



**Testimony of Molly Wasow Park, Acting Commissioner  
New York City Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare  
Department of Social Services Fiscal Year 2024 Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 13, 2023**

Good morning. I want to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Brannan and the members of the General Welfare and Finance Committees for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify about the Department of Social Services' (DSS) Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Preliminary Budget.

My name is Molly Wasow Park. For the past several years I have served as the First Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), and for the bulk of my career I have worked to promote and finance affordable housing development. Today I introduce myself as the Acting Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services, which is made up of the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). I look forward to working with the Council as Acting Commissioner. I am joined by DSS First Deputy Commissioner Jill Berry, HRA Administrator Lisa Fitzpatrick, DHS Administrator Joslyn Carter, and DSS Executive Deputy Commissioner of Finance Rosine Ferdinand.

Before I begin my testimony, I would like to thank our DSS frontline staff and providers for their dedication and service to our clients and New York as a whole. During the pandemic and in our recovery, DSS staff and providers have stepped up repeatedly to meet the challenges New York City has faced to ensure New Yorkers in need can access the services and supports many rely on in these challenging times, and they continue to do so.

Under the leadership of Mayor Adams, DSS-HRA-DHS staff and providers work every day to fight poverty and provide New Yorkers in need with essential benefits such as Cash Assistance, SNAP, Medicaid, Home Energy Assistance, Rental Assistance, Fair Fares Transit Discounts, anti-eviction legal services, and other

benefits and programs. We work to prevent homelessness, provide shelter when there are no alternatives, address unsheltered homelessness with care and compassion, and connect vulnerable New Yorkers to suitable housing to set them on a path to stability. It is my honor to serve as Acting Commissioner as DSS works to advance these critically important goals.

With an FY24 Preliminary Budget of \$10.7 billion, including \$8.4 billion in City funds, and a staff headcount of 12,127 total positions, DSS/HRA continues to serve millions of low-income New Yorkers through a range of programs that address poverty and income inequality. The nation's largest municipal social services agency, DSS/HRA assists approximately three million New Yorkers every year, administering many public benefit and support programs. The majority of the DSS/HRA budget supports entitlement spending; close to 85% of HRA's city tax levy and almost 80% of total funds are allocated for Medicaid payments to the State and cash assistance payments to clients and, on their behalf, rental assistance payments to landlords.

DHS' FY24 Preliminary Budget is \$2.3 billion, including \$1.5 billion in City funds, and a staff headcount of 1,920 total positions. DHS staff and our network of service providers administer the City's shelter system and provide supports for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. Over 95% of DHS's budget is allocated for direct and contracted shelter, intake and street outreach services.

Those figures, \$10.7 billion at DSS/HRA and \$2.3 billion at DHS, only scratch the surface of all the critical social supports we provide to vulnerable New Yorkers. As the safety net of the safety net, our team is committed to uplifting the well-being of New Yorkers in need. Some of the key programs we administer in DSS/HRA include:

- the Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and Cash Assistance entitlement programs, all of which help provide food, health care access, and income security to New Yorkers;
- rental assistance programs such as CityFHEPS, State-funded FHEPS, and federally-funded emergency housing vouchers (EHV) which provide housing stability;
- the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) which helps keep vulnerable New Yorkers warm in the winter and cool in the summer;
- programs for people living with HIV/AIDS, domestic violence survivors, and those in need of adult protective services to meet the needs of highly vulnerable individuals and families;
- and the Fair Fares program, which provides low-income individuals, regardless of immigration status, with discounted MetroCards to support their transportation needs.

At DHS, we provide shelter to families and adults; we provide 24/7 outreach and low-barrier beds to unsheltered people, and we support their transitions to stable and subsidized permanent housing.

Just as there is no single profile for a New Yorker, there is no single profile for a client of DSS-HRA-DHS – a client may avail themselves of our education, training, and job placement services to pursue a career, a client may be a survivor of domestic violence securing their safety, or a client may be a person living with HIV/AIDS gaining assistance to live more independently. We serve working families and individuals; we serve people who are unable to work; we serve people who need our services for a short while and those with longer term needs; we provide one-time and on-going assistance; we provide means-tested and universal benefits. From children and their guardians receiving assistance from HRA's Office of Child Support Services to seniors and individuals with disabilities to assist with home care, protective services, and long-term care programs – New Yorkers of all ages benefit from our wraparound programs and services and will benefit from the preliminary budget we discuss today.

Before my colleagues and I take your questions, I do want to discuss a few key issues facing DSS, the steps we have taken, and our pathway forward.

### **Asylum Seekers and the DHS Census**

I can report that as of March 12<sup>th</sup> there are 21,841 Asylum Seekers currently residing in DHS shelter. New Yorkers should be justly proud of our identity as a sanctuary city, and of our centuries-long history of welcoming newcomers from around the globe. We will continue to build on that rich tradition. We have opened 96 emergency shelters since spring of 2022, responding in real time to ensure asylum seekers coming to New York have a safe place to stay.

While our shelter census is currently almost 71,000, I think it is important to understand that without the asylum seeker crisis, the DHS census would be approximately 49,000 today. That 49,000 figure represents a marginal increase over last year and shows that this Administration's efforts were keeping the shelter census stable even in the face of increased housing costs, inflation growth, the end of the eviction moratorium and the State's Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), and the continued financial and housing challenges low-income New Yorkers face every day.

Our team works tirelessly to deliver services that support the dignity and respect that every New Yorker and our “new” New Yorkers deserve – no matter their background, no matter their origin, no matter their present circumstances. We will continue to work with partners at the Department of Education, Health and Hospitals, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, at NYC Emergency Management, Administration for Children’s Services, Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, and at other agencies across the administration to provide services using a whole-of-government approach.

As Mayor Adams has said, we have a “responsibility as a city to care for New Yorkers in the greatest need.” While recognizing that critical responsibility, I would like to restate Mayor Adams’ important call on State and federal authorities to aid in addressing this crisis – assisting us, and all our partners across government and the nonprofit sector, in delivering the care and support asylum seekers deserve. The Mayor’s recently released *The Road Forward: Blueprint to Address the New York City Asylum Seeker Crisis* outlines the key ways in which the New York State and federal governments can address this crisis in partnership with New York City.

## **Housing Subsidies & Housing Retention**

DSS actively works to keep people in their homes, and thereby keep our New York neighborhoods strong. As sociologists, urban planners, and public health experts all agree, the consequences of housing instability can be catastrophic – having impacts on the ability to create and maintain supportive social networks, employment, food security, education opportunities, and health.

DSS wrestles with the breadth of housing instability in New York City. Because of the scale of this challenge, we believe it requires a coordinated and multi-pronged response. Only through mobilization of all levels of government can housing instability truly be overcome.

Despite the scale of the challenge, we at the City-level diligently employ a multiplicity of tools. We believe the most appropriate course of action is to carefully target assistance for those in need. The rental assistance subsidies and the emergency rent arrears that we provide and the homelessness and eviction prevention work we pursue serve as essential tools here. Rental assistance programs, including CityFHEPS, State FHEPS, and HASA enhanced rent supplements, help keep New Yorkers housed and help those experiencing homelessness move out of shelter and into stable housing by providing monthly rent supplements. HRA provides over \$200



million on average each year in emergency cash assistance rent arrears to prevent eviction. Homeless prevention services and aftercare services to families and individuals exiting shelter and moving to permanent housing are provided through HRA-administered Homebase offices. Our 26 Homebase locations help connect eligible New Yorkers with services to prevent eviction, assistance obtaining public benefits, short-term financial assistance, and more. Our Office of Legal Services has served more than half a million New Yorkers since 2014 – and we are continually working to strengthen our first-in-the-nation universal access, right-to-counsel initiative.

In order to meet this housing challenge we need your partnership in advocating for a more proactive, federal-scale response on tackling housing affordability; that is a challenge that confronts us not only as New Yorkers, but also residents of communities across the country; last year, the Pew Research Center found “about half of Americans (49%) say the availability of affordable housing in their local community is a major problem, up 10 percentage points from early 2018.” As we work on a local level to foster housing stability, let’s recommit to working to mobilize the resources at other levels of government necessary to truly end the housing crisis.

## **Benefits Processing**

I’d also like to speak about the processing of SNAP and Cash Assistance benefit applications and recertifications. First, I would like to begin with the context created by the COVID 19 pandemic. The pandemic caused extraordinary adversity across the nation and particularly in its epicenter in New York City, resulting in a significant increase in demand for public benefits – as illustrated by the graph on the number of Cash Assistance recipients. Beginning in March 2020, HRA saw an unprecedented and sudden increase in application volume that has not abated. Today, we continue to see an historically high volume of applications when compared to pre-COVID pandemic figures.

Relative to January 2019, January 2023 Cash Assistance applications are up by 70%. Over that same time period, SNAP applications are up 67%.

We took steps to streamline processes to keep up with growing needs; including implementing waivers from New York State to allow for extended recertification periods and suspension of some eligibility requirements; more remote screening, processing and submission methods; expanding our Interactive Voice Response System for SNAP recertifications; and continuing and expanding phone interviews. In order to continue to meet the unprecedented need for assistance, we are updating our

staffing models to better meet the significant, sustained demand we have seen for SNAP and Cash Assistance. We are actively working to recruit, train, and onboard the staff we need.

In addition to prioritizing frontline staff hiring, we are also looking at steps we can take to improve access by streamlining and simplifying the SNAP and Cash Assistance application process for our clients, as well as reducing the administrative burden on our staff. This requires a thorough and thoughtful approach in conjunction with our State and Federal partners – but we also want to make sure we are seizing this opportunity to reevaluate and reassess. We are asking key questions like:

- What further information technology tools can we deploy to streamline processes for clients and staff?
- What lessons can we draw from our experience with the pandemic to pursue greater innovation and better deliver for the New York communities we serve?

Despite the unprecedented increase in applications and related challenges, our teams processed more applications and connected more New Yorkers to benefits than in recent pre-pandemic years. 1.77 million New Yorkers receive SNAP benefits, the highest number since 2014, to address food insecurity, and more than 450,000 receive CA benefits to meet basic needs and housing costs.

While DSS has faced challenges this year, we have also had some significant achievements that benefited New Yorkers, including:

- Made the largest funding commitment in DHS history to street homeless services, including 4,000 safe haven and stabilization beds.
- Increased Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) accessibility by adding applications to HRA's online application and case management platform, AccessHRA.
- Increased availability of fresh produce, balanced nutritious meals, and food packages through our Community Food Connection pantries.
- Expanded IDNYC by adding six eligibility documents for asylum seekers.
- Worked with New York State to provide over \$2.3 billion in federal pandemic emergency rental assistance program (ERAP) benefits to approximately 160,000 households.
- Worked with NYC Health + Hospitals to analyze health care outcomes for clients experiencing homelessness in order to increase access and provide enhanced Medicaid services.

- HIRENYC connected nearly 5,000 low-income New Yorkers to employment opportunities across the City - the highest number of job placements in any fiscal year since its inception.
- Implemented One-Number, a technological update that consolidates multiple DSS telephone helplines and adds additional interactive voice response options so clients can quickly and more efficiently get access to information about their benefits.

I will close by underlining our ongoing commitment to break down government silos and improve access to services. The challenges DSS-HRA-DHS works to confront bridge across agencies, and further, bridge across jurisdictional boundaries. Overcoming these challenges goes to the heart of creating the kind of caring, compassionate communities we seek to live in.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and we welcome any questions that you may have.

Thank you.



**Jess Dannhauser  
Commissioner**

**Testimony to the New York City Council  
General Welfare Committee  
March 13, 2023**

**Fiscal Year 2024 Preliminary Budget Hearing- General Welfare**

Good morning. I am Jess Dannhauser, the Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Thank you Deputy Speaker Ayala, and the members of the General Welfare Committee, for holding today's hearing on our Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2024. I appreciate the opportunity to share the important work we are doing at ACS to help make New York City a more safe, just and equitable place for children, youth and families to live and thrive. I am joined today by First Deputy Commissioner Winette Saunders, and Margaret Pletnikoff, who is the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Finance.

In my first year as Commissioner, I have had the opportunity to meet with, shadow and learn from staff from throughout the City, from our child protection Borough Offices, legal units, detention facilities, the Children's Center, the training sites, and the hard-working administrative teams. I have also had the opportunity to meet with and visit our provider agencies' prevention, foster care, FEC, community partnership and juvenile justice sites. I have been impressed and moved by the deep commitment and passion the staff have to our mission of making New York City a better place for children and families. I want to take a moment to thank all of the staff for the work they do each and every day. I have also had the opportunity to meet with many advocates, elected officials, foundations and outside experts and I want to thank them all for their commitment and tenacity, and for continuing to push us as a system to keep the voices of children and families front and center in every decision and action we take. While my testimony will focus on many of our accomplishments, I know, and my colleagues at ACS know, that there is much more work for us to do, so that we can be even more

supportive to children and families, while addressing current and historical inequities in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

**Addressing Racial Disproportionality and Narrowing the Front Door**  
**of the Child Welfare System**

As you may know, ACS is required to respond to all reports of suspected abuse or maltreatment forwarded to us by the New York Statewide Central Register (SCR). While ACS cannot directly control the front door of the child welfare system, nor all of the reforms necessary to address it, we have an important role to play. We know that too many families of color in NYC have reports called into the state and are then subject to an unnecessary child protection investigation—last year we found evidence of maltreatment in fewer than 14,000 of the 45,000 investigations we conducted. Moreover, this large volume of calls distracts us from our effort to protect children truly in danger.

Our job at ACS must be to get this balance right—to help reduce the volume of unnecessary reports and to ensure our child protection teams have the training, support and resources to identify the children who are in danger, make sound decisions, and ensure that families are surrounded by the services, resources and/or relationships that mitigate the risk(s) identified. We have taken steps to reduce the unnecessary and burdensome ministerial tasks for child protection staff so that they can focus more of their time supporting children, youth, and families. And we have increased the real time coaching from quality assurance staff that they get so that they are equipped to help those children truly in need of child protection.

That said, we understand that the impact of an investigation on a family is significant—investigations are often disruptive, stressful and can be traumatic—and they are disproportionately impacting families of color: One recent study estimated that 44% of Black children and 35% of Hispanic/Latinx children in NYC experience a child welfare investigation before they turn 18.<sup>1</sup> Given the ubiquity of ACS investigations in some NYC communities, we know that some families feel reluctant to voluntarily engage in the supports associated with ACS, which can further impede child safety and well-being.

With the support of our Deputy Mayor, ACS has embarked on a city-wide strategy to reduce the number of unnecessary child welfare investigations and replace SCR reports, where appropriate, with supports that can meet the needs of families further upstream. We believe that this is how we can reduce the number of families experiencing the formal child protection system, prevent child maltreatment, and help families feel and be comfortable and safe enough to ask for and receive help without judgement or fear.

A key component of this work is collaborating with our sister City agencies, many of which have large numbers of mandated reporters, to find opportunities to train and shift the culture to supporting families rather than reporting. We do this by educating professionals who work with children and families (mandated reporters) on the many ways to provide support to families without making an unnecessary report to the SCR. This past summer, ACS worked with our colleagues in the Department of Education

---

<sup>1</sup> 2021 study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2106272118>

(DOE) to completely revise their annual mandated reporter training, which we then jointly provided to staff members from all 1,800 DOE schools. The overarching goal is to help mandated reporters understand that there are many ways to access supports for families who need help, without calling the SCR, and that SCR calls should be reserved for instances when they suspect a child is truly at risk of abuse or otherwise in danger. In the training, we focus on how best to determine when a call to the SCR is in fact warranted, while also helping DOE staff understand the impact of making a report, the potential role of implicit bias on the decision to make a report, and how to access the many resources available to assist families citywide..

We have also been working closely with Health + Hospitals, so that hospital and other medical staff understand the impact reporting has on families and that reports should only be made when there is a concern for a child's safety. We are now in the process of tailoring and expanding this work to other city agencies such as the Department of Homeless Services.

While we continue to make efforts to narrow the front door of the child welfare system, we have also been rapidly increasing the percentage of new cases that we assign to the CARES track after the state forwards a report from the SCR. CARES is NYC's version of differential response, a state-authorized, non-investigative child protection response to reports referred to ACS from the State. With CARES, there is no traditional investigation, no court involvement and no determination. In CARES, specially trained child protective staff assess the safety of the children and then partner with the family to identify their needs, empower the family to make decisions that address their needs and the needs of their children, and connect families to appropriate



services. The CARES approach is family-centered, family-driven and solution focused. The number of CARES cases has nearly tripled since 2019 and increased 72% from 2021 to 2022. There are currently 46 CARES units, and we plan to have an additional 18 CARES units by the end of 2023.

