdotal experiences and limited available data show that increasing mental health support was a major priority before the pandemic and, going forward, will continue. There is, however, a high level of unmet need among children and families throughout Westchester. Developing consistent indicators and investing in better monitoring can help our leaders to budget and respond to increased demand while facilitating collaboration to better support children. **Participants of the WCA Roundtable agreed that innovative solutions to some of these challenges are needed and that it was extremely beneficial to gather and discuss trends and challenges because change happens when voices unite and demand it.**

The group identified as recommendations: planning another roundtable to continue the conversation, engaging school district personnel to get a pulse on what they are experiencing with students, better data collection, identifying key indicators, and having Dr. Kira Hudson Banks (the keynote speaker at WCA's 2022 Advocacy Breakfast) return. WCA is ready to take the next steps necessary to better serve the mental health needs of Westchester's children and youth.

For more information on WCA's mental health work, please visit wca4kids.org/issues/campaign-kids, and be sure you are signed up to receive our emails at wca4kids.org/subscribe.

WCA Fights to Cut Child Poverty in New York State

WCA's Executive Director, Allison Lake is an appointed statutory member of Governor Kathy Hochul's Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council (CPRAC) and, along with other state advocates, is pushing to codify key investments to reduce child poverty by increasing funding to support lower-income households.

Targeted pandemic-era relief has helped reduce and mitigate poverty and food insecurity throughout the country. The temporarily expanded federal child tax credit cut child poverty by 46% during the pandemic. Investing in the youngest low-income children is one of the smartest, highest-return social investments the government can make.

We know what works:

- 1. Deliver tax relief to children in low-income families by strengthening refundable tax credits.** Specifically, the New York's Empire State Child Credit (ESCC) and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
- 2. Increase New York's minimum wage and adjust it each year to keep up with rising costs**
- 3. Keep children and families housed by establishing the Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP)** a state-level voucher program to provide housing stability to New York families at risk of homelessness.
- 4. Establish and fund statewide, permanent Healthy School Meals for All** to ensure all students receive a healthy school breakfast and lunch at no cost each school day.

In the Executive Budget proposed by the governor for fiscal year 2024, there is an absence of policy instruments with the strongest evidence of reducing child poverty. We have an opportunity to advance critical, evidence-informed actions that will immediately assist New York's children and families who are experiencing poverty - why should children wait?

TAKE ACTION! Send a message to state elected officials wca4kids.org/state-budget

For more information on WCA's work on state budget advocacy, poverty, and homelessness, go to wca4kids.org/state-budget and wca4kids.org/issues/child-homelessness and be sure you are signed up to receive our emails at wca4kids.org/subscribe.

What you need to know about poverty in New York State



Estimated costs to NYS =
\$60+ billion per year¹

In 22 counties, **OVER 20%** of children live in households below the poverty line.²

And, in Westchester County³



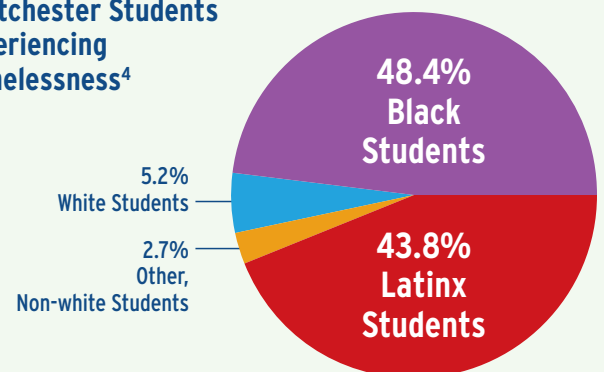
23% of children live in single parent households

54% of households are rent burdened, and 40% live paycheck to paycheck

The Poverty Rate is 18.9% and 18.4% respectively for Black and Latinx children, whereas the child poverty rate for all races is 10.4%.

Black and Latinx children experience poverty at higher rates due to structural, historic, and ongoing racism in housing, employment, education, policing, and other systems.

