



Priorities for Westchester's Children & Youth

Recommendations for the New York State Legislature on the Executive Budget for SFY 2025-26 January 2025

WCA works to ensure every child is healthy, safe, and prepared for life's challenges regardless of race or zip code. WCA partners with local, state and national organizations to identify the needs of children, raise awareness, and advocate for policies and programs that strengthen their well-being. In our 2025-36 budget recommendations, we are centering 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.

Child Poverty

In Westchester, one in five children live in poverty, and 700,000 children statewide live below the federal poverty line. To address this, we must invest in policies that permanently lift families out of poverty, reduce racial inequities, and ensure all children have access to tax credits, housing, and nutrition support.

➤ Tax Credits:

- **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 ITIN filers, 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.

➤ Housing:

- **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.

➤ Public Assistance:

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

➤ Nutrition Support:

- **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.

Youth Well Being

New York's youth are facing significant challenges in mental health services and child welfare. To address this, the state must invest in improving behavioral health for children, support community-based programs for families, and ensure greater access to care and services for those in need.

➤ **Mental Health**

- **Invest \$195 million to improve the children's behavioral health system**, including Article 31, Article 32, Children and Family Treatment and Support Services (CFTSS), and Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) programs, addressing reimbursement issues and enhancing access to timely, high-quality mental health services statewide.
- **Increase behavioral health rates and contracts by 7.8%** to help providers address staff vacancies, reduce turnover, and manage rising operational costs.
- **Increase funding for school-based mental health clinics (SBMHCs)** by \$25,000 per site to support expansion and sustainability.
- **Remove** copays and coinsurance for behavioral health services to increase access to care.

➤ **Child Welfare**

- **Establish the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund** with \$30 million to invest in community-based programs and services that support the well-being of children and families.
- **Prohibit** the automatic referral of parents with children in foster care to child support collection, ensuring parents are not automatically required to pay child support when their child enters foster care.

Youth Justice

New York must take urgent action to reform the youth justice system. To achieve this, the state should invest in community-based services, prioritize rehabilitation over incarceration, and focus on alternatives to punitive measures.

- **Establish the Youth Justice Innovation Fund through bills (S.9312A/A.10290A)**, allocating \$50 million from the \$250 million Raise the Age appropriation to support community-based services, including prevention, early intervention, and alternatives to detention and incarceration.
- **Pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Bill (S.1040/A.5691)**, 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 (S.3426/A.4238)** 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 Children's Early Access to Counsel Bill (S878/A.8923A)** 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.

Early Childhood Support

To tackle the issues surrounding early childhood education and childcare access, New York must strengthen its workforce, increase funding for affordable childcare, and ensure that low-income families have access to the support and resources needed for their children's success.

- **Workforce Support:** Develop a sustainable statewide pipeline of support for childcare workers to attract qualified candidates and retaining staff.
 - **Create minimum base pay scale and subsequent career compensation scale** for early childhood professionals that is comparable to similarly-credentialed workers in the K-12 public school system. For example, the entry level salary for a full-time ten-month kindergarten teacher in Westchester count is \$54,533.00
- **Family Program Access:** Ensure New York families can access child care by guaranteeing assistance to eligible low-income New Yorkers
 - **Create a state-funded entitlement** for families making less than 250% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$78,000 income for a 4-person household in 2025)
 - Increase state funding for the **Child Care Assistance Program** by \$300 million to account for growth in CCAP enrollment

Child & Youth Homelessness

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.

- **Homelessness and Eviction Prevention:** Support those at risk of eviction with rental assistance and early responses to eviction proceedings.
 - **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.
- **Homelessness Recovery:** Allow children and families experiencing homelessness to move beyond poverty circumstances.
 - Pass (A00745/ S.3414A) **eliminating rental charges for those living in homeless shelters**, allowing children and families to eventually move to more permanent and sustainable housing.

Note: Highlighted sections are awaiting new bill numbers for the 2025 NYS Legislative Session.