We understand the impact an investigation or a court intervention such as court ordered supervision can have for families. We are committed to providing parents with information upfront, at the outset of an investigation. This year, we will be piloting a new "Palm Card," which will in plain language explain to parents that while ACS has a legal role to assess the safety of the child, the parents are not required to let ACS into their homes and that they can seek the assistance of an attorney.

As a result of much of the work we are doing, we have seen a reduction in both court filings and court ordered supervision. From 2021 to 2022, we reduced court filings by 13%, and we are filing about half as many cases as we did in 2019.<sup>2</sup> Thanks also to our efforts to shorten the length of time families are involved with the court and ACS, we have managed to decrease the number of open court ordered supervision cases by 48% from January 2019 to January 2023.

### **Providing Services and Supports Upstream**

We are working hard to reduce families' interaction with the child protection system by providing resources and support upfront. We are taking intentional efforts to increase the number and percentage of families participating in our continuum of prevention service programs through the community referral process and thus without a

---

<sup>2</sup> In CY 2022, we filed 3,538 cases (compared with 4,081 in CY2021 and 6026 in CY 2019.)

report to the SCR. New York City has one of the most robust prevention service arrays in the country. Our prevention services can provide help with concrete needs, parenting skills, service referrals, and counseling, and are available regardless of immigration status. Currently 45 contracted providers serve over 15,000 families per year. In a 2022 survey of thousands of parents who participated in prevention services, 94% said they were happy with the services they received.

It is important to note that participation in prevention services is unlikely to lead to a family's deeper involvement with ACS. Data show that SCR reports from ACS-funded providers (including prevention) comprise fewer than 2% of SCR calls. Given that social services account for about 20% of calls, most calls to the SCR from social services organizations are not coming from ACS-funded programs. It may be that ACS-funded providers are more likely than others to understand how the SCR works and when a call is truly necessary. ACS providers are also more likely to know how to access or provide the help families need without an SCR call—which is precisely the direction we are moving as a system.

We are also in the process of expanding our Family Enrichment Centers from 3 to 30 over the next 2 years. FECs, operated by community partners, provide community members with a safe and nurturing environment to build social connections and receive concrete resources like food and clothing. Last July, we finalized contracts with the 9 providers that will operate FECs in the first wave of expansion. These new FECs have been in a critical planning process, finding locations, engaging community members and elected officials, and co-designing space and offerings to meet individual

community needs. Just last week, ACS announced the recommended awards for the next 8 FECs and we anticipate issuing an RFP for the remaining 10 this coming fall.

Our 11 Community Partnerships also continue to combine coalition building and community organizing to foster broad multi-sector networks of providers, public agencies, community organizations and residents to lead community designed strategies and activities that strengthen family well-being and stability. For example, this past year three Community Partnerships have been working with three community schools so that families who need support or resources get connected to that help; the goal is to give school staff more community connectivity to support families, so that making a call to the SCR is a very last resort.

Our Office of Child Safety and Injury Prevention is continuing to lead efforts to provide parents and caregivers with the information and resources they need to avoid unintentional injuries and keep children safe. This winter, we continued to share critical information about infant safe sleep, educating parents of young children that babies sleep most safely on their backs, in their own crib, and without blankets or other items in the crib. This month we will be continuing our work to educate parents and caregivers on the dangers that cannabis-infused edibles pose for young children, particularly given how similar some of these items and their packaging is to other treats. Next week is National Poison Prevention Week and we will be participating in Poison Prevention Week Information and Resource Fairs where we will be sharing information and providing free lock boxes to help keep cannabis-infused edibles locked up and out of reach of children.

### **Expanding Access to Child Care Assistance**

We are also focused on increasing access to child care assistance for low-income families. Child care is a critical support for families, and we are working to ensure to expand access and remove barriers for families that need help paying for care. ACS currently provides child care assistance to the families of approximately 57,000 children through child care vouchers supported by the federal Child Care Block Grant, as well as other state, federal, and city funds. Child care assistance from ACS is available to families with child welfare involvement and eligible low-income families (with income at or below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level).

Over the summer, ACS completely cleared our child care voucher waitlist of over 35,000 children, by offering child care assistance to any eligible child whose family applied, while also prioritizing access to low-income families in 17-high need neighborhoods. Since the fall, we have been accepting applications for low-income child care vouchers from families citywide. This effort has been successful—in the past year we have more than doubled the number of children enrolled in child care with the assistance of an ACS-issued low income child care voucher.

### **Strengthening Foster Care**

Our commitment to providing families with the services and supports they need as far upstream as possible has led to a continued decline in the number of children in foster care, with a historic low of 6,717 at the end of 2022. For those children and youth who do need to come into foster care, ACS has maintained our commitment to placing children with kin, meaning family or close friends. Over half of children entering foster

care are placed with kin and 44% of children currently in care are with family or friends. ACS is also committed to working with our provider partners to provide children and youth in care and their families with the services and supports they need to thrive and, in most cases, return home.

To accomplish this, ACS recently announced the recommended awards for both our family-based and residential foster care contracts, which will begin in July 2023. First, the new system will add parent advocates with lived experience, to help parents safely reunify with their children more quickly. Second, the new system will include the Enhanced Family Foster Care (EFFC) program, which blends the traditional regular and therapeutic model into one program which will increase stability for children as their needs fluctuate. children. Through EFFC, all kin parents, foster parents and staff will participate in a trauma-informed training called Trauma- Responsive Informed Parenting Program designed to increase their capacity to care and support youth with complex needs. Third, the redesigned system will significantly increase therapeutic and evidence-based supports to better meet children's needs while they are in foster care and reduce the amount of time they are in residential care. Fourth the redesigned system increases resources and expands the use of proven practices across the system in key areas, including visiting; continuing to increase the proportion of children placed with family and friends; expediting reunification; and providing services and supports to youth in care such as tutoring and Fair Futures coaches. Fifth, the redesigned system includes a new fiscal model that eliminates paying providers by the number of "care days" and provides more predictable funding to address the costs involved in maintaining high quality services for children and families. In addition, these

awards will also create Supervised Independent Living Programs (SILPs), a model that enables older youth experience and learn from living more independently as they prepare to leave the foster care system.

In the past year, we have expanded the Fair Futures model of coaching and tutoring supports from ages 11-21 to include youth 21-26, and in our juvenile justice programs. Over 3,000 young people are now receiving coaching and nearly 1,000 middle school students are receiving tutoring services. We have also launched VCRED, a vocational training program, and College Choice, our new model that provides housing, tuition, stipends and other supports to youth in foster care attending college, regardless of what college they attend.

### **Strengthening Juvenile Justice Programs**

ACS oversees services and programs for youth at every stage of the juvenile justice continuum, which includes community-based alternatives for youth who are at risk of delinquency, as well as for their families. ACS recently released an RFP for Alternative to Detention (ATD) services, which is transitioning from MOCJ to ACS, with the start of those contracts in FY 2024. In addition, we provide secure detention services at Crossroads and Horizon, oversee nonsecure detention, and oversee the Close to Home juvenile justice placement system.

Close to Home is the juvenile justice placement system for youth found to be juvenile delinquents (JDs) by the Family Court and ordered to be in placement. Close to Home programs offer structured residential care for youth in a small, supervised, and home-like environment. In contrast to the traditional larger juvenile placement facilities

model, Close to Home programs have been intentionally designed to enhance participation in programming while preserving the safety and security of youth, staff, and the community. Close to Home allows for engagement to occur simultaneously with the youth, the family and the community to ensure that factors leading to juvenile justice system involvement are addressed before the youth returns to the community. Each Close to Home program is required to implement an evidence-based therapeutic program model that serves as the primary mechanism of behavioral support.

The census in Close to Home has continued to remain low; in January 2023, there were 50 youth placed in Close to Home. To help right-size Close to Home and to be more efficient, ACS has been working with OMB and our providers to reduce capacity. As noted in the November Modifications, starting in FY24, ACS will be reducing the size of the system from 237 beds to 171 beds. This Spring, we will be releasing an RFP for Close to Home, which will also enable us to strengthen our work to better address the older youth in Close to Home as a result of Raise the Age.

While the census in Close to Home has declined, we are seeing an increase in the census in our secure detention facilities, Crossroads and Horizon. As you know, since 2018, youth who allegedly committed crimes when they were age 16 or 17, who are ordered to be detained, are now detained with ACS rather than on Riker's Island. This has increased the number of older youth for whom ACS is able to provide the much-needed services and supports that these youth need. Since emerging from COVID, both the number and percentage of young people facing serious charges and awaiting trial in secure detention has increased. Youth in secure detention have been charged with more serious offenses and tend to have more complicated legal cases,

leading to longer lengths of stay. This is a trend also seen for adults here in New York and for both youth and adults throughout the country.

We are intensely focused on making our secure detention facilities safe and supportive for both staff and youth. I, along with the leadership in the Division of Youth and Family Justice, regularly engage the youth and staff so that we can hear directly from them how they can best be supported. Despite the increased census we are seeing the rate of incidents (both between youth and between youth and staff) dramatically decrease.

ACS has been intensely focused on recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining Youth Development Specialists. In 2022, we hired 195 YDS, including 61 during the last quarter of 2022, and in January of 2023, we hired an additional 27 YDS.

Supporting our staff working in detention facilities is a top priority. To address attrition and to support our staff, we have embedded staff and youth safety in all conversations. We continue to conduct regular wellness events and activities for our Detention staff. We instituted professional coaching for leadership and mid-level managers, created a Director of Performance and Learning position at each facility focusing on staff development and training, and launched a Teambuilding Fellowship for detention staff to promote increased opportunities for building positive working relationships between all staff.

We have increased our efforts to engage youth in school, programming and behavioral health services. In the current school year, we designated Youth Development Specialists in each secure facility to serve as school officers, to help encourage and facilitate school attendance and participation. Since September, we



have seen approximately ten young people graduate with either a Regents diploma or a GED. We are also expanding our programming menu to better meet the needs of the older youth in custody to include training in barbering, entrepreneurial training, and training to build a physical training business.

### **The Budget**

ACS's proposed budget for City Fiscal Year 2024 is \$2.696 billion, including \$852.8 million of City Tax Levy. This represents about 2.5% decrease from FY23 Adopted budget to FY24 plan and is due in large part to savings measures instituted in the November Plan and one-year Council and Administration funded initiatives. The proposed state budget continues to maintain cuts to ACS's core services, including the reduced state reimbursement rate for prevention services (62% rather than the statutory 65%) and the total elimination of state funding for our Close to Home program (which previously received \$30.5 million). ACS was pleased to see that the state budget proposes to increase the income eligibility for low-income child care assistance to the federal limit (85% State Median Income), but disappointed that the state proposes to eliminate statutory discretion for counties, such as NYC, to prioritize child care eligibility when there is not enough funding to meet the demand. The state budget also proposed a 2.5% COLA for the foster care workforce, but ACS was disappointed that the state's proposed COLA once again failed to include the prevention workforce.

ACS appreciates our longstanding partnership with the City Council in our efforts to ensure the state maintains its commitment to NYC's children and families and we look forward to collaborating again this session.

## **Conclusion**

As you can see, ACS and our providers have continued to make progress in our efforts to support children, youth and families, in the least intrusive manner possible.

But there is more work to be done. We remain committed to listen, particularly to those who have first-hand experiences with our system, and to continue to learn so that we can deepen our understanding and evolve our work even further.



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

**Jumaane D. Williams**

---

**TESTIMONY OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS  
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE  
MARCH 13, 2023**

Good morning,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams, and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. Thank you to Chair Diana Ayala and the members of the Committee on General Welfare for holding this hearing today.

The solution to homelessness is permanent housing. In many cases an inability to afford housing on the private market causes homelessness. Programs that provide affordable housing can be the best solutions to homelessness. Research consistently shows that subsidized housing decreases homelessness and improves mental and physical health and education outcomes for communities. We know that people who leave homelessness for rent-subsidized housing are less likely to return to shelter than people who leave shelter and move into unsubsidized housing.

New York City spends more than any other jurisdiction on homelessness, resulting in a growing shelter census since the 1980s. Thus far, the most impactful city programs for reducing the incidence of homelessness have been Homebase, the right to counsel in housing court, and the recent eviction moratorium. The latter is a temporary fix related to the COVID-19 pandemic and expired in January 2022.

The HomeBase prevention program provides housing resources, financial support, counseling, and budgeting support to people at risk of homelessness. Research shows that Homebase reduces the average number of nights in shelter by an estimated 22.6 nights, reduces the percentage of families who spent at least one night in shelter by 6.5 percentage points, and the percentage who apply for shelter by 8.9 percentage points.<sup>1</sup> Expanding this program with robust housing resources will prevent more people from entering shelter and decrease the number of people in shelter every month. For FY 2023, a \$2.3 million Emergency Solutions Grant federal grant funded the Homebase program. The city should, at a minimum, designate \$5 million for this program.

As affordable housing is the best way to combat homelessness, the city should invest in a streamlined, simplified CityFHEPS application process. Requiring applicants to jump through

---

1

<https://www.abtassociates.com/insights/publications/report/evaluation-of-the-homebase-community-prevention-program-final-report>

administrative hoops discourages people from seeking this assistance, especially those who have limited English proficiency, those who do not have access to the internet, and people with disabilities. Currently, there is only one Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Center in the city, located in the Bronx, for all families experiencing homelessness. For families who live far from this location, traveling to the PATH Center is unnecessarily burdensome. The city should, at a minimum, establish one PATH Center in each borough.

Further, increasing supportive housing production would allow more single adults and families to exit homelessness to stable housing. Runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness also need more housing assistance and supportive housing, as unaccompanied youth who are homeless do not get priority for Section 8 or NYCHA and do not receive city rental assistance vouchers. A bill I have introduced, Int 0062-2022, would establish a home-sharing program under DSS for people experiencing homelessness, in which homeowners or apartment leaseholders with a spare private bedroom in their home share their living accommodations with people experiencing homelessness in exchange for rent, companionship and/or assistance with household chores. As there is a serious housing crisis, the city should earmark funding for establishing this program.

The pandemic has been particularly hard on survivors of intimate partner violence, especially those living with an abusive partner, parent, or other family member. Family Justice Centers (FJs) provide vital safety and social services for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence and their children. At the moment, there are only five FJs—one in each borough—and they do not operate 24 hours a day, even though survivors can experience violence at any time and require immediate assistance. The city should invest in increasing the number of FJs, and prioritize hiring staff to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year.

Lastly, child care assistance is a vital resource for so many families in our city. Currently, however, many income-eligible children are excluded from the state's Child Care Assistance Program due solely to their immigration status, including those with pending asylum cases and other children lawfully present in the United States, but who fall outside the federal definition of "qualified immigrant." New York City should establish a child care assistance fund for these families in this year's budget.

Thank you.



**Testimony from Win (formerly Women In Need, Inc.)  
For The Committee on General Welfare FY24 Budget Hearing**

Thank you, Chair Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee, for the opportunity to offer testimony. Win is the largest provider of shelter and services to families with children experiencing homelessness in New York City. Win operates 14 shelters and nearly 500 supportive housing units throughout the city. Currently, more than 6,200 people call Win “home” every night, including 3,490 children — in total, we house over 14 percent of homeless families with children in New York City.

The homelessness crisis in New York City is worse than it has ever been, with the average shelter census exceeding 70,000 people each night. In large part, the influx of asylum seekers over the last year created this unprecedented rise in homelessness. The homeless shelter system, which was already under strain resulting from the expiration of pandemic related funding and protections for renters, has been pushed beyond its limits. With a shelter capacity of less than one percent citywide, the city must step up critical investments to change the trajectory of the homelessness crisis. In particular, the city must invest in and expand access to programs and services that aim to solve rather than just manage the crisis. It is imperative that the City adequately compensate contractors, staff agencies, and fund positions with competitive salaries to meet the surging demand for services. To address the growing mental health need, the City must allocate \$12 million to fully fund the first phase of Intro 522, which will provide needed clinical mental health services to families in shelter, to help them address trauma, mental illness, and move out of shelter. Additionally, the City must focus on cost effective and long-term solutions including tier two shelters over hotels, and more critically, vouchers to move people out of shelters.

