

## **Westchester County 2021 Budget Comments and Recommendations**

**Westchester Children's Association (WCA)** is a 106-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization. **Campaign for Kids (CFK)** is our coalition of 100+ organizations and individuals concerned with increasing opportunities and supports for young people in our County.

Recognizing that children, youth and families have access to different resources both during this time of the coronavirus pandemic and long before it, we aim to promote equity across Westchester County. We offer the following recommendations for the 2021 Operating Budget.

### **Invest in Kids:**

- **Maintain existing funding for current Invest in Kids programs, totaling \$2,509,000.** This will allow the 57 current programs impacting thousands of Westchester children to continue to provide critical services.

### **Why is this important?**

All Invest in Kids programs keep children and youth safe, support working families, and foster academic success. They fill a critical need in communities, especially now, by creating and strengthening connections in children's increasingly remote environments.

### **Digital Connectivity:**

- **Access to computer, laptop, chrome books or other devices** that enable students to participate in remote learning.
- **Access to free or low-cost Wi-Fi** for all.
- **Expand access to existing virtual mentoring, tutoring** and other supports for students during remote learning.

### **Why is this important?**

In order to build digital equity, now, during this prolonged period of remote access to work and school, and far beyond, Westchester must close its digital divide and build technological infrastructure.

Parents, guardians and students alike cannot work and fully participate in learning from home without the technological and digital connectivity to access Wi-Fi and devices. Westchester families need connection now more than ever, as a way to directly address county-wide racial, educational, and income disparities and foster widespread learning and opportunities.

### **Child & Youth Homelessness and Affordable Housing:**

- **Increase investments and access** to affordable housing in Westchester.
- **Further support the needs of doubled- and tripled-up children and families**, expanding the Westchester County Department of Social Services pilot program for overcrowded families.
- **Expand funding for homelessness prevention services**, including a right to counsel for low-income residents at eviction proceedings and other eviction prevention programs.

**Why is this important?**

All experiences of homelessness have deeply traumatic and far-reaching short-term and long-term effects on children and youth, such as physical, emotional, and mental health issues, developmental delays, behavioral issues, and educational and learning difficulty.

Westchester’s quickly rising housing prices, coupled with situations like economic and housing insecurity, underemployment, family dysfunction, and discrimination, create experiences of homelessness for nearly 2,800 children and youth in Westchester, according to the New York State Education Department. As COVID-19 transmission and concerns have decreased use of the shelter system, families have increasingly shifted to doubled- and tripled-up living situations, sharing space with family and friends and creating a public health need to specifically support this population.

Westchester has successfully lifted veterans out of homelessness, and can do the same for its children, youth, and families by (1) further supporting those currently experiencing homelessness with accessible, coordinated services and (2) emphasizing prevention through increased investments in affordable housing and eviction prevention.

**Early Childhood Support:**

- **Invest in innovative, evidence-based early childhood home visiting programs** using best practices.
- **Increase child care subsidy reimbursement rates each year until they reach NYS market rates**
- **Reduce parent co-pay for child care from 25% to 20% of income over 100% FPL.**
- **Make more Title XX child care slots available.**
- **Reinstate the Westchester Child Care Scholarship Program.**

**Why is this important?**

In this time of COVID-19, safe, accessible, affordable child care is a necessity to restart the economy. Equally important, quality early childhood supports like home visiting have a critical impact on family functioning, kindergarten readiness, high school graduation, employment rates, and adult income. Unfortunately, early childhood programs and child care costs are exceedingly high, which creates barriers for many children and families.

At a time when many child care programs have had to close their doors and others have struggled to stay afloat and provide adequate salaries to their staffs, the need could not be greater for Westchester to bridge the gap between its subsidy reimbursement rates and the latest, higher state reimbursement rates.

**Youth Justice:**

- **Allocate significant funding for support services, prevention and community-based alternatives** under Raise the Age.

**Why is this important?**

Westchester has made significant strides to support youth under Raise the Age. However, recognizing the original intent of the law to prevent children from entering the criminal justice system, there remains a great need for Raise the Age funds to support community-based prevention and age-appropriate, rehabilitative alternative programs. With the delay and complications in state funding, there has been an overrepresentation of Probation programs, which may not be the right fit for certain youth.

**CFK supports the agendas of *Nonprofit Westchester* and *Westchester Women’s Agenda*.**

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