



Priorities for Westchester's Children & Youth

Recommendations for the New York State Legislature Westchester Delegation on the Executive Budget for SFY 2023-24 March 13, 2023

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 2023-2024 New York State Executive Budget as well as your enduring support for Westchester's Children.

*WCA works to ensure every child is healthy, safe and prepared for life's challenges. Many children and their families are still 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 attention to evidence-informed policy actions that will immediately assist New York's children and families who are experiencing poverty.*

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.

- **Pass the Working Families Tax Credit** to promote economic stability, reduce poverty, address income inequality, and support the well-being of children, youth and families.
- **Expanding the Empire State Child Credit** to include children under 4 years of age, restructuring the credit so the highest credit goes to the lowest income-earning families, increasing the credit amount, and ensuring more immigrant families are included.
- **Establish the Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP)** to provide housing stability for New York Families at risk of homelessness.
- **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.

Youth Justice

- **Reject Executive Budget proposals that revisit the components of bail reform and protect gains made in Raise The Age legislation.** We must also invest in effective interventions and programs that address the underlying issues that contribute to youth involvement in the justice system and ensure that children and youth continue to be dealt with in age-appropriate ways. To address this issue, it is essential for New York to:
 - **Pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act** which shifts away from punitive disciplinary practices and move towards solutions that prioritize prevention, support and positive relationships between students and educators.
 - **Pass the Youth Justice & Opportunity Act (A4238/S3426)** and help break the cycle of youth involved in the criminal justice system by expanding alternatives to incarceration.
 - **Pass the Youth Interrogation Bill (A1963/S1099)** and protect the rights of young people under the age of 18 by ensuring they have access to legal counsel during police interrogations.
 - **Pass the Clean Slate Act(S211)** and seal criminal records of eligible individuals who have served their sentences and demonstrated rehabilitation, helping to remove barriers to employment, housing and other important aspects of daily life.

Mental Health

- **Increase funding and access to mental health services for every child and youth in New York.**
 - **Commit at least half (\$500 million) of the \$1 billion in behavioral health funding proposed in the Executive Budget to behavioral health services for children and families.** This funding should support a range of interventions including emergency and residential care, community-based services, family and peer supports and other programs that help children and youth receive needed behavioral health services.
 - **Increase** the number of behavioral health providers in the workforce to ensure children and youth receive effective behavioral health services in a timely manner.
 - **Adopt** the Executive Budget proposal to invest \$10 million in school-based mental health clinic funding and school-based wraparound services.

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.

- **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.
- **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.
- **Enact and fund the Housing Access Voucher Program** to provide secure and affordable housing options and reduce the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness or are at risk of losing their housing.

Early Childhood Supports and Home Visiting

New York State must address disparities in access to early childhood supports and home visiting services to ensure children and families have the support guidance and resources they need to create nurturing and stimulating environments for children during critical early years of life.

- **Invest** \$175M to implement universal home visiting.
- **Restore** \$200,000 for ParentChild+ home visiting and include an increase of \$300,000 to further expansion and continue initiatives

We support the 2023 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, Youth Justice and Opportunity Campaign, Schuyler Center for Analysis & Advocacy, Nonprofit Westchester and Westchester Women’s Agenda which include many of the priorities outlined above.