



Priorities for Westchester's Children & Youth

Recommendations for the New York State Legislature on the Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2025

January 2024

Westchester Children's Association (WCA) would like to thank the members of the New York State Legislature for the opportunity to submit our testimony on the FY 2025 New York State Executive Budget as well as your enduring support for New York's Children.

WCA works to ensure every child is healthy, safe, and prepared for life's challenges regardless of race or zip code. WCA collaborates with partners at the local, state, and national level to identify children's needs; educate the public and policy makers; promote policies and programs that improve children's lives; and protect public investments for children and youth. In our FY 2025 budget recommendations, we prioritize placing children's safety, housing needs, mental health and physical well-being front, and center. Recognizing that children, youth, and families have access to different resources, we aim to promote equity throughout New York State.

Child Poverty

In Westchester, one out of five children and youth ages 0-24 live in poverty or low-income households. Across New York State 700,000 children are living at or below the federal poverty line. Policies and programs must be implemented that lift children and families out of poverty and towards opportunity.

- **Enhance the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** to ensure that every working New Yorker, including those who file with an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN), have access to the credit.
- **Strengthen the Empire State Child Credit** by removing the current income phase-in and raising the credit amount to make a more substantial impact on a family's budget.
- **Establish and Fund the Healthy School Meals for All Program**, ensuring that schools participating in the National School Lunch Program offer both breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge.
- **Ensure** continuous enrollment in Medicaid and Child Health Plus health coverage for all eligible children, maintaining coverage from birth through age 6.

Mental Health

Improve access to equitable behavioral health services to address the growing needs of children and support providers with methods of recruitment and retention.

- **Invest \$195 million** in the children's behavioral health outpatient system to address reimbursement challenges that have hindered children's access to timely, high-quality mental health services.

- **Require** commercial insurers to pay Medicaid APG rates for in-network and out-of-network behavioral health services.
- **Increase funding and broaden** the criteria for both current and new recruitment and retention strategies, including initiatives such as loan repayment, tuition waivers, scholarship programs, expansion of residency and fellowship positions, and grants for employee assistance.
- **Include** a 3.2% COLA, tied to the July 2023 Consumer Price Index for all state agencies overseeing behavioral health services for children, youth, and families, ensuring its statutory inclusion.
- **Fund and establish** school based mental health clinics in every school that wants one in a transparent and equitable manner.

Child & Youth Homelessness

Ensure all children and their families have fair and timely access to adequate, safe, and stable housing that is affordable and sustainable to reduce the rate of homelessness 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.
- **Fund the Housing Access Voucher Program**, aimed at offering state-funded vouchers to families experiencing homelessness or facing the imminent threat of losing their housing.
- **Pass Statewide Right to Counsel (A1493/ S2721)** to provide legal representation for tenants facing evictions, with the aim of preventing wrongful evictions and homelessness, and allocate \$260 million to its implementation.
- **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.

Youth Justice

Protect gains made with Raise The Age legislation by investing in effective, age-appropriate interventions and programs that seek to mitigate youth involvement in the justice system and prevent re-engagement with the criminal system as adults. To address the futures of at-risk youth, it is essential for New York to:

- **Expedite** the distribution of Raise the Age funds to counties and allocate a portion of resources and funding directly to local community-based-organizations supporting youth involved in the criminal justice system.
- **Pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act (A5691)**, emphasizing a transition from punitive measures like suspensions to proactive strategies focused on preventing issues, offering support, and fostering positive relationships between students and educators.
- **Pass the Youth Justice and Opportunity Act (A4238/S3426)** and enhance support and opportunities for youth engaged in the criminal justice system by providing alternatives to incarceration, prioritizing

rehabilitation, and establishing pathways to education and employment. Aiming to prevent further involvement in the criminal justice system.

- **Pass the Youth Interrogation Bill (A1963/S1099)** and safeguard the rights and well-being of youth during interrogations by law enforcement by implementing tailored guidelines and protocols that guarantee equitable treatment throughout interrogation procedures.