As migrants have come to New York City in record numbers, Win has been at the forefront of efforts to ensure that these vulnerable families have a safe place to rest, heal, and recover from what was an extremely traumatic journey for most. Win is currently providing shelter for approximately 1000 asylum seekers, including more than 700 children, from the most recent wave of migrants that began arriving in August. But immigrant families are not new to Win. In fact, many of the families that have been in our shelters the longest are undocumented immigrants. In our deeply unaffordable city, immigration and homelessness are inextricably linked. For Win and other social services providers to be able to serve these families, and for migrant families to have a chance to overcome homelessness, we need more support. Although we recognize that support is needed from all levels of government, the City must step up and provide additional resources so that providers like Win can meet the growing needs of our most vulnerable families. To begin, the City must allocate resources for the additional costs incurred by providing basic necessities not covered in existing contracts. Migrant families also urgently need access to affordable legal aid services, and the City can and should make more funds available for immigration legal assistance.

Regardless of immigration status, the experience of homelessness is traumatic for families, and both parents and children in New York City shelters have historically been forced to cope with that trauma with extremely limited access to mental health resources. With the passage of Intro 522, families in shelter will now be able to access mental health services when and where they need them most, directly in shelter. But those services require funding. With the first phase of Intro 522 required to roll out in the



30 largest families with children shelters by July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024, it is critical that the City allocate the \$12 million dollars required to ensure that the necessary resources are in place. Research indicates that providing mental health care in shelter can have a tremendous positive effect on the wellbeing of both children and adults. For instance, a recent quantitative study of mental health services provided in Florida homeless shelters found significant reductions in trauma related symptomology in children.<sup>i</sup> In addition, research indicates that those services can have other lasting effects. Several studies that evaluated the benefits of services offered to families in shelter, which included mental health care, found they remained stably housed longer than families that did not.<sup>ii</sup>

The City must also prioritize moving families out of shelter to free up capacity and change the current trajectory of the homelessness crisis. Even before the recent influx of migrants, the New York City shelter system had limited resources to spare. Unfortunately, the thousands of families entering the system have totally overwhelmed the limited capacity that existed, forcing the City to rapidly open hotels and HERRC's to accommodate the new arrivals. Despite being faced with this massive capacity crisis, the City has maintained the archaic and cruel 90-Day Rule, which senselessly requires families to remain in shelter for an arbitrary 90 days before they can even apply for rental assistance. This criterion forces families to stay in shelter months longer than they need to, unnecessarily costing the City thousands of dollars per family per month, while prolonging an already traumatic experience. As migrants continue to arrive, many of whom are wrongly ineligible for any form of rental assistance, it is even more critical to prioritize moving families who are eligible for vouchers out of the system. By repealing the 90-Day Rule, the City can immediately help increase shelter capacity. Additionally, the City can and should expand CityFHEPS eligibility to people regardless of immigration status. For migrant families who lack citizenship and a social security number, there are almost no options to move out of shelter.

We know that vouchers cost the City less money than keeping families in shelter. The average daily cost to house a family in New York City Shelter is \$188, while CityFHEPS vouchers cost just \$72 daily, a savings of \$116 per day or nearly 62 percent.<sup>iii</sup> For every week that a CityFHEPS eligible family remains in shelter as opposed to moving into an apartment, it costs the city \$814. Yet, the number of families moving out of shelter with CityFHEPS is far lower than it should be because of under investment in the program. The City must significantly increase funding for DSS staff responsible for processing CityFHEPS applications to ensure that families are able to move out of shelter as quickly as possible. The City must reject the Mayor's plan put forward in his preliminary budget, which would cut vacant lines at agencies responsible for processing housing applications. Instead, the City should be increasing staffing to ensure CityFHEPS applications are expedited, which will actually save the City money in offset shelter costs. Additionally, retention in both City agencies and providers contracted through the City are suffering from retention issues. These issues with retention are deeply exacerbated by low wages. The past year has seen the highest rates of inflation in decades, and salaries of human services workers, the majority of which are women of color, are not sufficient to cover basic expenses. The City must include a 6.5 percent COLA for human services workers in this year's budget. Investing in this critical workforce will help ensure retention of trained talent and continuity of essential services.

As the City continues to face a variety of unprecedented challenges, it is critical that the FY24 budget invests in essential services. The only way to combat the extreme costs of the homelessness crisis is to



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness  
for Women and their Children

invest in the solutions that will solve it. That includes contracts that pay enough for providers to do their essential work while paying dignified wages to their staff to ensure retention of a competent workforce. It also means, investing in mental health services and vouchers for both citizens and non-citizens, which are central to getting families out of shelter and ending the cycles of homelessness.

---

<sup>i</sup> Spiegel, Graziano, P. A., Arcia, E., Cox, S. K., Ayala, M., Carnero, N. A., & O'Mara, N. L. (2022). Addressing Mental Health and Trauma-Related Needs of Sheltered Children and Families with Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT). *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 49(5), 881–898. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-022-01207-0>

<sup>ii</sup> Bassuk, & Geller, S. (2006). The role of housing and services in ending family homelessness. *Housing Policy Debate*, 17(4), 781–806. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2006.9521590>

<sup>iii</sup> Ceron, Ella. (2022) NYC Mayor Urged to Abolish 90-Day Shelter Rule Amid Migrant Influx. *Bloomberg* <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-20/new-york-mayor-eric-adams-is-pressured-to-abolish-homeless-shelter-rule?leadSource=uverify%20wall>



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn since 1971

## Testimony to be Delivered to the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare

### Re: FY 24 Preliminary Budget - General Welfare

**March 13, 2023**

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the preliminary budget. My name is Betty Baez Melo, and I am an attorney and Director of the Early Childhood Education Project at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC).

#### Board of Directors

Kimberley D. Harris, *President*

Harriet Chan King, *Secretary*

Paul D. Becker, *Treasurer*

Eric F. Grossman, *President Emeritus*

Carmita Alonso

Matt Berke

Matt Darnall

Jessica A. Davis

Lucy Fato

Brian Friedman

Caroline J. Heller

Jamie A. Levitt, *past president*

Maura K. Monaghan

Jon H. Oram

Jonathan D. Polkes

Veronica M. Wissel

Raul F. Yanes

#### Executive Director

Kim Sweet

#### Deputy Director

Matthew Lenaghan

We believe that every child should have access to high-quality early childhood care and education programs. As such, we were pleased when the City launched Promise NYC to increase access to early childhood programs for children who are undocumented. Unfortunately, the FY 23 budget included only one-year funding, and the Mayor's FY 24 Preliminary Budget does not include any funding to continue this crucial initiative, leaving hundreds of children at risk of being turned away from their program after June.

Many child care and preschool programs, including DOE 3-K and Pre-K extended day and year programs, require families to qualify for child care assistance in order to enroll. These programs have historically excluded children who are undocumented as they are not eligible for this subsidy based on state and federal restrictions.

Since its launch in January, hundreds of families of children who are undocumented have applied for child care funding through Promise NYC. At a time when NYC has seen an increase in immigrant families, we should be increasing, and certainly not decreasing, funding for this initiative so that children are not excluded from programs based on their immigration status. About 40% of the thousands of newly arrived immigrant children are ages zero to five; access to early care and education is critical to helping prepare them for success in elementary school and beyond, while also enabling their parents to work, connect with resources, find permanent housing, and settle in their new communities.

In Fiscal Year 2023, with advocacy from Council Members and the Comptroller, the City allocated \$10 million to serve approximately 600 children from January to June 2023. Since \$10 million is being used over six months, it will be necessary to allocate





Advocates for Children  
of New York  
Protecting every child's right  
to learn since 1971

\$20 million for the full year in FY 24 in order to maintain capacity. We are calling on the City to invest and baseline \$20 million in FY 24 for Administration of Children Services (ACS) funding for Promise NYC.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.



ALL OUR KIN INC

NEWYORK@ALLOURKIN.ORG 917-933-3282 [WWW.ALLOURKIN.ORG](http://WWW.ALLOURKIN.ORG)

**Testimony Submitted by Steven Morales, NY Policy Director of All Our Kin  
for the FY24 General Welfare Budget Hearing  
New York City Council  
March 13, 2023**

Honorable Chair Ayala and Members of the City Council,

My name is Steven Morales and I'm the New York Policy Director at All Our Kin. All Our Kin is a nonprofit organization that trains, supports, and sustains home-based family child care educators in New York City. Most of the educators we serve are located in the Bronx, where we work with nearly 300 family child care educators with the capacity to care for over 4,000 children.

Family child care, licensed child care programs that operate out of an educator's home, plays an essential role in caring for and educating our City's youngest children. Many parents choose family child care because of its unique ability to offer flexible hours, mixed age group care, and culturally responsive care in a family's home language. In New York City:

- 73 percent of licensed child care programs are family or group family child care
- Family child care programs have the capacity to care for over 83,500 children
- More than half of all infants and toddlers in publicly funded care are cared for in family child care programs

New Yorkers rely on family child care programs and it is essential that our City budget support family child care educators, a workforce that is made up of 94% women and 75% people of color, so that they have the tools and resources they need to serve the City's children and families.

At this moment, the child care sector in New York City, including family child care, is in a freefall. Since 2019, New York City has lost a net of 489 family child care programs, accounting for 4,913 child care slots. As recently as December 2022, in a survey of family child care providers in New York, one-third of existing programs reported that they are on the verge of closing due to low compensation. And at the same time, parents still struggle to find care that they can afford, with many parents paying as much or more for child care than they do for rent. This broken child care system results in lost jobs for families, lost educational opportunities for children, and according to the Mayor's Child Care Blueprint, costs the City \$2.2 billion in annual tax revenue and \$23 billion in reduced economic output.



ALL OUR KIN INC

NEWYORK@ALLOURKIN.ORG 917-933-3282 WWW.ALLOURKIN.ORG

At the core of the child care crisis lies one simple fact: compensation for child care providers is woefully inadequate. On average, child care educators in New York City are in the bottom 3 percent of all earners. One family child care provider that we work with in the Bronx is closing her program after 25 years of serving her community because the rates she receives through ACS do not meet the rising costs of running her business. That provider shares that she used to be one of several family child care programs in her immediate neighborhood, but that she is one of the last ones left. These child care closures are not unique and they are harming our children and their parents' ability to maintain steady employment.

We also know from family child care providers that they are simply unable to compete in our current labor market – they frequently lose staff to retail jobs that are able to pay higher wages and offer benefits that they cannot afford as child care businesses. One educator shared that she worries about her own aging mother, who works as an assistant in her program and is unable to retire because Isaura cannot afford to offer her employees retirement benefits.

That is why we are calling on New York City to make significant investments in the child care workforce in this year's budget. For the sake of our City's future, the Council must use the City budget to ensure all families who need child care are able to access it, and that educators are able to sustain their businesses, their employees, and their families.

All Our Kin calls on the City Council to make the following investments in our child care system:

1. **Offset family child care educators' health insurance premiums.**
  - a. Unlike school-based and many center-based child care educators, family child care educators frequently cannot afford health insurance for themselves or their staff. To help keep FCC educators from leaving the profession, the City Council should offset their health insurance costs through a flat contribution. Washington DC, Washington State, New Mexico, and California all have initiatives to support benefits for family child care providers and New York City should follow suit.
2. **Offer family child care educators access to retirement benefits.**
  - a. Inadequate funding often leaves family child care educators without retirement savings – another of the compensation-based reasons that educators continue to close their programs and leave the field. The City Council should ensure that family child care educators have access to retirement benefits that allow them to remain competitive with other industries and have long-term financial security.
3. **Bring family child care educators into the City's compensation agreements with center-based early childhood programs.**
  - a. Whether in contracted centers or home-based programs, all educators deserve equitable compensation. We applaud efforts to increase pay rates at contracted center-based early childhood programs, however both contracted and independent family child care providers have been left out of those agreements. As a result,



ALL OUR KIN INC

NEWYORK@ALLOURKIN.ORG 917-933-3282 [WWW.ALLOURKIN.ORG](http://WWW.ALLOURKIN.ORG)

they continue to operate with inadequate reimbursement rates which has led to the closure of hundreds of programs. We call on the City Council to include family child care in early childhood compensation initiatives by supplementing the voucher payments they currently receive from the state.

4. **Invest \$20 million to continue the PromiseNYC voucher access for undocumented children.**

- a. We were thrilled when the Council and Mayor agreed to include \$10 million in the FY23 budget for child care for undocumented children and we are encouraged by the rollout of the PromiseNYC program which began in January. We call on the Council and Mayor to once again fund PromiseNYC, increasing the amount to \$20 million to cover a full year of access to high quality child care for our undocumented neighbors with young children.

In addition to these budget requests, **we also support Intro 941 by Councilmembers Gutierrez and Riley** which would make child care accessible to all families in our city and would ensure that family child care providers receive the compensation they deserve. We look forward to working with the Council to pass and fund this important legislation.

In closing, child care is critical for the future of our children and the success of our City's economy as a whole. Investing in child care is an opportunity to provide our children with the high quality learning experiences they need to thrive, to allow parents to maintain stable employment, and to grow New York City's economy. We urge you to invest in child care and the child care workforce in the FY24 budget.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



## **Asian American Federation**

### **Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare**

*March 13th 2023*

#### Written Testimony

Thank you Committee Chair Diana Ayala and the Council Members of the Committee on General Welfare for providing the Asian American Federation the chance to testify on this year's Budget. My name is Lisha Luo Cai, and I am the Advocacy Coordinator at AAF, where we proudly represent the collective voice of more than 70 member nonprofits serving 1.5 million Asian New Yorkers.

Since 2010, the Asian population in New York City has increased 34%, growing from over 1.1 million in 2010 to over 1.5 million in 2020, making up 17.3% of our city's total population. Overwhelmingly, Asian New Yorkers are immigrants, with two out of three in the city being foreign-born. Of those Asian immigrants, 47% arrived in 2010 or after.

Asian New Yorkers comprise more than 10% of the population in 34 out of 51 City Council districts, and 36 districts have some of the fastest-growing Asian populations. Yet, from Fiscal Year 2002 to 2014, the Asian American community received a mere 1.4% of the total dollar value of New York City's social service contracts. And while these numbers reflect a broader, long-term trend, this year's Budget is an important opportunity for us to elevate the communities who supported us by putting an equitable pandemic recovery at the forefront.

#### Anti-Asian Hate: Deliver Immediate Safety to New Yorkers

The continued wave of anti-Asian hate is leaving permanent scars on Asian New Yorkers, impacting how they connect to their neighborhoods and interact with City and State programs and initiatives. Between March 2020 and March 2022 alone, the Asian American Federation (AAF), Stop AAPI Hate, the New York Police Department (NYPD), and the New York City Commission on Human Rights (CCHR) reported more than 2,700 incidents of race-based discrimination against Asians—a mere fraction of the total incidents due to underreporting. As COVID-19 restrictions subside, self-isolation amongst Asian New Yorkers is no longer about fearing a deadly pandemic, but the fear of falling victim to anti-Asian violence. In response, community organizations are having to step up in order to provide aid and comfort for victims while implementing preventative programs.

At AAF, we launched our signature Hope Against Hate Campaign in 2021 in response to these attacks. Since then, AAF continues to lead the response to anti-Asian violence through a network of 33 partner organizations, developing infrastructure to provide community-centered safety solutions to combat this crisis. Through the first year of our Campaign, we have:

- Trained 2,400 individuals in conflict de-escalation, safety awareness, upstander and physical self-defense techniques in over 100 safety trainings;
- Reached over 2,700 youth through community education, anti-bullying initiatives, and emotional/mental health support;
- Made over 3,700 referrals to support services, including domestic violence support, protective accompaniment, reporting assistance, and behavioral and mental health services; and



## **Asian American Federation**

- Connected with 3,775 small businesses and faith centers to provide safety information to impacted Asian Americans.

In FY 2024, AAF's Hope Against Hate campaign will continue to expand and work with our network of 33 member and partner agencies, as well as our external training partner organizations. Addressing anti-Asian hate attacks requires implementing and strengthening community safety programs, safe zones, victim support services, and safety training across the city in order to protect our most vulnerable.

Our CBOs are already on the ground working with community partners and members, and we urge the City to play its role as a significant supporter of this work.