Westchester Students Experiencing Homelessness⁴



¹Columbia University; ²Citizens Committee for Children; ³WCA Community Snapshot, American Community Survey; ⁴WCA's NYS Education Dept. Freedom of Information Request, 5 year estimate, 2019.

Making Noise for Youth Justice

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Right 2 Remain Silent legislation would safeguard the right to counsel prior to police questioning for youth under 20 years-old. Research suggests nearly 90% of youth waive their Miranda Rights. This protection would increase the likelihood that youth understand their rights and maintain them. Attention to policies, supported by speaker's real-life experiences, reminded attendees that youth justice reform is needed in Westchester, and affects our emerging adults.

Policies which provide support following youth's contact with the justice system also gained attention. **The Youth Justice and Opportunities Act (YJ&O)** would expand access to emerging-adult and alternative programs for youth offenders. YSOW offers such programs, and there were many young people from their organization in attendance. Ja'Quan Wallace, who was interviewed on WCA's Ground Truthing Podcast, spoke not only about alternative programs, but also about the need for **Clean Slate Legislation**, which would incentivize good behavior by clearing previous conviction records after a predetermined period of time. "Makes sense, doesn't it?" Jordan Comier of YSOW asked of the participants while explaining the bill. Her question was met with enthusiasm. Both YJ&O and Clean Slate would respond to the growing need for mentorship and promotion of personal improvement following youth contact with law enforcement. In this, youth offenders will not be limited due to past actions and will have access to resources enabling growth beyond them.



White Plains Youth Bureau and other partners

Despite the Youth Justice Rally's commentary on the need for justice reform and inequities within the justice system, attendees were reminded that the fight for youth justice can be exciting. The event itself was high energy, complete with a DJ, pom-poms, noise makers, and t-shirts. There were many chants in between the sharing of personal accounts and of information. Aaliyah Guillory-Nickens, emcee of the event, started a call and response chant: "What do we want?!" to which the crowd responded, "Youth Justice!!" In WCA's continued efforts for Youth Justice, many offered enthusiasm and found community.

For more information about WCA's Youth Justice work, please visit us at wca4kids.org/youthjustice and don't miss our article, "The Advocate Within" in this newsletter.

Volunteer for our NEW Eviction Court Watching Program



Along with our community partners, WCA is launching a court watching program to help ensure fairness in eviction court and inform our advocacy on preventing homelessness. We are looking for volunteers! Required trainings will take place in White Plains in late April and mid-May.

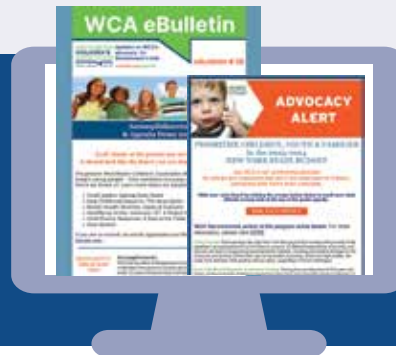
What is court watching? Observing court proceedings with an eye on equity and documenting aspects of the proceedings. Court watching remains a powerful tool that can be used to change the behaviors of decision makers.

For more information, visit wca4kids.org/issues/child-homelessness

OUR NEXT NEWSLETTER
WILL BE ONLINE ONLY

Don't miss it!

Sign up at wca4kids.org/subscribe



The Advocate Within: Empowering Caregivers and Young Adults

WCA is excited to share with you the success of our recent **Advocacy 101 training** done in partnership with **Family Ties of Westchester** and **Sister to Sister International**.

This virtual three-part training took place over three weeks and brought together nearly thirty system-involved youth and their caregivers. The sessions provided valuable opportunities for caregivers to gain knowledge and skills on how to effectively advocate for their children, interact with elected officials and amplify their voices in the community.

