

Child Advocates, Westchester Officials Address Challenges Facing Kids | The Examiner News

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By Ryan Raicht



A panel of Westchester County commissioners who work regularly on issues facing the county's children speak during a forum held last week by the Westchester Children's Association.

The Westchester Children's Association held a forum last Thursday at the Greenburgh Public Library, bringing county officials together to discuss the pressing issues facing Westchester's children.

The event, called Commissioners' Conversation, was led by Allison Lake, executive director of the Westchester Children's Association, and Angel Gray, the nonprofit organization's policy and program manager.

It brought together five of Westchester County's department commissioners who are involved on some level with children's-related matters, with the goal of addressing how county government plans to manage the challenges facing Westchester's youth.

In 2021, 2.8 percent of white children under five years old were living in poverty. Meanwhile, 13.5 percent of Hispanic children and 19.3 percent of Black children fell into that category.

"I get the importance of data, but it's so important that there are children and people behind these numbers with individual stories, individual needs, and it's really all of our work to partner and collaborate to try and move things forward," Lake said.

Limarie Cabrera, the Westchester Children's Association's director of data, said the organization is unveiling a three-part blog series that examines income and wealth distribution in the county.

"We are planning to launch the 2023 edition of our data bulletin," Cabrera said.

"And as usual, we have compiled a number of data indicators that cover a variety of topics such as demographics, education and health that provide a statistical portrait of what is going on with Westchester's children and youth.

"In this edition, we're planning to incorporate the voices of those we advocate for. So, the data bulletin is not just a place where numbers are shown, but a place where our youngest residents can be heard and seen."

Deputy County Executive Kenneth Jenkins also addressed how the administration has prioritized establishing services for families in need.

"We've had record funding for expansion of childcare that enables more families to access safe and reliable childcare. When we walked in the door, (the) childcare parent share was 28.5 percent, and right now it's 5 percent," Jenkins said.

County commissioners who participated in the event were Michael Orth (Community Mental Health), Kathleen O'Connor (Parks, Recreation and Conservation), Rocco Pozzi (Probation), Leonard Townes (Social Services) and Dr. DaMia Harris Madden (Youth Bureau).

Orth was asked how his department plans to tackle the soaring number of youngsters experiencing mental health, emotional, developmental and behavioral problems.

"We've invested a significant amount of money to support emotional mental health," Orth said. "Our 988 new suicide prevention hotlines that Westchester County didn't have to, but they funded, really have a more robust response for mental health services. A good percentage of the people we serve are children and young adults."

Townes said one of the initiatives that he is most proud of are the Family Enrichment Centers.

"These centers are family-based with other members of the community, but they set up a home-like environment where you can come and engage others, engage in community and get support," Townes said. "It takes the community to raise children and put them on the right track. Not a department, not social services. We're hammered and tied down by regulations. There's only so much we can do. We can assist those that come to us. We have community partners that reach out and engage the population that we don't serve directly, but it's a challenge."

Madden said the Youth Bureau currently funds 36 employment programs across the county, and her efforts have seen a significant increase in funding in recent years.

"We've seen an increase of about 81 percent in funding," Madden said.

“This is unprecedented. In 2018, when we walked in, there was about \$1.7 million in investing kids. Today we are at \$3.2 million.”

Madden also serves as president of the Hudson Valley Youth Bureau Association, which covers other Hudson Valley counties, including Ulster, Dutchess and Rockland. But to Madden, Westchester stands out.

“Westchester has done a stellar job,” she said. “When I look at the opportunities that we present within our region, we are always ‘Bestchester.’”

For more information about the Westchester Children’s Association and the extensive data that the association has collected and analyzed, visit www.wca4kids.org.



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