### Language Access: Build Concrete Resources to Help LEP Immigrants

In New York City, many Asian New Yorkers are immigrants, with two out of three being foreign-born. Of those Asian immigrants, 30% arrived in or after 2010. Additionally, language barriers remain disproportionately high among Asian New Yorkers - nearly 50% of Asians living in New York City have limited English proficiency, compared with a citywide average of 23%.

As part of the Language Access Collaborative, which includes AAF, the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), MASA, and African Communities Together, AAF continues to advocate for increased language access through enforcing existing laws and executive orders and creating innovative programs to address the gaps in language interpretation services. In FY 2023, City Council made an allocation of \$5 million towards language access programming, including language access cooperatives and a community interpreter bank; \$700,000 was allocated to the development of an Asian language cooperative. With an FY 2024 funding request for the same amount, AAF will continue its work on an Asian language worker cooperative to professionalize interpretation capacity within our community.

### Nonprofit Support: Strengthen Community Based Organizations

Many of the issues that Asian communities face are interconnected, further emphasizing the importance of nonprofit community-based organizations that are able to provide multiple types of aid. While these organizations strive to meet the increased demand for services across programs, they lack meaningful and continuous financial support from the City to strengthen their organizational capacity and programmatic services.

Council members must keep in mind the persistent inequities in city contracting practices and the systemic barriers facing our CBOs. For example, the median total allocation in FY 2023 across City Council Initiatives was less than \$260,000 across 34 member organizations, an amount that was barely enough to maintain operations. On top of this, across our member organizations, there are complaints that contracting is moving too slow, and that even small amounts of approved funding are taking too long to receive, if they've been received at all. Serious process constraints are handicapping our organizations, and these must be addressed at the agency level.

But within our City's contracting processes there must be prioritization for the CBOs that have the expertise needed to make the most of every dollar in our communities by giving greater weight to organizations with a demonstrated track record of serving low-income, underserved immigrant



## **Asian American Federation**

communities with linguistic and cultural competence. Our CBOs are leading by example in the provision of direct services, from providing wrap-around services that include mental wellness checks, to allying with food suppliers that provide culturally-competent food.

### Mental Health: Expand In-Language, Culturally-Responsive Care

In partnership with our member organizations in 2021, our mental health programming resulted in 13,000 Asian New Yorkers gaining access to mental health services from providers who speak their language and understand their unique cultural needs. In 2022, AAF released the first-ever online mental health provider database that prioritizes providers who speak Asian languages and understand Asian cultures.

As Asian New Yorkers grapple with the effects of a historic increase in anti-Asian violence, the fallout from continued economic insecurity, and the accompanying stress and anxiety, demand for mental health services is far outstripping the capacity of our community-based mental health providers. Due to these factors, our member organizations reported a 20% increase in community members asking for mental health services to mitigate the continuing anxiety and fear within our communities.

To that end, AAF will work in close partnership with six Asian community-based organizations to increase access to in-language, culturally responsive clinical and non-clinical services for the Arab, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, and Southeast Asian communities. In FY 2024, we will also continue to expand our online mental health directory by adding 50-100 providers to the 195 we already have, and widely disseminate the directory so that Asian New Yorkers have increased access to culturally and linguistically competent mental health care providers.

This work, and the work of our community mental health providers, needs support more than ever before.

### Immigration and Integration: Empower Immigrants to Pursue Their American Dream

Funding for critical efforts like ESOL workshops and accessible immigration legal services has remained stagnant even while demand has increased. For many immigrants, the Muslim Ban and the Public Charge assault have continued to impact how they engage with assistance programs throughout the pandemic. Thus, the City must prioritize investing in immigration-related services for a community that has faced anti-immigrant backlash and growing unemployment rates.

Since 2016, AAF has been the only nonprofit to build capacity at Asian-led, Asian-serving community-based organizations for immigrant integration services to low-income immigrants in Brooklyn and Staten Island. Now, we serve immigrants in all five boroughs. In FY 2023, we provided 45 workshops in 5 Asian languages, reaching over 1,700 Asian immigrants with COVID-related service information, workforce development training, and other supportive services and necessary resources. Based on our learnings from the past seven years of immigrant integration work, collaboration with several community partners in FY 2024 is of utmost importance in developing a bridge workforce development program. These programs can help low-to-moderate-income Asian immigrants gain the computer literacy skills they need in order to work with Asian small businesses on expanding their online marketing presence.



## **Asian American Federation**

Policymakers must invest in long-term capacity-building initiatives for our community organizations, which serve the fastest-growing community in our city and state. To support all our work ahead, we ask the City Council to:

- Support AAF's work and priorities through:
  - Speaker Initiatives (**\$400,000**)
  - CUNY Citizenship NOW! Program (**\$250,000**)
  - Mental Health Services for Vulnerable Populations Initiative (**\$150,000**)
  - Hate Crimes Prevention Initiative (**\$200,000**)
  - Immigrant Health Initiative (**\$100,000**)
- Increase funding to the AAPI Community Support Initiative to **\$7.5 million**. AAF requests a budget allocation from this Initiative of **\$250,000** to support ongoing support for our Hope Against Hate Campaign.
- Continue to fund the Communities of Color Nonprofit Stabilization Fund at **\$3.7 million**. AAF requests a budget allocation from this Initiative of **\$150,000** to support our technical assistance work.
- Fund the development of a worker cooperative for Asian language interpretation (**\$700,000**). We also ask, in partnership with African Communities Together, Masa, and New York Immigration Coalition, for **\$2.25 million** to support a community interpreter bank (CIB).
- Invest **\$90,000** to support the operation and expansion of AAF's small business programs, such as technical assistance and merchant organizing.

I want to thank you all for providing us the chance to speak with you today. The Asian community has been through a lot over these past couple of years, and this Budget is the best way for the City Council to show that we are a priority and our community is cared for as it deserves.



My name is Charlotte Phillips. I live in Brooklyn, and am a retired pediatrician. I am the Chairperson of Brooklyn For Peace, and also a member of Move the Money/NYC. I oppose the deep cuts and reductions proposed by Mayor Adams in the preliminary budget.

In the preliminary budget proposed by Mayor Adams, housing agencies and programs are being slowly starved as hiring freezes are increasing the number of vacant positions. The Comptroller's office released a report that shows the Department of Social Services is struggling to meet its targets while facing an extremely high vacancy rate of 20%. Staff positions which are unfilled at HRA mean that applicants for food stamps and housing vouchers experience unacceptably long waiting times for services to which they are entitled.

I worked in the NYC public hospital system, most recently in Brooklyn with the North Brooklyn Health Network. The disruption to children's lives and education when their families were evicted, or even threatened with eviction, leads to long-term emotional and psychological harm which is difficult to reverse. Food insecurity, and the lack of appropriate nutrition when families do not get food stamps, has a particularly devastating impact on children as well as the entire family.

As a country, we have the resources: they are being misappropriated. For the 2023 fiscal year, Congress approved \$868 billion dollars for the military, \$37 more than even the Department of Defense asked for. That same Congress voted against continuing expanded SNAP (food stamp) and childcare benefits, and other vital social programs. Rather than cutting our budget, Mayor Adams should play a leadership role in speaking out for the federal budget to reallocate funds toward vitally needed programs so that we can fulfill the needs of our families here in New York

It is critical that the Council helps defend the workforce staffing the basic social safety nets in the upcoming budget negotiations. Thank you.



### **Testimony**

**New York City Council Committee on General Welfare  
Oversight Hearing on the FY24 Preliminary Budget  
Monday, March 13, 2023**

**Submitted by:**

**Beatriz Diaz Taveras, Executive Director  
Catholic Charities Community Services, Archdiocese of New York**

Thank you Deputy Speaker Ayala and members of the Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York - a federation of 90 contracting agencies and providers of social services - on the challenges we face entering the FY 2024 budget season. I am Beatriz Diaz Taveras Executive Director on one of the agencies within the federation, Catholic Charities Community Services. As you consider the preliminary budget, I ask that you keep human services front of mind.

The Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York seeks to uphold the dignity of each person as made in the image of God by serving the basic needs of the poor, troubled, frail and oppressed of all religions. We collaborate with parishes, as well as non-Catholic and Catholic partners, to build a compassionate and just society. Catholic Charities delivers, coordinates, and advocates for quality human services and programs touching almost every human need.

### **Food Insecurity**

In the past year, Catholic Charities agencies distributed over 8 million meals, operated 40 ongoing food programs, and enrolled over 7,700 individuals in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). While the skyrocketing increase in food insecurity caused by the COVID-19 has partially subsided, demand remains elevated from pre-pandemic levels, spurred on by persistently high prices that eat into the budgets of both clients and the pantries that serve them. The expiration of enhanced SNAP benefits further exacerbates food insecurity, and while proposed changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) would help certain families, more immediate relief is needed to prevent a rise in hunger in New York City. Catholic Charities is thankful for the Council's consistent allocation of food pantry funding to combat food insecurity across the City, and supports enhancement of this funding in FY24.

### **Aging**

Of the thousands of meals served by Catholic Charities agencies daily, a significant portion are older adults who can't leave their homes. Whether ill, immobile, immunocompromised, on fixed incomes or facing the persistent specter of isolation, all deserve to have nourishing food to eat. As the aging population continues to grow rapidly, prices have risen to new heights at the fastest rate in a generation. One Catholic Charities agency has seen a 90 percent increase in the costs of providing meals to older adults in their homes, as well as a 20 percent increase in costs of providing meals at their senior center. Combined with functional budget cuts to the Department of Aging Services exacerbating the cumulative effects of years of underinvestment, providers are reaching annual budgets for services months ahead of schedule, putting budgetary concerns in direct conflict with their overriding missions to provide meals to older adults for whom services are their only source of nourishment. Further investment is needed in the FY24 budget to ensure that providing holistic nourishment - food, connection, and care, does not become a relic of the past.

### **Day Laborer Programming**

- Through its Day Laborer program, CCCS helps low-income and immigrant New Yorkers obtain needed professional training and dignified employment. The sustained influx of migrants and asylum seekers has caused the demand for OSHA-30 and other necessary licensing, as well as the number of workers coming daily to *paradas*, to skyrocket.
- Continued and enhanced resources would help Catholic Charities and other members of the Day Laborer Workforce Initiative respond to increased demand. Ongoing investment in Site Safety Training programming will further improve job development outcomes and expand language access for training, while funding for additional counsel will aid CCCS' efforts to combat wage theft and assist with newly announced Deferred Action cases.

### **Immigrant Children Advocates' Relief Effort (ICARE)**

- Since 2014, City Council support has enabled the ICARE Coalition protect over 8,000 Unaccompanied Minors from deportation and empower them to achieve their education and career goals.
- Even after escaping violence and trauma in their home country and while traveling to the United States in search of safety and opportunity, nearly 2,000 young New Yorkers annually face removal proceedings and possible deportation without due process if they cannot afford a lawyer.
- While only 17% of children without representation win their case, ICARE attorneys raise that success rate to 90%.
- As the migrant surge intensifies the need for legal services, we ask the Council to continue to demonstrate its commitment to helping immigrant youth by renewing funding for Unaccompanied Minors and Families (UMFI) in the FY24 Budget.

### **International Center – ESOL and Digital Literacy**

- For the past decade, CCCS' International Center has offered ESOL classes at multiple proficiency levels, citizenship preparation classes, digital skills classes, individual

conversation practice, and specialized off-site programming for vulnerable communities in Manhattan and the Bronx.

- As the Council examines the Preliminary, and later the Executive Budget, we request the renewal of the \$4M City Council Discretionary Adult Literacy Initiative, doubling the funding of the resoundingly successful Adult Literacy Pilot Project, the restoration and renewal of \$13.7 million in baselined adult literacy funding, and the baselining of the \$6.7 million one-year FY23 investment in adult literacy funding. This would keep existing programs whole while allowing upcoming contracts to reflect per-student rates that reflect the cost of services.

### **Legal Services:**

- CCCS provides legal services and representation to thousands of immigrants each year.
- As New York City responds to the needs of not only new arrivals, but existing immigrant populations, it should collaborate with legal service providers, prior to the issuance of RFPs, to ensure that program reevaluations are able to sustain existing cases while accommodating a frequently evolving legal landscape.
- Service enhancements to address emerging needs are equally important, such as creating effective pathways and stipends for volunteer interpreters, particularly those with knowledge of Haitian Creole and indigenous languages. Integration of case managers into legal services contracts would increase service efficiency by allowing legal and service staff to use their respective expertise to meet multiple needs simultaneously.
- Lastly, the City should move to eliminate outdated and onerous reporting requirements that inhibit service delivery and constrain service alignment with community demands and in-house expertise.

### **Conclusion:**

On behalf of New York's most vulnerable, and the 90 human services agencies in the Catholic Charities Federation, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and thank you for continuing to serve this great City of New York. Please do not hesitate to contact me for additional detail as you work to craft a budget that benefits all New Yorkers in need.

The Center for Justice Innovation is a non-profit organization that seeks to transform the policies and practices of the justice system to make it fair, effective, and humane. The Center operates the following sites throughout New York City.

■ Family    
 ■ Criminal    
 ■ Community Development    
 ■ Civil/Housing

Click on the name of any program to learn more.

#### STATEN ISLAND

1. Staten Island Justice Center

#### MANHATTAN

2. Harlem Community Justice Center
3. Headquarters
4. Manhattan Justice Opportunities
5. Midtown Community Court

#### MULTI-BOROUGH

6. Legal Hand (Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens)

#### BRONX

7. Bronx Child Trauma Support
8. Bronx Community Justice Center
9. Bronx Community Solutions

#### BROOKLYN

10. Brooklyn Justice Initiatives
11. Brooklyn Mental Health Court
12. Brownsville Community Justice Center
13. Neighbors in Action
14. Red Hook Community Justice Center
15. Supervised Release Program

#### QUEENS

16. Queens Community Justice Center (Jamaica and The Rockaways)



#### Citywide

■ Access to Justice    
 ■ Neighborhood Safety Initiatives    
 ■ RISE Project  
■ Alternatives to Incarceration    
■ Parent Support Program    
■ Strong Starts Court Initiative  
■ Driver Accountability Program    
■ Project Reset    
■ Youth Action Institute  
■ Gender and Family Justice    
■ Restorative Justice Practices    
■ Youth Impact

For More Information  
 Shane Correia  
[correias@innovatingjustice.org](mailto:correias@innovatingjustice.org)



520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018

p. 646 386 3100

f. 212 397 0985

[innovatingjustice.org](http://innovatingjustice.org)

Courtney Bryan. Executive Director

**Center for Justice Innovation  
New York City Council  
Committee on General Welfare – Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 13, 2023**

Since its inception, the Center for Justice Innovation (formerly the Center for Court Innovation), referred to as ‘the Center’ throughout these remarks, has supported the vision embraced by Council of a fair, effective, and humane justice system and public safety built through sustainable, community-driven solutions that cultivate vibrant neighborhoods. The Center’s longstanding partnership with Council over the past 25 years has helped bring this vision to life through evidence-based and racially-just programming that spans the justice continuum.

Our firsthand experience operating direct service programs and conducting original research uniquely positions us to offer insights that Council can look to as it considers the development of initiatives that respond to needs of all New Yorkers. In addition to our annual renewal awards, the Center asks for Council support in achieving the following goals in FY24:

- Return to prior funding levels for Supervised Release Program, considering recent cuts to funding for existing contracts.
- A \$250,000 increase to the Innovative Core Funding partnership between the Council and the Center, to represent the first increase of this award in over a decade.
- \$1.5 million to enhance misdemeanor alternatives to incarceration options across all parts of the justice system as referrals increase, and \$211,000 in new funding to support a first-of-its-kind youth weapons diversion program.
- \$461,000 in support for integrating behavioral health within the justice system to support individuals suffering from substance use disorders.
- \$550,000 to expand access to comprehensive support and prevent housing instability.

In each instance, our aim is to provide a meaningful and proportionate response, treat all people under our care with dignity and respect, prioritize public safety, and produce much-needed cost savings for the City. And, as an anti-racist organization, we work to ensure the needs of marginalized New Yorkers are addressed.