The training included presentations and discussions on a variety of advocacy efforts, like **lobbying elected officials, building coalitions, creating awareness campaigns, and speaking publicly about issues related to system-involved youth and young adults. Group discussions took place also to identify specific issues and share strategies for effective advocacy.**

The sessions were not only informative, but also provided a safe and supportive space for caregivers to connect, share their experiences and exchange ideas. Many caregivers face similar challenges and being able to connect with others who understand their experiences proved to be incredibly empowering and validating.

By providing participants with the opportunity to engage with elected officials, the staff of WCA and partner organizations continuously aim to break down barriers of access and empower caregivers to become effective advocates. Elected officials have the power to shape policies and make decisions that impact



WCA's Programs and Policy Manager, Angel Gray, leads a high school training

system-involved youth, young adults and their families, and it's crucial that caregivers have the chance to share their experiences and advocate for their respective causes.

As participants engaged with **Senator Shelley Mayer** and **Legislator Catherine Borgia**, they were able to further discuss their advocacy issues, practice their new skills, and receive valuable guidance on how to move their advocacy efforts further. Most importantly, they were able to have their voices heard!

We believe advocating and engaging with elected officials is a critical component to building successful advocacy efforts and creating positive change across all systems. To further our efforts and reach a greater amount of community members, **we have partnered with Volunteer New York to provide our advocacy training to high school students throughout Westchester County.** It is important for community members of all ages to know that their voices matter, they can make a real difference in the lives of many, and their voices have power!

ADVOCACY: FROM PROBLEM TO GOAL



WCA's advocacy training is available for a fee. Please contact Angel Gray, WCA's Program and Policy Manager at agray@wca4kids.org or 914.946.7676 x 308.



The Board of Directors and the entire team at
Westchester Children's Association

CONGRATULATES

Our Executive Director, Allison Moore Lake

on being named as one of

Crain's New York Business 2023 Notable Black Leaders

crainsnewyork.com/notables/meet-crains-2023-notable-black-leaders

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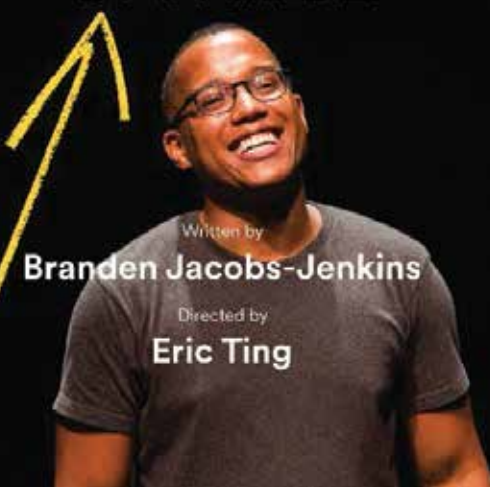
ChildWATCH

- Making Noise for Youth Justice
- Spotlight on Mental Health
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- The Advocate Within: Empowering Caregivers and Young Adults
- Ground Truthing Podcast
- Court Watching Volunteers Wanted
- Email Sign-Up

SignatureTheatre

"One of this country's most original and illuminating writers." - *The New York Times*

THE COME- UPPANCE



Meet WCA for a NYC Matinee

Join the Board and staff of Westchester Children's Association for *The Comeuppance* at the Pershing Square Signature Theater in New York City on Sunday, May 21, 2023, at 2:00 PM for \$100 per ticket.

Support WCA while enjoying an enlightening work of theater, *The Comeuppance*. This darkly comic play, written by Branden Jacob-Jenkins and directed by Eric Ting, tells the story of a group of former classmates reconvening for their twentieth high school reunion. Branden Jacob-Jenkins is described by the New York Times as "one of this country's most original and illuminating writers" and his honors include finalist for the Pulitzer Prize (twice) and the MacArthur fellowship.

Each \$100 ticket purchased through us results not only in supporting an up-and-coming young playwright of color, but also a \$60 tax-deductible donation to Westchester Children's Association.

For more information, visit wca4kids.org/events/comeuppance

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