

Parent Empowerment Group: From Lived Experience to Advocacy

Westchester Children's Associations Parent Empowerment Groups

The Parent Empowerment Group, led by Westchester Children's Association, is a safe, bilingual space where families develop advocacy skills to raise their voices, defend their rights, and influence decision-making on issues related to child poverty and the well-being of children in Westchester. Through workshops and guided conversations, families identify the issues affecting them, explore their root causes, and learn to document them with both data and personal stories to strengthen their advocacy. This process—identifying, understanding, documenting, and taking action—empowers families to transform personal experiences into credible evidence and persuasive stories, ultimately amplifying their capacity to drive change in their communities.

Adapting the Approach to Families' Realities

Sessions were designed with intentional flexibility based on what facilitators have learned through ongoing engagement with the group. Many participants navigate fear, uncertainty, language barriers, and systemic exclusion. Traditional



advocacy models often assume safety in visibility, comfort engaging with institutions, and confidence speaking publicly, assumptions that do not reflect the realities of many families in this group. In response, the facilitation approach prioritized emotional safety, trust-building, and validation of participants' experiences in their native language before introducing formal storytelling tools.

What Families Are Experiencing

The challenges parents named during empowerment sessions are not new. They are the same concerns families have raised consistently throughout our time together, underscoring how deeply embedded these barriers are in their daily lives. As parents reflected collectively, they reaffirmed the persistent obstacles they face across systems that directly shape child and family well-being.

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Parents once again described the difficulty of **accessing affordable childcare**, pointing to long wait lists, high costs, limited awareness of available subsidies, and the lack of backup or emergency care options. These challenges continue to disrupt employment stability and place added strain on already stretched household resources.

Food insecurity remains a constant source of stress. Families spoke about the ongoing challenge of stretching SNAP and other food benefits as grocery prices rise, compounded by fear and uncertainty linked to federal policy changes and the government shutdown. Many parents shared anxiety about whether benefits will be reduced, delayed, or eliminated altogether, making it difficult to plan their families' basic needs. This unpredictability, combined with limited time and transportation to seek out affordable food options, has heightened stress and insecurity.

Housing instability also continues to remain at the forefront of their minds. Parents described the lack of affordable housing, discrimination against families with

children, and the constant threat of housing loss driven by missed work, rising rents, or unexpected financial emergencies.

Parent Perspectives

Throughout the sessions, parents shared concrete examples of how public systems intended to support families instead create additional barriers. These experiences reflect patterns WCA has observed consistently in our work with families across Westchester: fragmented services, limited coordination across agencies, and processes that place the burden of navigation on parents themselves.

Parents described how challenges in one system often trigger consequences in others. Difficulties of accessing benefits intersect with school transportation policies, housing instability, and gaps in behavioral health supports, resulting in missed school time, academic decline, heightened stress, and concerns about safety. The following excerpts, shared in parents' own words and attributed by community to protect privacy, illustrate how these systemic issues affect children and families in their daily lives.

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This experience reflects the administrative burden families face when eligibility systems are siloed, requiring repeated documentation and in-person appointments to access basic supports.

Port Chester – Navigating applications across systems

"Going to separate meetings for different government benefits (SNAP, housing, Medicaid, etc.) is time consuming and wasteful when they ask for the same information in each application. I'm repeatedly asked to prove my need in each application, and I wish there was a more comprehensive form to prove eligibility across assistance programs."

Port Chester – Education and transportation barriers

"There is an unwillingness for administrators to work with you, and that creates more problems. My daughter cannot access school busing, and the school will not relocate her to a closer high school. She's on the school meal program, but the bus drops her off too late to access it. She misses most of her first period class, resulting in lower marks than all her other classes."

Parents described how transportation decisions can limit students' access to meals and instructional time, with direct consequences for academic performance.

Parents shared feeling dismissed or unsupported when seeking behavioral health services, often without clear guidance on available resources or next steps.

Greenburgh – Advocating for behavioral health support

"My daughter experienced mental health challenges. I constantly asked for support, and it made me feel like I was a burden. I just wanted to know where and how to help her."

Learning What Makes Advocacy Effective

After grounding the conversation in the realities, families continue to face. The session shifted toward helping parents understand how their lived experiences can be communicated in ways that influence systems and decision-makers. Rather than treating advocacy as something abstract or separate from their daily lives, parents explored how the challenges they described can form the foundation of effective advocacy.

Through reviewing video examples of testimony at rallies and public hearings, parents highlighted the importance of strong introductions that situate their stories in a personal context. They emphasized the value of combining qualitative storytelling with quantitative details, such as the number of missed school days, interactions with housing authorities, or instances of food insecurity, to illustrate both the human and measurable impact of systemic gaps. Parents demonstrated how personal stories can make policy challenges visible and difficult to ignore by highlighting specific experiences with

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housing authorities, benefits offices, schools, and transportation systems and showing the real consequences of these experiences, including missed school, hunger, eviction risk, academic decline, and safety concerns.

The session also emphasized the importance of ending stories with intention. Parents practiced naming what they are asking for, whether system improvements, clearer and more accessible processes, or direct support for families. With guided time to write and reflect, participants drafted stories that connected their personal challenges to the changes they want to see.

In the Greenburgh group, parents shared



experiences navigating behavioral health systems without adequate guidance, surviving domestic violence while living in shelters, and concerns about school safety that affected their children's attendance. In the Port Chester group, parents spoke about childcare challenges tied to transportation barriers, difficulties securing appropriate school placements and

services, and housing instability driven by rising costs and development pressures

Key Takeaways and Looking Ahead

While the workshop did not immediately result in readiness for public advocacy, it produced meaningful outcomes. Storytelling offered emotional release and validation, helped parents organize complex experiences into clearer narratives, and strengthened a sense of shared experience and community. Most importantly, parents began to see that their stories matter and that visibility, on their own terms, can be a first step toward collective power. Looking ahead, this session reinforces the importance of continuing Parent Empowerment Group programming that centers safety, trust, and emotional grounding as the foundation of advocacy. As we step into the 2026-27 New York State legislative session, we are preparing parents to advocate for the state budget with a focus on policies that reduce child poverty.

Their advocacy will be guided by the recommendations of the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council and the New York Can End Child Poverty Coalition, including strengthening the child tax credit, ensuring robust cash assistance, expanding

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housing supports, increasing access to nutrition programs, and advancing steps toward universal childcare.

Advocacy pathways must be adapted to reflect the real risks families face, including options that do not require public visibility, while strengthening partnerships with immigrant-serving organizations and integrating wellness and support resources. When advocacy is grounded in lived experience and delivered with care, it becomes not only a tool for systems change but also a pathway for parents to reclaim voice, dignity, and agency for themselves and their children while helping shape a state budget that meaningfully addresses child poverty and promotes equity across New York.

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