**Restoring Supervised Release to FY22 Levels to Respond to Increasing Referral Volume**

Community-based pretrial supervision is a critical component in the implementation of bail reform and safely shrinking the jail population to close the Rikers Island Jail Complex by the intended date. After a comprehensive assessment, the Center's Supervised Release Program removes people from the harmful environment of incarceration through community-based supervision and refers participants to relevant voluntary social services. **We are seeking a return to FY22 funding**

levels, as the FY23 contract was reduced by 10% while caseloads for the most intensive category of cases are already double the contracted caseload. The Center operates the **Supervised Release Program** in Brooklyn and Staten Island, and citywide nearly 17,000 participants were served by all providers in 2022. The programs continue to grow, reflecting judges' confidence that clients in Supervised Release show up for court dates at a very high rate. Additionally, with this growth, the number of participants with higher needs has increased; in our two boroughs, 1,600 individuals had potential mental health needs in 2022 compared to 430 in 2019<sup>1</sup>. This reflects just under a third of all participants assessed in 2022 flagging for mental health needs.

After program eligibility expansion and initial budget increases, the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice *reduced* the budget for Brooklyn and Staten Island from 2022 to 2023 by approximately 10%. This reduction in budget occurred amidst an over 60% increase in volume of participants. With the reduction in budget and increase in the number of participants with substantial needs, the program cannot function as intended. Lower caseloads are crucial for staff to provide quality time with each participant to ensure case management is responsive to their individual needs. With twice the caseload, it is difficult for case managers to have more frequent and intensive supervision with individuals, including at community locations closer to the participants' work/home. Rising caseloads prevent staff from working with participants who voluntarily seek or might benefit from enhanced support, including supportive housing and peer support, services that can have positive life-changing impacts. In addition, case managers experience stress and burnout, leading to a low staff retention rate and resources spent on continually recruiting, hiring, and training new staff that could be spent on programming. The Center seeks Council support and guidance on this urgent issue.

### **Innovative Core Funding**

This year, we ask Council to continue and expand support for the Center's **Innovative Core Funding to \$750,000 from \$500,000, an amount not raised in over a decade**. Each year, the Center uses this funding to flexibly respond to the immediate needs of New Yorkers by piloting novel and effective community-based pilots to test for scalable solutions. Enhanced support would allow the Center to float programming despite delayed contract payouts from city agencies, which delays hiring and implementation across our programs. The Innovative Core Funding allows us to ensure programming doesn't get interrupted. In FY23, this contract transitioned from the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) to the Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD), and we call on Council to ensure there is a long-term plan in place to sustain this funding. Council's Innovative Core Funding supports public safety and criminal justice responses in all five boroughs.

The Center makes deep investments in engaging individuals as far upstream as possible by meeting young people where they are, promoting housing stability, preventing gun violence, and working at the intersection of the justice and behavioral health systems. Center programs currently serve thousands of young people citywide each year, offering meaningful off-ramps and justice system alternatives through counseling, academic support, and workforce development. The Center's Youth Impact program, for example, provides peer-led diversion that invests in youth leadership and restorative alternatives to detention. In Harlem and Red Hook, the Center works with tenants in community to increase housing stability and reduce evictions by helping tenants navigate housing

---

<sup>1</sup>Center for Justice Innovation. (2023). [Supervised Release Program data file]. Retrieved from the Justice Center Application case management system.

court. Similarly, our Legal Hand program serves Crown Heights, Jamaica, and Tremont residents facing housing, immigration, and employment issues by training local residents to empower their neighbors with legal information. In both Brooklyn and the Bronx, the Center works to prevent gun violence by actively engaging those at risk of being involved in violence, building community movements against violence, and providing supports and opportunities to community members in need. The citywide Reimagining Intimacy through Social Engagement (RISE) Project addresses the intersection of intimate partner violence and gun violence.

The Center has a particular expertise in providing trauma-informed social services, which continue to be crucial given the increasing number of justice system-involved individuals facing mental health and/or substance use challenges. Through our Staten Island Justice Center, for example, the Center provides clinical support and restorative programming for court-involved youth who have mental health needs. Our Midtown Community Court's Misdemeanor Mental Health Court works with some of Manhattan's most vulnerable individuals—those with extensive histories of mental illness and/or substance use disorders—to resolve cases while reducing the use of incarceration and continued cycling through systems. The Center's Bronx Child Trauma Support provides therapeutic and court accompaniment services to children who have been victim or witnesses to violent crime.

### **Reducing Incarceration:**

The Center is seeing an increase in referrals for both misdemeanor and felony ATI cases in New York City. To keep up with growing misdemeanor caseloads, and in order to take on cases with deeper levels of engagement required, **the Center is seeking \$1.5 million in new Council funding for misdemeanor cases.** Additionally, the Center is piloting a felony alternative-to-incarceration program for young people charged with weapon possession and related charges. **The Center seeks \$211,000 in new Council funding to expand the pilot's eligibility criteria and serve a greater number of referrals from family court cases.**

The Center has measurable experience implementing data-driven programs that meaningfully reduce incarceration without decreasing public safety, which aligns with Council's goal of closing the Rikers Island Jail Complex. Alternatives to incarceration (ATI) and diversion programs can prevent unnecessary incarceration and disruption to individual lives, while providing linkages to additional services to decrease criminogenic factors that would otherwise grow in confinement. In 2022, the Center served 6,742 new participants in ATI programming (Felony, Misdemeanor, and Brooklyn Mental Health Court) across New York City.<sup>2</sup> These models are studied to be safe, effective, and cost efficient; and avoid unnecessary incarceration, reducing the long-term adverse impacts it has on individuals, families, and communities.

### *Enhancing Felony ATI in Brooklyn*

Felony ATI programs are an essential component of the timely and important conversations around the dangers and systemic challenges that plague the Rikers Island Jail Complex. The Center's **Brooklyn Justice Initiatives** and **Brooklyn Mental Health Court** work in conjunction to offer an array of alternative felony sentencing options for individuals arrested on violent and non-violent charges in Brooklyn. These programs are pioneering innovative responses to serious crimes that

---

<sup>2</sup>Center for Justice Innovation. (2023). [ATI data file]. Retrieved from the Justice Center Application case management system.



engage people in individualized services, so they can remain in their communities while making positives changes in their lives and avoiding the harmful effects of incarceration.

With Council funding, Brooklyn Justice Initiatives successfully launched their felony ATI program in January 2020, which offers community-based interventions and rigorous judicial monitoring of felony cases that are otherwise ineligible for drug, mental health, and domestic violence courts. Brooklyn Justice Initiatives staff provide comprehensive clinical assessments, and robust offerings of services through community partners and in-house programs. Brooklyn Mental Health Court is based in the Brooklyn Supreme Court and launched in 2002 as the first mental health court in New York City. Brooklyn Mental Health Court crafts meaningful responses to participants, including those with felony charges, who have mental illness. Addressing both treatment needs and the public safety concerns of the community, the court links defendants with serious and persistent mental illness who would ordinarily be jail- or prison-bound, to long-term community-based treatment as an ATI. The majority of Brooklyn Mental Health Court participants who do need intensive and long-term support are connected to a psychiatrist and community-based mental health supports in a way that meets their specific needs and situation. Since it opened in 2002, the court has seen nearly 1,300 participants satisfy program requirements and graduate successfully. Active participants exhibit a 74 percent compliance rate and are 46 percent less likely to be re-arrested while in Brooklyn Mental Health Court than those in a comparison group. In addition, court participants see a 29 percent reduction in the likelihood of a re-conviction versus a comparison group.<sup>3</sup>

The Center seeks renewal funding to sustain and grow operations of felony ATI programming in Brooklyn. Continued Council support would allow the Center to serve the growing number of individuals coming through the legal system living with serious mental illness.

#### *The Next Frontier of Felony ATI: The Midtown Youth Weapons Diversion Program*

The Center also has a history of unique knowledge and expertise in working to reduce gun violence and increase public safety, including serving as the original site for Cure Violence in New York City. The Center's research team has evaluated programs that address violence, and recently conducted a unique study examining why young New Yorkers carry guns.<sup>4</sup> This work has provided the Center with lessons learned for effectively reaching target populations. The Center's Midtown Community Court seeks new Council funding to expand and enhance the **Midtown Youth Weapons Diversion Program**. In collaboration with the New York City Family Court Law Department, the Legal Aid Society, and the New York City Department of Probation, this Center pilot program is one of very few holistic diversion options for young people ages 14-18 arrested for weapon possession. Most youth participants are referred to the program by the Law Department.

In our inaugural year, nearly every eligible participant referred to Midtown's Youth Weapons Diversion Program has chosen to enroll in the program, and 90% of participants have completed the full program.<sup>5</sup> Successful completion of this diversion program leads to a non-filing of the case, which diverts the young person away from Family Court proceedings, or a dismissal if the case was already filed, thereby avoiding the full criminal process and its collateral consequences. In addition to providing a critical diversion opportunity that addresses the root causes of gun violence, this

---

<sup>3</sup><https://www.innovatingjustice.org/publications/criminal-justice-interventions-offenders-mental-illness-evaluation-mental-health>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.innovatingjustice.org/publications/gun-violence-NYC>

<sup>5</sup>Center for Justice Innovation. (2023). [Midtown Community Court data file]. Retrieved from the Justice Center Application case management system.

program will provide educational support and job skills development, offer connections to health and wellness and other holistic services, and build youth connections to the community. We are working with the Law Department to study compliance and recidivism for this program as compared to the standard Family Court criminal legal process.

### *Growing Need for Misdemeanor Alternatives to Incarceration*

The Center is seeing need for new Council funding to support increasing misdemeanor ATI referrals in Queens and Manhattan. Misdemeanor ATI programs provide meaningful alternative sentences that both reduce the use of incarceration, fines, and convictions and enhance public safety. Council funding would support growing caseloads and allow Center programs, **Queens Community Justice Center** and **Manhattan Justice Opportunities**, to take on misdemeanor ATI clients with higher-needs and extensive case histories. Funding would also support the **Midtown Community Court Emerging Adult Diversion Program**, a driving factor in the re-opening of the community court. Collectively, these three projects offer innovative community-based diversion options in criminal court, with the goal of reducing incarceration and criminal convictions and enhancing public safety in their respective boroughs. These alternative programming options hold people accountable for their actions, while connecting them to services and resources that build stability in their lives and decrease their likelihood of reoffending.

In Queens, the misdemeanor ATI program has experienced a significant increase in referrals, due to a number of factors: first, the program's services are entirely free to all participants, in contrast with many other providers in Queens who charge a fee; second, the programming is accessible to non-English speakers due to its multi-lingual and culturally competent staffing; and lastly, the program boasts an impressive success rate—in 2022, the program had a 99% compliance rate.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this success, judges and other court stakeholders have requested that Queens Community Justice Center expand their presence in additional court parts in order to identify, screen, and accept even more referrals. Council funding would allow the Center to have a greater presence in multiple court parts and conduct same-day intakes and assessments, which will allow immediate participant connection to emergency services.

In Manhattan, Manhattan Justice Opportunities serves as a centralized, court-based social service hub that provides judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys in New York County Criminal Court and Supreme Court with a single point of access to a wide array of community-based services as alternative sentencing options in criminal cases. Manhattan Justice Opportunities has a wide reach and impact, serving over 1,363 new individuals in 2022.<sup>7</sup> We anticipate that we will serve a similar number of participants in 2023. While the majority of Manhattan Justice Opportunities' work is funded by MOCJ, Manhattan Justice Opportunities supervisory and administrative capacities are underwritten by a grant from the Manhattan District Attorney's Office that ends in the summer of 2023. With City Council support, Manhattan Justice Opportunities will be able to sustain and expand misdemeanor ATI services. Finally, the Midtown Community Court Emerging Adult Diversion Program offers group and individual programming to help break the cycle of intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and dating abuse experienced by court-involved young adults. Council

---

<sup>6</sup>Center for Justice Innovation. (2023). [Queens Community Justice Center data file]. Retrieved from the Justice Center Application case management system.

<sup>7</sup>Center for Justice Innovation. (2023). [Manhattan Justice Opportunities data file]. Retrieved from the Justice Center Application case management system.

funding will allow Midtown to offer client-centered, trauma-informed, and evidenced-based services to help individuals heal from the impact of IPV and to prevent future abusive behavior.

### **Adequately Addressing the Behavioral Health Needs of New Yorkers**

**The Center seeks \$461,000 in new Council support for behavioral health integrations into the justice system, to combat the overdose crisis.** Behavioral health and the justice system cannot be siloed; they are inextricably intertwined. Properly addressing the mental health and substance use needs of all New Yorkers—necessary now more than ever before with the stressors of COVID-19 weighing heavily on already under-resourced communities—will allow us to lessen harmful interactions with the justice system and law enforcement. We can also ensure that contact with the system is humane, with an emphasis on providing culturally competent treatment and programming.

#### *Combatting the Overdose Crisis*

The Center operates direct services, conducts original research, and provides expert assistance at the intersection of criminal justice and the overdose crisis. We are committed to providing a meaningful and proportionate response to opioid use disorder, geared toward prevention and rehabilitation, treating all impacted individuals with dignity and respect, and prioritizing public safety. As funding from opioid manufacturer settlement cases are distributed across New York City, the Center seeks new Council support for the **Bronx Heroin Overdose Prevention and Education (HOPE) program**.

Building on the success of the Project Reset model, the Center piloted Bronx HOPE to address substance use issues at the precinct level by giving individuals brought in on a controlled substance Desk Appearance Ticket (DAT) charge the option of accessing community services as an alternative to arraignment and prosecution. By giving clients the option of accessing community services instead of appearing in court, Bronx HOPE gives Bronx residents the opportunity for rehabilitation and connection to community rather than jail or options that don't address the underlying issues. Bronx HOPE's Peer Specialists are dispatched to the precinct to engage with individuals immediately at the time of their arrest. Peer Specialists provide solutions that match local needs and resources, foster trust and buy-in among program participants, and ensure that those who are directly impacted have a voice in decision-making. Bronx HOPE demonstrates that eligible cases are more likely to engage in programming with peer presence at the precinct. In 2022, Bronx HOPE had a contact rate of 84 percent for dispatched cases.<sup>8</sup> Of those cases that were dispatched and enrolled in programming, 81 percent completed their services, thereby preventing the need for those participants to appear in court and face criminal charges.<sup>9</sup> If an individual chooses to participate, they meet with a Center case manager who works with the individual to develop a holistic plan of care, identify services that address their needs, and provide support to complete programming.

#### *Court-Based Behavioral Health Integrations*

One of the Center's newest efforts launched in January 2022, at the request of our partners at the New York State Unified Court System; the Midtown Community Court and Red Hook

---

<sup>8</sup>Center for Justice Innovation. (2023). [Bronx HOPE data file]. Retrieved from the Justice Center Application case management system.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid at citation 13

Community Justice Center launched two new **Misdemeanor Mental Health Courts** (MMHC), serving Manhattan and Brooklyn, respectively. These currently unfunded problem-solving courts offer community-based interventions and judicial monitoring for misdemeanor cases that are eligible for diversion. The Center seeks new Council funding to meaningfully address rising misdemeanor caseloads in these Mental Health Court parts.

Modeled on the successes of the Brooklyn Mental Health Court, the Center's MMHCs take on the most complex misdemeanors where participants have high needs, extensive histories with the system, and are facing multiple open cases that bring them into the MMHC. Thus, the level of engagement is different than a typical misdemeanor ATI case. Throughout the past year of assessing, counseling, and graduating clients in MMHC, we have noticed several overarching themes that impact the individuals who arrive in this court part: major interruptions to daily functioning at time of arrest, Serious Mental Illness (SMI), co-occurring mental illness and substance use, and unstable housing and lack of access to resources. The court part is staffed by a team of multidisciplinary professionals who specialize in behavioral health and are responsible for conducting independent assessments, preparing recommendations for court, providing referrals to community-based providers, and offering ongoing case management. The ultimate goal is to offer meaningful individualized programming for persons living with mental health as a case resolution, whether through a pre-plea or post-plea model.

#### *Supporting Whole Families in Family Court Proceedings*

The Center's **Strong Starts Court Initiative** (Strong Starts) provides specialized services and supports for children from birth to 3 years of age who, due to allegations of neglect or abuse, are subjects of child protection proceedings filed by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and under the jurisdiction of the New York City Family Court. Strong Starts provides ongoing child and family assessments by experienced clinicians that help determine the services needed to restore safe and nurturing parenting and to promote healthy developmental trajectories for children.

