



Westchester County 2024 Budget Recommendations

Since 1914, Westchester Children's Association has acted as the county's only independent child advocacy organization. As part of the Campaign for Kids coalition of 100+ organizations and individuals concerned with increasing opportunities and supports for young people in our county, **our recommendations this year for the 2024 budget is to place children's safety, housing needs, social-emotional, and physical well-being front, and center.** Recognizing that children, youth, and families have access to different resources, we aim to promote equity throughout Westchester County.

Invest in Kids:

Sustain financial support for community-based youth development programs, ensuring ongoing funding for all Invest in Kids initiatives. These programs play a vital role in safeguarding children and youth, assisting working families and promoting academic achievement. In the current climate of rapid change and uncertainty, these initiatives are crucial for establishing and reinforcing connections that contribute to the well-being of children throughout Westchester County.

Child & Youth Homelessness and Affordable Housing:

- **Broaden the Westchester County definition of homelessness** to create “adequate”, “safe” and “secure” standards for housing so that more children, youth, and families qualify for support especially those in **doubled- and tripled-up housing**.
- **Fund and implement Access to Counsel** to provide crucial legal representation for tenants facing evictions.
- **Increase investments and access to affordable housing** in Westchester.
- Add County **funding for rent arrears** to reduce evictions.

Why is this important?

The inconsistent definitions of homelessness, which often omit children and families living in doubled or tripled-up housing arrangements, create barriers to accessing services for certain youth and families. Expanding the definition's scope will enhance program accessibility and alleviate the distressing effects of homelessness, which can lead to various short- and long-term impacts on their mental health and educational outcomes. This issue is inherently linked to racial justice, as African-Americans represent 25% of Westchester's population living in poverty, yet they account for 64% of those experiencing both sheltered and unsheltered homelessness, along with 70% of families with children experiencing homelessness.

Early Childhood and Home Visiting Support:

- **Home Visiting:**
 - **Increase Home Visiting Funding** and find legislative pathways to offer universal home visiting.

- **Childcare:**
 - Improve the availability of **childcare for children and youth experiencing homelessness.**
 - Maintain **existing funding for Westchester Works Childcare Scholarship**, totaling \$3 million.
 - **Raise income eligibility** cap to 500% FPL (\$150,000) from 400% FPL (\$120,000) for a household of four.

Why is this important?

Quality early childhood and home visiting support is crucial for improving maternal and child health outcomes, family stability and increasing school readiness. These programs help address developmental challenges and promote healthy growth. They also offer guidance, education, and resources to parents and caregivers, empowering them to create a nurturing and stimulating environment for their children.

Children's Mental Health

- **Allocate funds to WCA to coordinate efforts to improve the mental wellness of school age children** in collaboration with county departments, schools, and community-based providers.
 - **Continue roundtable on children's mental health** to collect and analyze data and to find workable solutions to support the full continuum of care needed.

 - **Conduct one on one conversations with school personnel** to quantify the prevalence of mental health issues among students in key districts and catalogue the best practices

- **Allocate funding to ensure out-of-school (IJK) programs are able to include culturally competent mental health supports** and enhance social-emotional development for youth.

Why is this important?

Investing in the mental well-being of young people not only ensures their healthy development but also helps prevent the escalation of mental health issues into adulthood. It empowers youth to thrive academically and emotionally, reduces the social stigma surrounding mental health, and safeguards their future contributions to the community. By prioritizing youth mental health support, Westchester County can foster a generation of resilient, productive, and mentally healthy individuals, thereby securing a brighter and more prosperous future for the entire region.

Youth Justice:

- Implement **pathways for community-based organizations to apply directly for Raise The Age funding** to support a continuum of services including diversion, rehabilitation, and placement only when necessary.

Why is this important?

Increasing access to community-based funding allows programs to enhance or create community led interventions tailored to the unique developmental and cultural needs of youth involved in the criminal justice system promotes community safety.