



## Priorities for Westchester's Children & Youth

### Recommendations for the New York State Legislature on the Executive Budget for SFY 2026-27

*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 2026-2027 New York State Executive Budget as well as your enduring support for New York's Children.*

WCA is committed to ensuring that every child is healthy, safe, and prepared for life challenges regardless of race or zip code. We collaborate with local, state, and national partners to identify children's needs, raise awareness, and advocate for policies and programs that strengthen their well-being. In our 2026–27 budget recommendations, we are prioritizing early childhood supports, child poverty, youth justice, youth well-being and child & youth homelessness. Acknowledging the barriers children and families face in accessing critical resources, we are dedicated to advancing policies that give every child in New York State the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential.

#### Childhood Support

To strengthen early childhood education and expand access to child care, New York must invest in a stable, well-supported workforce, increase funding for affordable care, and ensure that low-income families have consistent access to the resources and supports their children need to thrive.

- Strengthen and sustain compensation supplements for the child care workforce by:
  - Creating a permanent state fund to increase child care worker compensation sufficient to offer all members of the child care workforce a significant boost in income (Child Care Workforce Pay Equity Fund S.5533 (Brisport)/A.492 (Hevesi))
  - Developing a plan for subsequent years to establish a minimum pay scale and career ladder based on agreed-upon criteria to inform compensation supplement levels after the base pay scale for all has been increased.
- Adopt the Governor's proposed \$1.2 billion investment in New York's child care system and provide additional funding to ensure a fully funded, long-term Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). (**\$2.3B - estimated \$1.8B for NYC and \$500M for Rest of State**)
- Implement two models of universal child care bridge projects in several communities across the state, expanding them over time until free, statewide universal child care is achieved.
  - **Community eligibility projects:** This model would make child care fully free and available to all families with children in communities where a significant number of families with low

incomes reside.

- **Capped-fee projects:** All families in a project community could access child care through this project at a cost of \$100 a week (\$20/day). Under both models, participating families would not be subject to income, work, or immigration status tests.

## **Child Poverty**

To ensure every child in New York has the opportunity to thrive, the state must take bold, sustained action to strengthen family economic security. This requires investing in proven, long-term solutions that lift families out of poverty, reduce racial and economic inequities, and guarantee access to critical supports,

### ➤ **Child Tax Credit:**

- Invest funding for outreach, education, and direct assistance so that all eligible New York families are able to successfully access the enhanced Empire State Child Credit.
- Strengthen and extend the 2025 expansion of the Empire State Child Credit by:
  - Increasing the credit amount to \$1,500 per child per year for children ages 0–18, consistent with recommendations from the New York State Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council
  - Adjusting the credit annually for inflation to maintain its full value over time
  - Establishing the credit as a permanent benefit that families can rely on year after year

### ➤ **Housing:**

- Strengthen and expand the Housing Access Voucher Program by making it a permanent, statewide program funded at \$250 million annually to expand access to housing assistance and support nearly 15,000 families and individuals in exiting or preventing homelessness, in line with recommendations from the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council

### ➤ **Cash Assistance**

- Increase the benefit level by 100% and adjusting it annually to reflect inflation
- Apply the same earned income rules for applicants as for current recipients so more working families can qualify for Cash Assistance
- Remove restrictive resource limits so families can save and build long-term financial stability
- Enact statewide reforms to end harmful sanctions and protect families' access to critical benefits

### ➤ **Nutrition Support:**

- Secure a state investment to provide funding for food benefits for all income-eligible New York households with children who are currently excluded from SNAP due to immigration status
- Fund the transition of SNAP benefits to electronic chip cards to prevent theft and ensure families receive the full value of their benefits

- Provide \$75 million each for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) and NourishNY to strengthen New York’s emergency food systems
- Allocate \$30 million in state funding for WIC to help local programs meet growing demand and serve more children and families

## Youth Justice

New York must take urgent action to transform the youth justice system by investing in community-based services, prioritizing rehabilitation over incarceration, and expanding alternatives to punitive and harmful practices. To achieve this, NYS must

- **Establish the Youth Justice Innovation Fund (S.643/A.8491)** by allocating \$50 million from the \$250 million Raise the Age appropriation to support prevention, early intervention, and community-based alternatives to detention and incarceration.
- **Pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act (S.134 / A.118)** to shift away from punitive school discipline practices and toward proactive approaches that prevent harm, provide student support, and strengthen relationships between students and educators.
- **Pass the #Right2RemainSilent: Children’s Early Access to Counsel bill (S.878/A.2620)** to protect young people’s rights during law enforcement interrogations by ensuring timely access to legal counsel and fair, developmentally appropriate procedures.
- **Pass the Youth Justice and Opportunity Act (S.4330)** to expand opportunities for system-involved youth by prioritizing rehabilitation, creating alternatives to incarceration, and establishing pathways to education and employment that reduce recidivism.

## Youth Well-Being

New York’s children and youth continue to face serious barriers to accessing mental health and child welfare services. To meet these needs, the state must strengthen behavioral health systems, invest in community-based family supports, and expand equitable access to high-quality care and services for all children and families.

- **Children’s Health & Behavioral Health**
  - Support New York State’s efforts to protect public health and expand access to quality, affordable health care for all residents, regardless of immigration status. This includes strengthening streamlined enrollment and renewal systems and ensuring that Medicaid reporting and administrative requirements are clear, accessible, and designed to prevent unnecessary loss of coverage.
  - **Invest \$200 million to update reimbursement rates for Article 31 and Article 32-822 clinic services**, Children’s Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS), and Child and Family Treatment and Support Services (CFTSS) to strengthen the workforce, improve retention, and expand urgently needed outpatient mental health and behavioral health services for children and families.
- **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.

- **Pass the Economic Justice for Kids in Foster Care Act (A.8036 / S.7778)** to ensure that children in foster care across New York State benefit from the federal funds intended for them.

### **Child & Youth Homelessness**

- To effectively address child and youth homelessness, New York must strengthen eviction prevention efforts, expand access to affordable housing, and invest in comprehensive supports that help families achieve lasting stability. In Westchester County alone, one of the richest counties in NY, there were [2,569 students experiencing homelessness](#) in the 2023-24 school year.
- **Pass A.745 / S.3787** to eliminate rental charges for individuals and families living in homeless shelters, reducing financial barriers to securing permanent housing.