Families are connected to high quality, trauma-informed services that specifically target the problems that brought them into the child welfare system. There is a strong focus on collaboration and problem solving that impacts the culture and the way in which the Courts, ACS, the family, and their clinical service providers work together, share information, and resolve family and systems problems. The Center seeks Council funding to build program capacity citywide so that Strong Starts can serve more infants, toddlers, and their families in need of these fundamental services that are associated with reduced likelihood of future abuse or neglect petitions.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Upstream Street Outreach and Interventions*

The Center's Midtown Community Court recognizes the value in offering holistic services that respond to a clients' needs, while not relying solely upon traditional policing to solve emerging community concerns. Instead, crisis response should be embedded within a comprehensive, integrated health care and public health system with high quality, accessible, and equitable services.<sup>11</sup> The Center's **Community First** model links individuals in the Times Square area to social and wellness services, while coordinating voluntary follow-up engagement built on relationships developed through consistent outreach.

---

<sup>10</sup><https://www.innovatingjustice.org/publications/helping-youngest-start-life-strong>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.fountainhouse.org/reports/from-harm-to-health>

Specifically, Community First employs Community Navigators with lived experience who partner with community-based organizations to engage individuals in social services, substance use treatment, and mental health services. Community Navigators build trust by learning clients' stories, offering essentials like food, blankets, and access to bathroom facilities, and, over time, connecting them to long term support like housing, employment, and/or substance use treatment. From July 2021 to December 2022, the Community Navigators have reached more than 604 individuals residing in or frequenting the Times Square area.<sup>12</sup> Early data demonstrates that individuals are willing to continuously engage with Navigators, and over time, begin to address their more substantive needs. Currently, Community First street outreach takes place exclusively in the Times Square area. Should Midtown Community Court receive additional Council funding, program outreach will extend to Hell's Kitchen. Additionally, Community First will continue to fortify relationships and partnerships in the Garment District, based on the findings of a Council funded FY23 Community First needs assessment, should the area prove viable for expansion.

### **Preventing Eviction through Comprehensive Housing Support**

**The Center seeks \$550,000 in new Council funding to expand comprehensive support to address the many interconnected factors that impact housing instability in New York City.**

Access to quality, sustainable, and safe housing is a crucial element to the conversation around social justice and equity. By proactively addressing factors like access to housing and housing resources, we hope to reduce the likelihood of individuals intersecting with the justice system. Three Center programs—the Red Hook Community Justice Center, the Harlem Community Justice Center, and Legal Hand—work directly with New York City residents who are facing housing instability, whether through the threat of eviction, the need for permanent housing, or living conditions that pose risks to their safety and well-being.

While New York City has made significant investments in attorneys for low-income residents, tenants are more likely to remain stably housed when they have assistance beyond legal representation in Housing Court. The Center's **Housing Navigators** work at Legal Hand sites, or out of the Center's Housing Resource Centers, to connect directly with residents who are facing housing instability. Housing Navigators support tenants in obtaining critical home repairs, preserving affordability, preventing evictions, and finding justice and fair treatment in housing court. We have found that a problem-solving approach in and beyond Housing Court helps both tenants and landlords connect to resources to address challenges like building repairs and back rent. Support with organizing files, evidence-gathering, and other written requests prior to legal filings have been noted to improve legal representation.

The Center's unique positioning—a community-based organization with programs across all five boroughs and individuals already engaging in this work—means that we can bridge those gaps to ensure that our most vulnerable residents do not fall through. We seek new Council funding to support Housing Navigators in Staten Island and the neighborhoods of Harlem, Brownsville, Red Hook, Crown Heights, Jamaica, and Tremont. Known as the **Housing Justice Community Navigator Program**, the initiative is dedicated to preventing evictions while promoting housing stability, affordability, and tenant protections for vulnerable tenants and public housing communities through a network of trained housing navigators and mobile pop-up events in all five boroughs. The

---

<sup>12</sup>Center for Justice Innovation. (2023). [Community First data file]. Retrieved from the Justice Center Application case management system.

Housing Justice Community Navigator Program is currently supported by congressional funding that is due to sunset in late 2023.

## **Conclusion**

By partnering with the Center, Council can go beyond transforming the justice system to cultivating vibrant and prosperous communities that center public safety and security for all who live here. We thank Council for its continued partnership and are available to answer any questions you may have.



520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018  
p. 646 386 3100  
f. 212 397 0985  
innovatingjustice.org

Courtney Bryan. Executive Director

## **Center for Justice Innovation FY24 City Council Major Finance Proposal Summaries**

---

**Center for Justice Innovation Innovative Core Funding (formerly Center for Court Innovation) #151226 - \$750,000 (Renewal/Expansion)** This is an application to support the continuation of the Center for Justice Innovation's innovative criminal justice responses, community-based public safety initiatives, and access to justice programs across all five boroughs in New York City. City Council's support allows us to serve tens of thousands of New Yorkers with mental health services, family development, youth empowerment, workforce development, and housing, legal, immigration and employment resource services. Our goal continues to be improving safety, reducing incarceration, expanding access to community resources, and enhancing public trust in government to make New York City stronger, fairer, and safer for all.

**Initiative:** Innovative Criminal Justice Programs

**Center for Justice Innovation (formerly Center for Court Innovation): Brooklyn Felony Alternatives to Incarceration #151072 - \$1,280,000 (Renewal/Redesign)** The Center for Justice Innovation (Center) seeks funding to support its Brooklyn Felony Alternatives to Incarceration (FATI) programs for individuals arrested on violent and non-violent felony charges in Kings County. These FATI program operate across two Center projects: Brooklyn Justice Initiatives and Brooklyn Mental Health Court, which offer holistic and individualized community-based interventions and rigorous judicial monitoring of participants on felony cases, thereby reducing the use of jail and prison sentences and leading to reduced criminal dispositions.

**Initiatives:** Diversion Programs; ATIs

**Midtown Community Court: Youth Weapons Possession Diversion Program #153321 - \$257,384 (New)** Midtown Community Court, in collaboration with the New York City Law Department, the Legal Aid Society, and the New York City Department of Probation, will expand and enhance a previously unfunded youth diversion pilot program for gun and other weapon possession charges. Currently, Midtown's pilot diversion program is one of very few holistic alternatives to prosecution for young people ages 14-18 arrested for weapon possession. Successful completion of the program results in the Law Department declining to prosecute or dismissing the case, thereby avoiding a full criminal process, a criminal record, and many collateral consequences. In addition to providing a critical diversion opportunity that addresses the root causes of gun violence, this program will provide educational support and job skills

development, offer connections to health and wellness and other holistic services, and build youth connections to the community.

**Initiatives:** Diversion Programs; Innovative Criminal Justice Program

**Center for Justice Innovation (formerly Center for Court Innovation): Queens and Manhattan Misdemeanor Alternatives-to-Incarceration Programs #151126 - \$450,000**

**(New)** This is an application to support funds that will expand the Center for Justice Innovation's Misdemeanor Alternatives-to-Incarceration programming in Queens and Manhattan, across three operating programs: Queens Community Justice Center, Manhattan Justice Opportunities, and the Midtown Community Court. The goal of these programs is to offer a single point of access to a wide array of community-based services as alternative sentencing options in criminal cases, thereby reducing incarceration, and improving public safety by addressing the underlying issues that lead to justice system involvement. Collectively, these funds will support staffing and program delivery at these three sites to meet the growing needs of the communities, participants, and court stakeholders.

**Initiatives:** ATIs; Innovative Criminal Justice Programs

**Bronx Community Solutions: Bronx Heroin Overdose Prevention and Education (Bronx HOPE) Mobile Services #153788 - \$461,680 (New)**

Bronx Heroin Overdose Prevention and Education (Bronx HOPE) is an initiative from Bronx Community Solutions that tackles substance use issues by using a precinct-based peer-driven diversion model for individuals issued a Desk Appearance Ticket for qualifying drug possession charges. The program was specifically developed to address the opioid crisis and help individuals who struggle with substance use disorder. Bronx HOPE practices a harm reduction model and uses interventions that provide participants the option to access community services instead of appearing in court. By giving individuals this option, Bronx HOPE offers the opportunity for rehabilitation and connection to the community rather than jail or options that do not address underlying issues. Bronx HOPE proposes the staffing and implementation of a response van to serve as the program's mobile office space, with the goal of increasing the number of individuals who are meaningfully engaged through the Bronx HOPE program. Bronx HOPE seeks funding to expand its services beyond the precinct level to increase the program's reach and provide support to community members before they come into contact with the justice system.

**Initiative:** Opioid Prevention and Treatment Initiative

**Center for Justice Innovation (formerly Center for Court Innovation): Brooklyn & Manhattan Misdemeanor Mental Health Courts #151177 - \$593,949 (New)**

The Center for Justice Innovation partners with the New York State Unified Court System to operate the Brooklyn and Manhattan Misdemeanor Mental Health Courts, offering community-based interventions and judicial monitoring for individuals with mental health diagnoses who are charged with misdemeanor offenses. The courts are staffed by a team of multidisciplinary professionals who specialize in behavioral health who are responsible for conducting independent assessments, preparing recommendations for court, providing referrals to community-based providers, and offering ongoing case management. The goal of these courts is to provide support and engagement through meaningful individualized programming for persons living with mental health as a case resolution, whether through a pre-plea or post-plea model.



**Initiatives:** Diversion Programs; ATIs; Innovative Criminal Justice Programs

**Center for Justice Innovation: Strong Starts Court Initiative #152718 - \$572,241 (New)** The Center for Justice Innovation seeks funding to build the capacity of the successful Strong Starts Court Initiative to meet the needs of a greater number of infants, toddlers, and their families throughout New York City and help build a sustainable program not entirely dependent on private foundation support. The Strong Starts Court Initiative is a Family-Court-based project; it employs a two generational approach to provide specialized supports for infants, toddlers and their families who have child protection cases, and it works to educate court-based professionals in an approach focused on early child development that will transform the traditional family court response to this extremely vulnerable population.

**Initiatives:** Mental Health Services for Vulnerable Populations; Children Under Five; Speaker's Initiative; Innovative Criminal Justice Programs

**Midtown Community Court: Community First #153859 - \$100,000 (Renewal)** Midtown Community Court (MCC) seeks support to build off of the findings of the FY23 Needs Assessment made possible by Councilmember Powers' Office to hire one Community Engagement Specialist to fortify relationships and partnerships identified during the initial needs assessments to build an infrastructure for Community First bridging Times Square and the Garment District.

**Initiative:** Community Safety and Victim Services Initiative

**Midtown Community Court: Community First #153703 - \$100,000 (New)** Midtown Community Court (MCC) seeks support to bolster the operations of Community First. Midtown Community Court has submitted a proposal in response to the New York County District Attorney's Office Neighborhood Navigators RFP to expand Community First operations to the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. Funding will support the general operations of the Community First program which currently operates from 40th Street to 53rd Street, 6th Ave to 8th Ave, including Restaurant Row. Council's funding will improve the capacity of Community First to serve the most vulnerable community members, often experiencing varying degrees of homelessness, substance use, serious mental illness, and/or physical health challenges.

**Initiative:** Community Safety and Victim Services Initiative

**Brownsville Community Justice Center: Housing Resource Center and Housing Navigator #153364 - \$100,000 (New)** Brownsville Community Justice Center (Justice Center) is seeking funding to bolster its Housing Resource Center—including through the hiring of a new Housing Navigator—in order to prevent homelessness and help community members maintain safe, affordable, and stable housing. With City Council support, the Housing Resource Center, in addition to providing direct tenant support, will conduct community education campaigns around important issues, like NYCHA's new portal and HP Actions. Additionally, the Housing Navigator will work with a team of Housing Navigators across the Center to address a wide range of housing needs. Although the Justice Center has long provided services that help prevent evictions via annual recertification, support residents secure benefits, and provide assistance overcoming homelessness, this dedicated Housing Navigator will expand and deepen its housing work in Brownsville.

**Initiative:** Community Housing Preservation Strategies

**Harlem Community Justice Center: Housing Help Center and Housing Navigator #153428 - \$100,000 (New)**

The Harlem Community Justice Center's Housing Help Desk seeks funding from the Community Housing Preservation Strategies Initiative to support a Housing Navigator who will help seniors, non-English speakers, and other public housing tenants living in Harlem obtain critical home repairs, preserve affordability, prevent evictions, and find justice and fair treatment in housing court.

**Initiative:** Community Housing Preservation Strategies

**Legal Hand: Crown Heights– Housing Navigator #153220 - \$100,000 (New)** City Council funding will support a dedicated Housing Navigator at Legal Hand: Crown Heights, which will be a part of a network of Housing Navigators across the City at other Center for Justice Innovation sites to address a wide range of housing needs. Although Legal Hand: Crown Heights has always provided services that help prevent evictions, assist residents to secure benefits, and support community members overcoming homelessness, this dedicated Housing Navigator role will expand and deepen its housing work in Crown Heights, in response to rising need.

**Initiative:** Community Housing Preservation Strategies

**Legal Hand: Jamaica – Housing Navigator #153254 - \$100,000 (New)** City Council funding will support a dedicated Housing Navigator at Legal Hand: Jamaica, which will be a part of a network of Housing Navigators across the City at other Center for Justice Innovation sites to address a wide range of housing needs. Although Legal Hand: Jamaica has always provided services that help prevent evictions, assist residents to secure benefits, and support community members overcoming homelessness, this dedicated Housing Navigator role will expand and deepen its housing work in Jamaica, in response to rising need.

**Initiative:** Community Housing Preservation Strategies

**Legal Hand: Bronx – Housing Navigator #153284 - \$100,000 (New)** City Council funding will support a dedicated Housing Navigator at Legal Hand: Bronx, which will be a part of a network of Housing Navigators across the City at other Center for Justice Innovation sites to address a wide range of housing needs. Although Legal Hand: Bronx has always provided services that help prevent evictions, assist residents to secure benefits, and support community members overcoming homelessness, this dedicated Housing Navigator role will expand and deepen its housing work in the Bronx, in response to rising need.

**Initiative:** Community Housing Preservation Strategies



Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS)  
198 East 121<sup>st</sup> Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, New York 10035 [www.cucs.org](http://www.cucs.org)

March 15, 2023

Dear Members of the General Welfare Committee,

The Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS) is a non-profit provider of housing, health, and wellness services to homeless and formerly homeless New Yorkers. We employ more than 600 human services workers in 36 programs, most of which are funded by government contracts. Through our contract with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), we are responsible for all the street outreach and housing placement for Manhattan. CUCS also operates program shelters for homeless mentally ill women and men, safe havens, a homeless drop-in center, and we provide support services to more than 3000 units of supportive housing. We work in jails, in VA Centers, and we operate eight Intensive Mobile Teams (IMT) that provide individuals who have frequent contact with mental health, criminal justice, and homeless services designed to reduce risk and adverse outcomes for those who have been poorly served by traditional models of care. Our staff is on the front line, offering critical service provision that is innovative, person-centered, and intended to reach to the most vulnerable people, thereby improving the quality of life and wellbeing of all New Yorkers.

Over the last two years, we have struggled to maintain adequate staffing levels. The pandemic has taken a toll on our workers, the pay no longer meets the market demand making it difficult for workers to see the human services sector as a viable employment option. Currently our staff vacancy rate is 21% and our frontline positions are staying open for months at a time. The city relies on its non-profit partners to operate shelters, supportive housing, and community-based treatment and homeless outreach teams. As such we believe that government contracted human service workers deserve compensation and benefits schedules comparable to that of workers in the same field who are employed directly with the city and the state.

CUCS is a proud member of the [#JustPay campaign](#), which calls on the city to do the following:

1. Establish, fund, and enforce an automatic annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) on all human services contracts.
2. Set a living wage floor of no less than \$21 an hour for all City –funded human services workers.
3. Create, fund, and incorporate a comprehensive wage and benefit schedule for government contracted human services workers comparable to the salaries made by City and State employees in the same field.

We thank Speaker Adams, Deputy Speaker Ayala, and the members of the General Welfare Committee for their effort to deliver much needed support to the human services sector. Our



Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS)

198 East 121<sup>st</sup> Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, New York 10035 [www.cucs.org](http://www.cucs.org)

workers not only serve the community, but they are also from the community, contributing to its sustainability and its vitality. Livable wages for non-profit sector workers are an investment in the long-term health and wellbeing of all New Yorkers.

