

The Road to Empowerment and Advocacy:

*Parents as Change
Agents*



Prepared by

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Executive Summary

This report brings attention to the lived experiences of parents and families in Westchester County, providing them with a platform to voice the challenges they face in navigating systemic barriers and child poverty. By centering the voices of these parents, we aim to humanize the data, illustrating the resilience and determination of families who, despite their hardships, continue to advocate for change. The stories shared in this report lay the foundation for an actionable roadmap to end child poverty, empowering parents to engage

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with decision-makers and community members to address these pressing issues.

While Westchester County is often regarded as affluent, the report highlights persistent struggles faced by families, such as housing instability, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare and essential services. These challenges are not unique to Westchester but are common across New York State.

To better understand these issues, WCA conducted focus groups with parents in 2023, leading to the formation of the Parent Empowerment Group. This group equips parents with the tools and knowledge to become effective advocates for themselves and their communities.

The report presents qualitative research based on group discussions, including English and Spanish language sessions. Participants were predominantly Hispanic/Latino (84.8%), and many face severe economic hardship, with over 60% of participants earning less than \$15,000 annually. The families represented in the report often struggle with multiple jobs, overcrowded housing, and limited access to resources.

The report highlights several key challenges faced by families, including housing instability, food insecurity, inadequate mental health support, and issues related to undocumented status. Families struggle with limited affordable housing options, high shelter fees, and landlord discrimination, which often leave them trapped in temporary accommodations without a path to secure permanent housing. Food insecurity is another significant issue, with insufficient SNAP benefits, inadequate food assistance in shelters, and administrative barriers preventing families from accessing the nutrition they need, increasing their financial and emotional stress. Additionally, a lack of adequate mental health resources, combined with the fear of punitive consequences when seeking help, leaves many families without the support they desperately need. For undocumented parents, the added difficulty of accessing services, paired with the constant fear of deportation, creates additional layers of stress and uncertainty.

Despite these challenges, families show remarkable resilience, forming support networks, sharing resources, and using coping mechanisms like yoga and spirituality to maintain hope. This report emphasizes the importance of amplifying parents' voices and advocating

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for targeted policy changes to dismantle the systemic barriers perpetuating child poverty, aiming to create a more equitable future for all families in New York State.

Introduction



This report aims to 1) acknowledge and give voice to parents navigating systemic barriers, 2) humanize data and 3) provide a platform for those directly impacted by child poverty. Parents and children are not just recipients of aid but active agents advocating for change. By amplifying these courageous voices, we lay the groundwork for meaningful civic engagement and advocacy. These stories form the foundation of an actionable roadmap for change with the hope of empowering parents with the tools and confidence to engage with decision-makers and community members to highlight the urgent need to end child poverty.

The challenges faced by families in Westchester County are not unique to our county but experienced by families throughout New York State. Some may be unaware, despite the county's affluence, that persistent issues such as affordable housing, food insecurity, healthcare challenges, and inadequate access to essential services continue to hinder families from achieving stability, as highlighted in WCA's 2024 report, "*Uplifting Courageous Voices: From the Frontline of Poverty in Westchester County.*" To better understand the lived experiences of the children and families behind the numbers, we began a series of focus groups in 2023, aimed at hearing directly from those impacted by child poverty. Drawing from shared challenges and resilience, one key outcome of our focus groups was the establishment of WCA's Parent Empowerment Group, where the voices of parents facing these struggles are central to driving policy change.

These groups also equip parents to navigate their roles as change agents, fostering a sense of community and support, while providing the resources and knowledge needed to effectively engage with local and state governments, as well as community partners.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to examine the varied experiences of individuals impacted by low-income and engaged in government-sponsored programs. Participants were recruited from the Westchester Community Health Center and Open Door Family Medical Center to form Parent Empowerment groups. Two English and two Spanish language Parent Empowerment groups were held, with one taking place in Portchester at Open Door Family Medical Center, and another in Greenburgh at the Westchester Community Health Center, where both English and Spanish groups met on the same day. To facilitate the Spanish-speaking groups, we partnered with a consultant, while WCA's Program & Policy Manager led the English-speaking groups. In order to ensure a focused conversation, an outline of questions was developed to address child poverty and capture the authentic voices of those impacted (See Outline Available in Appendix).

We were committed to engaging respectfully and openly with individuals facing hardships, ensuring their voices were central to our research. Each participant was compensated for their time, with the goal of gathering firsthand experiences and preparing them to advocate for change at the local, state, and federal levels.

Participant Demographics

The participant demographics provide insight into the families involved in the Parent Empowerment groups, revealing a predominantly Hispanic / Latino group (84.8%), with a significant number of parents aged 25 to 44 (66.7%). Income levels highlight the significant economic challenges faced by these families, with the majority, 63.6% earning under \$15,000 annually and another 21.2% earning between \$15,000 and \$24,000 annually. Most participants have two children (48.5%) with a majority of children aged 5 to 17 (56%).