Sincerely,

Joe DeGenova, Chief Executive Officer, CUCS

**Contact Information: CUCS 198 East 121<sup>st</sup> Street, NY NY 10035. [www.cucs.org](http://www.cucs.org)**

**Joseph DeGenova, Chief Executive Officer @ 212-801-3313. Email: [joe.degenova@cucs.org](mailto:joe.degenova@cucs.org)**



**ADVANCING OUR  
COMMUNITY**

**Chinese-American Planning Council, Inc. (CPC)**

150 Elizabeth Street New York NY 10012 (212) 941- 0920 fax (212) 966-8581

[www.cpc-nyc.org](http://www.cpc-nyc.org)

**Chinese-American Planning Council, Inc.  
Testimony at the New York City Council General Welfare Committee  
Honorable Diana Ayala, Chair  
March 16th, 2023**

Thank you Chair Ayala and the Members of the City Council for the opportunity to testify today. The mission of the Chinese-American Planning Council, Inc. (CPC) is to promote social and economic empowerment of Chinese American, immigrant, and low-income communities. CPC was founded in 1965 as a grassroots, community-based organization in response to the end of the Chinese Exclusion years and the passing of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. Our services have expanded since our founding to include three key program areas: education, family support, and community and economic empowerment.

CPC is the largest Asian American social service organization in the U.S., providing vital resources to more than 60,000 people per year through more than 50 programs at over 30 sites across Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. CPC employs over 700 staff whose comprehensive services are linguistically accessible, culturally sensitive, and highly effective in reaching low-income and immigrant individuals and families. We also serve over 300 children and their families each year through our early childhood programs. With the firm belief that social service can incite social change, CPC strives to empower our constituents as agents of social justice, with the overarching goal of advancing and transforming communities.

The early childhood workforce in community based organizations provide care and education to children throughout New York City including many of the City's poorest children, and many children whose classes are their first introduction to the English language. Our teachers across our 6 early childhood education centers work incredibly hard to provide high quality, culturally competent, linguistically sensitive programming for the children they serve. In our Queens based Lois E Lee Early Childhood Education Center, for example, we do dual language reading in 8 different languages. Not just serving the children, these teachers help the parents with language access to critical information about how the school system works and how to best support their children. During the height of the pandemic, many families told us that CPC was their only connection to resources and supports, and if they didn't have a child in school they would not have known where to turn.

To that end, we are grateful to testify about issues that impact the individuals and families we serve, and we are grateful to the Council for their leadership on these issues.

***CPC's testimony addresses the following concerns: Child Regression and Decrease in Quality of Programming, Community Based Support Capacity, Lack of Transparency and Language Access***

***Child Regression and Decrease in Quality of Programming***

CPC's Early Childhood and School Age Centers are critical safety nets for thousands of working-class, AAPI, and immigrant families. In addition to providing childcare for low-income families, CPC's Childhood Development Services (CDS) staff are instrumental in supporting the growth of children of color with disabilities. During COVID-19, when schools closed and services shifted to a remote setting, CPC's CDS staff continued to provide their services nonstop, and creatively integrated their programming onto an online format. However, the lack of support and funding from the city has made it even more challenging to implement creative programming that meets the learning and developmental needs of children during COVID-19, and this has resulted in concerning childhood developmental regression.

The following anecdotal example of childhood regression is about a child with disabilities who enrolled in one of CPC's Childhood Centers when she was two years old. When she entered in the program, she was unable to speak any words. Through CPC's support, she was able to speak in coherent sentences at three years old. When COVID-19 hit and services shifted to remote, this child was unable to access their teletherapy sessions due to the language, digital, and financial barriers that her family encountered. Once CPC's Childhood Center reopened this fall, this child returned and was unable to speak in coherent sentences anymore. In six months, she had regressed two developmental years - back to speaking single word phrases.

Children with disabilities require paras (paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities with communication, instructional, and behavioral support), as well as services that are difficult to maintain through online systems due to the lack of equitable funding designated to support families who experience digital and linguistic barriers. Some parents with children who need extra support for their disabilities are also reporting that they are **just now** receiving their learning devices, even though they applied for them back when the pandemic first started in the US, in March 2020. Some students still have not received their learning devices. Along with the digital literacy gap disproportionately affecting working class immigrant parents, as well as the Broadband barrier affecting majority working class and Communities of Color, the lack of accountable follow through with providing digital learning devices is yet another systemic barrier that prevents working-class Children of Color from learning. These systemic inequities impact low-income children of color and children with disabilities and immigrant-serving CBOs such as CPC end up taking on the mantle to support these children through interruptions to their cognitive development. While we are grateful to be back in person, we should be prepared in advance for any possible remote schooling again and make sure that all children have the resources necessary. **CPC calls for equitable investment in community-led Early Childhood services, the integration of intentional community outreach for families with digital and linguistic barriers, and provision of training on school reopening guidelines for community-based childhood centers to adequately support low-income immigrant families as NYC schools reopen.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been detrimental to children's mental health, which affects their academic performance and long term development. The disruption from in person learning and prolonged isolation has increased students' stress and anxiety. Fourth graders in CPC programs are asking questions such as, "what if it stays like this forever, what if my parents die, what if we don't have anymore money. why ...why do I need too...nothing will change," and they breakdown in tears from sadness and frustration trying to get answers. The overwhelming sense of uncertainty, grief, and hopelessness weigh heavily on students' minds, leaving them unmotivated and unable to focus in the classroom. Additionally, students carry onto their families'

pain and loss, and are unable to receive the proper mental health support to fully process and heal from their traumas. CPC staff are not professionally trained to provide the comprehensive mental health supports students need, and may experience vicarious trauma from consoling students as well. Additionally, many staff are living through the same stress, anxiety, and dilemmas the children are feeling. Social Services workers need to be better trained and equipped on what signs to look for in mental illness specifically in young children, in addition to how to address it appropriately. **CPC calls on the City to ensure that CBO's receive the same equitable support in mental health for the children they serve as the DOE.**

### ***Community Based Support Capacity***

Our CPC staff not only attend to their students' needs, but they also field worried parents' anxieties whose children are placed on waitlists due to classroom closures. Without culturally competent childcare options, working class immigrant parents are left with little to no choice regarding whether or not they should stay home to take care of their children, or continue essential employment to put food on the table.

During COVID-19, AAPI unemployment claims have increased by 6900% in comparison to last year. Lines for free meal distribution events wrap around the block, and CPC staff have supported thousands of families navigate through different relief programs provided by City, State, and Federal level governments. At CPC's Early Childhood sites, without an increase in funding from the City, any increase in meal distribution comes out of the individual site's program budget. Whether or not a child gets fed should not depend on an individual organization and agency's own resources. **Therefore, CPC demands increased investments funding for CBO run Early Childcare Centers, which provide necessary childcare services for working-class immigrant families.**

### ***Closing***

Early Childhood centers and schools are critical social safety nets that cannot afford to be jeopardized by the COVID-19 pandemic. The city needs to prioritize investing in working-class communities of color and community-led efforts of recovery in order for NYC to be able to fully recover from COVID-19. All of these recommendations are only the beginning in providing the care our community members deserve. CPC appreciates the opportunity to testify on these issues that so greatly impact the communities we serve and look forward to working with you on them.

## **Address Child Care Needs to Lay Foundation for a Universal Birth-to-Five System**

- Add new infant/toddler seats.
- Convert a significant share of 3-K and Pre-K seats to extended day/extended year.
- Increase access to child care vouchers and reduce the backlog of families on voucher list.
- Decentralize enrollment and permit contracted Early Childhood providers to enroll eligible families into their own programs.

- Embed developmental and behavioral health supports in child care contracts with nonprofit organizations.

## **Make Building Block Investments to achieve Universal Year-Round Youth Programming**

- Baseline funding for summer middle school programs.
- Expand year-round programs for elementary school students.

## **Stabilize the Child & Youth Workforce**

- Extend salary parity to include benefits and longevity increases, as well as staff left out of the original 2019 agreement: Community Based Organization (CBO) preschool special educators and community-based directors.
- Increase afterschool and summer youth programming rates to reflect the true cost of program operations and ensure properly compensated staff.
- Address the current Department of Health & Mental Hygiene clearance backlog affecting child care and youth service staff.

## **Reinstate the Children's Cabinet and Engage CBOs in Cross-sector Planning**

- Reinstate the Children's Cabinet and empower it with authority to coordinate across child and youth-serving agencies and inform the development of new policy initiatives.
- Begin the process of integrating data systems to analyze and respond to child, youth, and family needs over time.

This brings us to another critical point, which are the non-profit organizations that would love to pay their well deserving staff competitive wages, but have contracts that are so deeply underfunded that they are in danger of insolvency.

Last year saw an important investment in human services provider organizations that hold City contracts. With your help, we secured \$300m of our \$500m ask to help nonprofit provider organizations cover the cost of delivering essential services to New Yorkers.

There are two areas of human service nonprofit operations that need special attention in FY19 that were not included in the Final budget- costs associated with indirect rates and fringe and escalating occupancy and insurance costs. We are suggesting funding parameters that set a floor of 15% for indirect in all human services contracts and are requesting a 10% increase in the portions of human services contracts covering occupancy and casualty and liability insurance to cover escalating costs in these areas. Additionally, the City uses an outdated formula for calculating employee fringe benefits. We are also asking for consideration of a 37% fringe rate in all human service contracts to reflect a generally accepted industry standard and that, coincidentally mirrors the fringe rate used by the City for its own employees.

Lastly, as ACS is now transferring Early Childhood Education to DOE, it is important to address several key issues.

Currently, the budget only pays 7.5 hours for a 10 hour day. This issue needs to be addressed especially now that the Governor's mandate has become strict in regards to adult supervision and administrative supervision. The program is 10 hours a day, but each person is paid for 7.5hrs



which includes the duty free hour. Therefore out of the 10 hours, employees are meant to be working for 6.5 hours plus take their lunch break. However, per Article 47 such schedule is not advisable because they could lose their job if they truly worked the schedule stated within their collective agreement. A CPC early childhood educator explains:

"I am paid for 38 hours a week without overtime. There is no budget for overtime, for a second person to cover the DCC at the end of my shift. The DCC is expected to have a certified person onsite without teaching duties at all time but there is no money for such person on the budget. There is no money for when I need to take vacation to have someone sit in my office to cover for me while I am away. For me I don't see it as an option to work beyond the 38 hours but as an obligation if I want to keep my center from being closed due to lack of supervision by an administrator."

We urge the City Council to push for the Early Childhood contracts to be fully funded for actual hours required by the program in the transfer to DOE.

Early Learn and Early Childhood Directors in Community Based Organizations are supervisors of their school and all its operations. Many oversee multiple (including family day care) sites in addition to their own center. We must recognize that these CSA directors' salaries must be at a minimum 6% to 10% above the salary of the highest paid teacher they supervise (whether it's a teacher with years of longevity or pay parity for teachers if passed).

Currently, UPK and 3 K provide 6 hours and 20 minutes of service. For working parents/caretakers Early Learn provides 10 hours of service. Currently, UPK and 3K operate from September to June whereas Early Learn offer year round services from July to June. The additional hours and months of service are crucial to meet the needs of working families. The extra hours and months are currently being funded through New York State Child Development Block Grant, Head Start, or City Council Discretionary funding.

The new 2019 RFP to be implemented in Sept. 2020 must offer options for funding for full day (8:00-2:30PM) or extended day (8:00 AM -6:00PM) and 10 months or 12 months of programming or perhaps a 8 week summer program if not the entire 2 months of summer). If the new RFP follows the current UPK 10 month funding, then many non profits will be unable to pay rent and salaries creating a gap in services and operational costs.

Our CSA Early Childhood Directors are certified teachers and experts in their field. They have numerous responsibilities to be in compliance with DOE, DOH, DOB, FDNY and face minor violations and appearing at OATH. They supervise and mentor their entire staff ( observations, evaluations, lesson plans, assessments –ESI-R, ECERS, CLASS, etc.). Administrative work include enrollment, CACFP (meals) attendance, payroll, budgets, RFP and grant writing. Interactions with student with challenging behaviors, parents/caretakers, consultants, DOE instructional coordinator, DOE Operations Analyst, DOE social worker and daily unforeseen circumstances.

Our priorities are what is best for the child, what works for families and what is cost effective. There must be clear guidelines on the implementation of UPK and 3K Expansion and the Transition of Early Learn NYC to DOE. This is an opportunity to do it right.

CPC appreciates the opportunity to testify on these issues that so greatly impact the communities we serve, and look forward to working with you on them.

If you have any questions, please contact Carlyn Cowen at [ccowen@cpc-nyc.org](mailto:ccowen@cpc-nyc.org)

**Testimony Submitted by**  
**Pauline Auguste, Director of Food Services, Community Help in Park Slope**  
**For the General Welfare Budget Hearing on the FY24 NYC Budget**

**March 15, 2023**

My name is **Pauline Auguste and I am the Director of Food Services at Community Help in Park Slope**. Thank you to Councilmember Diana Ayala for holding today's budget hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

**Located on the border between Park Slope and Gowanus in Brooklyn, CHiPS runs a soup kitchen that provides breakfast and a hot lunch, prepared in-house, six days a week. We also run a twice-weekly food pantry and year-round provide support and temporary housing to nine new and expectant mothers and their children.** CHiPS is a member of the [NYC Food Policy Alliance](#), a multi-sector group of 75+ food system stakeholders from across New York, including frontline CBOs directly impacted by food insecurity. The Alliance's mission is to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to our current economic and hunger crises, but also address the ongoing vulnerabilities and injustices of the food system. Collectively, we approach this work through an anti-racism lens to ensure communities of color and other systemically under-resourced communities benefit from public policies and funding.

Our city has not fully recovered from the economic, social or public health impacts of the pandemic. Many families are still struggling to make ends meet and our partners are seeing an unprecedented demand for emergency food assistance. Since May of 2020, the unemployment rate in New York City has hovered around twice the national average at around 5.6%. The most recent United States Department of Labor data shows that inflation rose to a record 9.1% in June 2022, the largest gain in nearly four decades, reflecting increased food, shelter, and fuel costs nationwide. In that same time period, 64% of respondents had difficulty paying for usual household expenses<sup>1</sup>. With a national economic recession looming, we are concerned that the poverty rates, inequality and need for food assistance we are already seeing across the city will worsen.

Access to healthy, culturally appropriate food is a continuous issue that New Yorkers face and yet the Mayor is proposing flat funding across the board for critical food assistance programs which will place an increased demand for food on pantries, farmers and supermarkets. We are very concerned with recent reporting that HRA is processing just [46.3% of applications for SNAP benefits](#) and we know agencies are already understaffed due to job vacancies. Funding cuts to HRA and other

---

<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau Household Pulse Data Survey results from September 2022.

agencies across the board will only worsen this situation and urge the Administration to reconsider its proposed cuts to HRA and to more seriously address the vacancy rate at the agency, which is greatly contributing to the slow processing of SNAP applications. We also urge the Administration to ensure any cuts in headcount vacancy for HRA do not impact benefits enrollment and ensure frontline positions are not eliminated.

In our policy recommendations below, we advocate for solutions that will assist with alleviating the burden that is placed on the food systems stakeholders. We support streamlining food assistance applications, investing in community based food businesses as well as urban agriculture and gardening programs, and increasing investment in healthy school food and nutrition education.

We stand in support of the nearly [80 organizations calling for a reduction](#) in the scope and budget of the NYPD. Instead we demand an equitable budget that restores and increases investments in human and social services, education, housing, community food programs. We respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following recommendations in the FY24 New York City Budget:

*Utilizing The Food System As The Catalyst To Build Wealth In Communities*

- **\$4.9 Million for Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative (WCBDI).** We support the [NYC Network of Worker Cooperative](#) in its call for increased funding from \$3.7M to \$4.9M in FY24. This local discretionary initiative funds 15 worker cooperative support organizations that coordinate education and training resources as well as provide technical, legal, and financial assistance for the start-up of new worker cooperative small businesses, and provide assistance to existing cooperatives. We urge that this increase in allocation help put worker cooperative support organizations that prioritize food businesses—such as RiseBoro Community Partnerships' [Worker Coop Development Program](#)—on the path to partnership within WCBDI. This focus on cooperative businesses within the food system will foster local food growers, aggregators, transporters, packagers, cooks, sellers and educators.
- **Create a new Food Justice Fund to allocate \$5 Million in Revolving Loans** that can support worker cooperatives, Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) and other employee-ownership models within the food system. There is a need to fund small and working size ESOPS in zip codes that reflect a high BIPOC demographic. Providing access to capital for employee ownership models in the food systems is a key strategy to build community ownership within the local food system, especially in BIPOC communities that have historically had low rates of business establishment by neighborhood residents. In addition, we recommend exploring ways to de-risk the loan, waive personal guaranties and other requirements that often prevent cooperatives from accessing conventional financing.