AGE OF PARENT		
Age	Total	Percentage (Out of 33 Participants)
18 to 24	3	9.1%
25 to 34	10	30.3%
35 to 44	12	36.4%
45 to 54	7	21.2%
60 to 64	1	3.0%

RACE / ETHNICITY OF PARENT		
Race	Total	Percentage (Out of 33 Participants)
Asian	0	0%
Black	4	12.1%
Hispanic Latino	28	84.8%
Multiracial	0	0%
White	1	3.0%

INCOME LEVEL		
Income	Total	Percentage (Out of 33 Participants)
Under \$15,000	21	63.6%
\$15,000 to \$24,999	7	21.2%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	2	6.1%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	2	6.1%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	1	3.0%

CHILDREN PER PARENT		
Number of Children	Total	Percentage (Out of 33 Participants)
1 child	9	27.3%
2 children	16	48.5%
3 children	1	3.0%
4 children	5	15.2%
5 children	1	3.0%
6 children	1	3.0%

AGE OF CHILDREN		
Age	Total	Percentage (Out of the 75 Total Children)
Ages 0 to 5	22	29.3%
Ages 5 to 17	42	56%
Ages 18 or Above	11	14.7%

Stories of Resilience

The challenges parents face in Westchester County are profound and complex, yet their resilience in overcoming these obstacles is equally remarkable. As parents navigate complicated support systems and overwhelming administrative hurdles while applying for essential resources, their stress and uncertainty are only intensified. One parent expressed their frustration: “I’ve had seven different caseworkers in less than seven months. Every time I think I’m making progress; I have to start all over again.” These challenges make it even more difficult to access the help they need.



“Not knowing is fatal. It’s overwhelming when you don’t know who to turn to or what to do next.”

Many of the parents in our empowerment group are also undocumented and face significant barriers in accessing essential services. Some are unable to apply for assistance, while others are afraid to do so due to the fear of deportation. This creates an additional layer of stress, as they struggle to navigate a system that is already difficult to access. Additionally, a significant number of parents want to learn English but struggle to find the time due to working multiple jobs. Virtual or infrequent in-person classes are often insufficient, limiting their ability to access resources, navigate bureaucratic processes, and fully engage in their communities.

HOUSING:

Housing instability remains one of the most pressing issues. Parents report limited affordable housing options, unrealistic budget constraints, and the constant threat of penalties for minor missteps. For some, overcrowded apartments have become a solution due to a lack of support systems, with multiple family members sharing tight spaces. This has also led to conflicts with landlords, adding to the already overwhelming housing crisis.

As one parent shared, “We don’t want to be in the shelter, but we are stuck because of systemic failures.” The fees required to live in housing shelters, sometimes as high as \$1,500 a month, undermine their ability to save for permanent housing. WCA has come to understand these fees residents vary throughout New York State. Despite legal protections against discrimination, parents also face bias from landlords who refuse to rent to families with children, leaving them feeling powerless and overwhelmed. As another parent explained, “Not knowing is fatal. It’s overwhelming when you don’t know who to turn to or what to do next.”

To combat child and youth homelessness, New York must strengthen eviction prevention measures, increase affordable housing options, and support families in overcoming homelessness to achieve long-term stability. Two key pieces of legislation to be

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championed are the statewide right to counsel and eliminating rental charges for those living in homeless shelters, allowing children and families to eventually move to more permanent and sustainable housing.

FOOD INSECURITY:

Food insecurity and financial struggles add another layer of hardship for many parents, particularly single mothers, who often find it challenging to make ends meet due to inadequate SNAP benefits, cash assistance, and other essential resources. As one single mother expressed, “The only thing we do rely on is the food stamps and cash assistance. That’s never enough.” For those managing work, childcare, and household responsibilities, this insufficiency adds overwhelming pressure to their daily lives.

The meals provided in shelters are often inadequate in both quantity and quality. One participant noted, “They give us three fish sticks on a plate with a little cup of coleslaw. That’s supposed to be lunch for a grown adult and kids.” The lack of fresh and nutritious options forces families to either endure substandard meals or find alternative means of feeding their children, which is particularly challenging when shelter policies restrict cooking. Parents living in shelters with kitchens that don’t accommodate cultural cooking practices face additional challenges. As one parent shared, “A lot of kids want their mom’s home-cooked meal, but you can’t cook unless you have privileges or a medical condition.”

Administrative barriers and delays further complicate access to food assistance, leaving families without critical support. One mother shared, “It took five months for DSS to add my daughter to my case,” leaving her without food benefits despite providing all required documentation. Additionally, food insecurity and limited access to support take a severe toll on parents’ mental and emotional well-being, leaving them overwhelmed by anxiety

and depression. “How am I going to feed my kids? Where do I go?” one participant asked. Another added, “it’s hard because you’re stressed, overwhelmed, and mentally destroyed.”

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT:

A lack of sufficient mental health support further exacerbates their and their child’s mental and emotional well-being. Parents spoke of lengthy waiting lists for services, leaving their children’s needs unmet and situations deteriorating. For some, seeking help has even led to punitive consequences. One mother explained, “When I call crisis intervention for help, it often leads to CPS being involved instead of actual support. It makes me not want to call for help at all.” These gaps in the system

not only delay critical care but also discourage families from reaching out for assistance.



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RESILIENCE:

Despite these hardships, families demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination. Many parents find strength in their communities, forming support networks and sharing resources to navigate complex systems. As one participant expressed, “If we learn something here, we can share it with someone else who needs it. Even if it’s not for us, we can pass it on and help our community grow stronger.” Others turn to creative coping mechanisms like painting, walking in nature, and practicing yoga to manage stress and maintain hope. Spiritual practices and personal growth also play a vital role in helping parents persevere. One parent shared, “God and yoga have been my saving grace. Just taking a moment to breathe and let go of the stress is what gets me through the day.”

Legislative Advocacy

The report also emphasizes the urgent need for policies outlined in the Child Poverty Reduction Act, which addresses the root causes of child poverty and provides pathways for long-term systemic transformation. Central to this effort is implementing robust tax relief for New York’s families, as highlighted by Governor Hochul’s 2025 proposal in the State of the State to increase the Child Tax Credit, providing \$1,000 per child under age four and up to \$500 per child ages four through sixteen, while ensuring that the lowest-income families in the state are included.

However, tax relief alone is not enough; stable housing is equally crucial, as it provides the foundation for a healthier, more secure future for children and their families. A statewide rental assistance voucher program for qualifying unsubsidized renters could be transformative, reducing child poverty by nearly 16% and lifting around 250,000 New Yorkers, including 82,000 children, out of poverty.¹

Additionally, it is essential to strengthen direct support programs like Public Assistance across New York State. Countless families face daily struggles to meet their basic needs. While Public Assistance’s “cash assistance” program is designed to provide essential support, its current benefit levels fall far too short of what is needed to survive.

Moreover, many children across the state are excluded from the SNAP program due to their immigration status, leaving them without vital access to food and nutrition benefits. To close this gap, New York must establish a Food Assistance Program that provides comparable support for these children, ensuring that all children in the state—regardless of immigration status—have the resources they need to thrive.

¹ “CPRAC Housing Choice Voucher One-Pager,” *New York State Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council (CPRAC)*, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://eadn-wc02-9834286.nxedge.io/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CPRAC-HCV-One-Pager.pdf>.

Through the collective power of parent empowerment groups and targeted policy interventions, we can begin to tackle the systemic barriers that perpetuate child poverty, creating a more equitable future for families across New York State.

CPRAC LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

Pass the *New York Working Families Tax Credit* to provide greater financial support for low- and moderate-income families, ensuring all working New Yorkers, including filers who file with Individual Taxpayer identification Number (ITIN), benefit from the credit.

Increase the *Empire State Child Credit* to \$1,500 per child, index it to inflation, and remove the minimum earnings requirement to ensure the lowest-income families can access the full benefit.

Expand and Fund the *Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP)* to provide rental assistance and housing stability for low-income New Yorkers, ensuring access to safe and affordable housing for all.

Raise the *Cash Assistance* amount for families and index it to inflation.

Create and Fund the *Healthy School Meals for All Program* to ensure that schools in the National School Lunch Program provide both breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost.

Secure state funding to **provide food benefits to all income-eligible New Yorkers** excluded from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) due to their immigration status.

Conclusion: Road to Advocacy

On November 19th, 2024, WCA traveled to Albany to join over 200 advocates from across New York State to rally to end child poverty. This event served as a powerful platform for families to share their stories, and push for meaningful change. Seven parents from our Parent Empowerment Group attended, with one parent having the opportunity to speak at the rally. She powerfully highlighted the notion that “you have to pay to be poor,” emphasizing the additional burdens placed on families struggling with poverty.



These parent stories highlight the systemic challenges families face and their unwavering commitment to creating a better future for their children. Their narratives underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms that prioritize equitable access to housing, food, health care services, and comprehensive support systems.

Their resilience empowers them to take the next crucial step in becoming effective advocates. WCA will provide participants with an in-depth Advocacy 101 training, ensuring that parents feel confident, informed, and ready to take on this critical role in driving change. As empowered change agents they will inform WCA’s 2025 State budget agenda including child poverty, youth well-being, youth justice, early childhood support, and child & youth homelessness. Recognizing the disparities children and families face when accessing resources, we are committed to advancing policies that ensure every child in New York State has the opportunity to thrive.

We will also seek parent input into our planned “Making Ends Meet” brochure, a guide to services and supports in Westchester County that helps working families save money and connect to government and community resources.