- **Partner with and support community food hub models** like Universe City and GrowNYC, and community-owned food retail such as Central Brooklyn Food Coop, to leverage existing and growing community-owned food, health, farming and retail infrastructures. We urge the City to fund these community-led groups to create food security plans and reduce barriers that prevent these types of projects from participating in city procurement contracts. In addition, we ask for the City to work with food hub CBOs to create a food security plan that can provide community wide food access and to establish pathways in the development of community food hubs..
- **Fully Fund the Citywide Community Land Trust Initiative at \$3 million.** We prioritize the notion that moving public land with insecure tenure to trust land will strengthen land security and sovereignty and prioritize access to lands for people who have deep and historic community connections, especially BIPOC farmers, growers and community gardens. Launched in FY2020, the citywide CLT discretionary funding initiative has helped catalyze CLT organizing, education, training and technical assistance. We support the [NYC Community Land Initiative \(NYCCLI\)](#) in its call for full funding to support 20 organizations working to develop and preserve deeply-affordable housing, community and commercial spaces, and advance a just recovery in Black and brown NYC communities. Public land must be used for public good, and be reserved for CLTs that provide for meaningful community control. It is also critical to raise awareness that CLTs can be utilized for commercial urban agriculture. We believe that this embodies the ability to balance local land control and long-term, stewarded development that addresses changing community needs. Supporting both Community-owned businesses and Community-controlled land together is part of an effort to democratize economic development in NYC's food system.
  - We also support the passage of the [Community Land Act](#), an urgently-needed set of bills that give community land trusts (CLTs) and other nonprofits tools to develop and preserve permanently-affordable housing, community and commercial space, and other neighborhood assets.

#### *Urban Agriculture & Youth Development*

- **Allocate funding for the new Office of Urban Agriculture** housed within the Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability (OLTPS) to maintain appropriate levels of staffing and increase transparency about Office goals and activities among the community of urban agriculture practitioners. Use funding to create a position dedicated to ongoing, intentional community engagement to inform the urban agriculture advisory's development of a set of recommendations as outlined in Local Law 123.

- As it is within the Office's duty and power to make recommendations to the "heads of relevant agencies with respect to protecting and expanding urban agriculture," we urge the Office to partner with the Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD) to ensure that interested youth can meaningfully participate at urban agriculture sites through both Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and Work Learn Grow (WLG). The Office of Urban Agriculture can play a leadership role in managing the placement of youth participants at community gardens with the collaboration of local CBOs, expanding participation of local compost operations as worksites, aligning the program timelines to allow for youth participants to be matched with an urban agriculture worksite year-round through both programs.
- **Increase funding to train the next generation of farmers and strengthen viable urban agriculture career pathways for youth** by expanding the DOE's Career and Technical Education program to strengthen its Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources and investing in local training programs with a commitment to social justice such Farm School NYC.
- **Establish a grant program** managed by the NYC Urban Agriculture Office targeted to residents in low income communities to invest in and provide technical assistance to urban agricultural startups and their acquisition of equipment, land and indoor growing space as well as staff.
- **Invest in GreenThumb at \$4.8 Million** to support the hiring of additional Community Engagement Coordinators, creating a permanent full-time Youth Engagement Coordinator position for the current seasonal position, and providing compensation for both youth and community gardeners that take leadership roles within GreenThumb Youth Leadership Council program, which is currently unpaid.
  - Direct the Parks Department to reduce administrative barriers to providing direct stipends from the City to community gardeners and youth to ensure Greenthumb can compensate community gardeners to teach workshops and train youth to run these programs, making existing gardening programming sustainable.
- **Increase opportunities for young people with \$206.5 million in baseline funding for Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and \$20 million in baseline funding for Work Learn Grow (WLG),** the complementary school-year youth workforce program. Mayor Adams has expressed his commitment to investing in the future of urban agriculture, yet current DYCD regulations create a barrier for urban agriculture worksites that would provide meaningful experiences for young people. We urge the DYCD to commit to a reassessment of these programs to ensure successful partnerships with food systems and urban agriculture worksites by:
  - Increasing baseline funding for employer placements and supporting CBOs that are working with DYCD.
  - Advocating for the reallocation of funding for the program to be directed to out of school programs.
  - Ensuring youth interns are placed at their selected work site based on their interests.

- **Maintain \$7 million in funding for NYC Composting programs.** We applaud Mayor Adams for [announcing a roadmap](#) to create the first citywide curbside composting program ever by the end of 2024. These programs are vital to the community because they create local sustainable jobs, reduce landfill waste, gardeners and residents having access to resources in their communities, are eco-friendly and sustainable, and promote community involvement. We want to uplift the support for:
  - Incorporating the NYCHA and public housing in the compost programs initiative to encourage community engagement and divert food waste from landfills.
  - Developing more transparency for accessing foodscrap bins so that community members can register for food scraps collect services.
  - Partnering with and increasing funding for local foodscrap hauling CBOs to collect foodscrap from households who are interested in the initiative. Residence should also be provided with the assurance that they can drop off their food waste at local drop off locations in their neighborhoods.
  - We urge the city to prioritize food waste reduction efforts to alleviate the waste management burden on city agencies and CBOs.

#### *Emergency Food & Benefits Access*

- **Increase funding to a total of \$59 Million for the Community Food Connection (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).** The Mayor's preliminary budget proposes baseline funding of \$23.8M plus an additional \$30 million for a total program budget of ~\$52 million. We urge that \$30 million that was allocated for FY23 and FY24 to be baselined as well as a moderate increase for a total of \$59 Million to accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program, rising cost of produce, and continued need, including the continuing influx of asylum seekers and other migrants seeking refuge in New York City.

**The numbers of people turning to us for food are surging and we are in serious need of additional funding. Our numbers rose at the beginning of the pandemic as people lost jobs and inflation began to climb and in January of this year demand spiked when 300 people, recently arrived from Venezuela, were given shelter by the city in a hotel around the corner from us. Three days after arriving in New York, a group of about 20 people—parents and children—arrived at our door. It was around 30 degrees that day and they had no jackets, no warm clothing at all. They were wearing t-shirts and flip-flops. There was one little boy in shorts who had his arms pulled inside his t-shirt because he was so cold. Any warm clothing we had we gave it to them. We got blankets to wrap the babies in—these were little babies, just a few months old. We had finished serving lunch and didn't have any hot meals on hand so we gave them sandwiches and bottled juice along with socks, hats, gloves—anything we had to keep them warm. I had to walk away to get my composure back because my eyes were filling with tears.**

After that initial group arrived, the numbers of people coming to us for meals doubled. We went from feeding 150 to 200 people per day to over 300, sometimes even 400 a day. For a small organization like CHiPS, this is a huge change. Three to four days in, we started running out of food. We were also scrambling to supply clothing, baby formula, and diapers. We put out the word on social media and the community responded very generously, dropping off sandwiches and cooked food, holding clothing and food drives for us. But this is not a short-term crisis. This is an ongoing situation and we cannot rely on individuals to keep us going. My staff is exhausted. They are running on empty. We are a small team, and even before January we were already spread very thin. Our mission is to feed those in need but without additional funding to the Community Food Connection (CFC) program, I don't know how we can sustain our current response.

- **Invest \$38.4 Million of new funding to combat hunger among older adults for home delivered meals programs and congregate meals at older adult centers.**
  - \$6.7M for inflation cost for raw foods, gas and other items for home-delivered meals
  - \$27.1M for inflation cost for raw food and other items for congregate meals at older adult centers
  - \$567k to address the DFTA's home-delivered meal waitlist
  - \$4M to support weekend and holiday home-delivered meals not provided through DFTA, especially as they have not seen an increase in years.
- **Direct the HRA to ensure that any cuts in headcount vacancy do not impact benefits enrollment and frontline positions are not eliminated,** increase wages to help fill critical vacancies and improve internal systems to be more efficient.
- **Increase HRA's budget baseline to ensure it can engage community based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and streamline benefits applications.** We urge the City to increase funding for the agency and CBOs engaged in benefits outreach to meet ongoing demand and improve the administration of critical food benefit programs. Additional administrative funding should support the SNAP program (run by NYC HRA) to have a joint application with the WIC program (run by NYS DOH). This would be a great first step in implementing Mayor Eric Adams' campaign pledge to create a MyCity applications portal for joint applications.
- **Evaluate the newly relaunched Grocery to Go Program.** This program emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as food assistance for homebound New Yorkers and has since been redesigned to provide food insecure New Yorkers who also have hypertension and/or diabetes with monthly credit to purchase groceries through an online marketplace of local grocery stores. Most participants that were originally participating in the Get Food program will not meet the new requirements for the Groceries to Go Program due to their physical health status.
  - Given the short timeframe in which the allocated funds will need to be spent (by June 2023) and the highly specific eligibility requirements, we are concerned that the



DOHMH may not be able to fully enroll 5,000 New Yorkers in time to spend down all of the available funds. To make the program more impactful and ensure unspent credits do not go to waste we strongly recommend: 1) the monthly credits allotted to each participating household are increased to ensure that funds are reaching the individuals that the program is intended to serve, 2) expand the list for diet related conditions to widen the scale of the program, and 3) allow for the participation of young adults who meet the other eligibility criteria.

- Finally, we encourage the program to allow enrollees to have the freedom to use the credits on food items of their choosing that reflect need, cultural preference, dietary or medical requirements and personal taste. We strongly encourage the DOHMH not to apply additional limitations to eligible foods and to maintain that Grocery to Go credits can purchase SNAP approved items.

*The NYC Food Policy Alliance stands in full support of the NYC Food Ed Coalition's call for quality food and nutrition education for all NYC Students, [including its FY24 City Budget priorities](#):*

- **\$37 million to provide flexible food & nutrition education funding for all NYC schools.**
- **\$3.5 million to increase compensation and head count at the DOE's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS).**
- **Renew \$500,000 in City Council discretionary funding for the Food Ed Hub based within the Tisch Food Center.**
- 

**Thank you for your attention to these important issues. For more information please contact:**

**Pauline Auguste, Director of Food Services, CHiPS (Community Help in Park Slope)**  
**[pauline@chipsonline.org](mailto:pauline@chipsonline.org)**



**Testimony of Juan Diaz, Jenny Veloz, Alice Bufkin, Rebecca Charles, & Caitlyn Passaretti  
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York**

**New York City Council Preliminary Budget Hearing on General Welfare  
March 13<sup>th</sup> 2023**

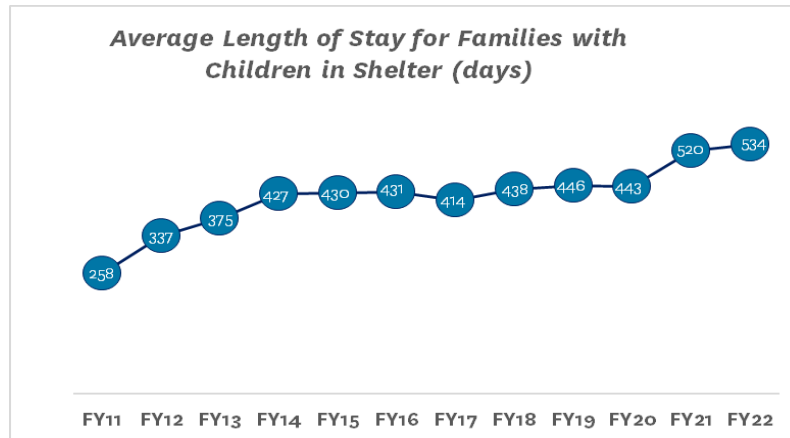
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York is a 76-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization. CCC does not accept or receive public resources, provide direct services, or represent a sector or workforce; our priority is improving outcomes for children and families through research and advocacy. We document the facts, engage and mobilize New Yorkers, and advocate for solutions to ensure that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe.

We would like to thank Chair Ayala and all the members of the Committee on General Welfare for holding today's preliminary budget hearing for general welfare. To ensure New York City continues its recovery from the pandemic and ensuing economic insecurity, we must make strong and robust investments in supportive structures for all families in the city.

**Family Homelessness**

CCC is a Steering Committee member of the Family Homelessness Coalition, a coalition of 20 organizations representing service and housing providers and children's advocacy organizations united by the goal of launching a coordinated, collaborative, multi-agency effort focused on preventing family homelessness, improving the well-being of children and families in shelters, and supporting the long-term housing stability of families with children who leave shelter.

New York City is facing a severe housing and shelter crisis. Since the end of the eviction moratorium in January 2022, thousands of families with children have been evicted and entered the already strained DHS-shelter system. To put in perspective the economic and housing burden that low-income families face, the cost of living in New York City is 128% higher than the national average and housing costs are 358% percent higher.<sup>i</sup> Rising costs for rent and basic needs disproportionately affect families of color, and multiple administrative and eligibility barriers are currently preventing at-risk families from accessing rental assistance to secure housing and economic stability. Furthermore, in FY2022, families with children spent on average 534 days in DHS-shelters, which is over 3 months more than the average time that families spend in shelter in FY2020.<sup>ii</sup>



The Mayor's FY 2024 Preliminary Budget calls for PEGs across human services agencies. **CCC and advocates across the city are deeply concerned about proposed staff reductions, given that families throughout the city are already suffering from severe delays in accessing cash assistance, food support, and housing assistance in a timely manner due to understaffing at HRA. We urge the City Council to not only oppose staffing reductions, but to advocate that the city provide the resources and support necessary to fill existing vacancies quickly.**

To this end, we applaud City Council Speaker Adams' and other Council Members' call for legislation to remove the bureaucratic inefficiencies that block access to housing vouchers. **We urge the City Council to pass legislation and propose sufficient funding to remove several restrictions that prevent -expeditious access to CityFHEPS housing assistance.**

- **Eliminate the 90-day waiting period for CityFHEPS eligibility (Int 0878 by Sanchez, Ayala, Hanif, Bottcher & Won).** A key strategy for improving families with children's access to CityFHEPS housing eligibility is to eliminate or modify the 90-day shelter stay rule that requires individuals and families to be in shelter for 90 days before becoming eligible for CityFHEPS. We urge you to continue your support for eliminating this illogical and costly administrative rule.
- **Permit accepting a rent-demand letter from landlords instead of a housing court eviction to qualify for CityFHEPS (Intro 2864 by Sanchez).** This eligibility requirement was temporarily implemented during the pandemic, and it helped many families prevent eviction. This change should be made permanent.
- **Remove the requirement that individuals must have had a shelter stay before qualifying for CityFHEPS (Intro 2862 by Ayala).** Residing in shelters can create a harmful environment for children and affects their educational development, among other areas. Additionally, providing CityFHEPS assistance while in the community instead of requiring shelter entry would save the City hundreds of millions of dollars.
- **Require HRA to designate housing specialists within all temporary shelters and to submit an annual report on housing specialists (Intro 0124 by Salamanca Jr.).** Advocates and shelter residents have expressed concerns over the lack of housing specialists to help them find apartments and to inspect apartments in a timely manner.
- **Make youth categorically eligible for CityFHEPS vouchers.** Youth experiencing homelessness in both DYCD-funded Runaway and Homeless Youth and those youth

transitioning out of ACS care should be made categorically eligible for CityFHEPS vouchers without first having to enter a DHS shelter. This will prevent young people from unnecessarily entering shelter, make vouchers easier to access, and support the Administration's goals of eliminating youth homelessness.

**Additionally, several vulnerable populations remain left out of CityFHEPS eligibility, even though they are at considerable risk of housing insecurity and homelessness. We urge the City Council and the Administration to:**

- **Expand CityFHEPS eligibility to undocumented families.** A 2022 [CCC housing data analysis report](#) found that immigrant households faced higher rates of overcrowding, rent burden and housing instability compared to the overall New York City population. Currently, only applicants with a valid social security number qualify. This leaves mixed-status families at a disadvantage as their CityFHEPS voucher only covers a portion of the rent for qualifying individuals.
- **Expand CityFHEPS eligibility to families and individuals that enter city shelters through pathways other than just DHS.** This should include HPD, domestic violence and runaway youth, who currently are ineligible for CityFHEPS unless they enter the system through DHS. While in the DHS shelter system, individuals and families staying in shelters other than DHS must remain 90 days before they qualify for CityFHEPS assistance. This unnecessary use of City resources could be allocated to supporting families to find suitable housing.

**CCC also strongly supports reforms that would improve students in temporary housing educational and overall wellbeing:**

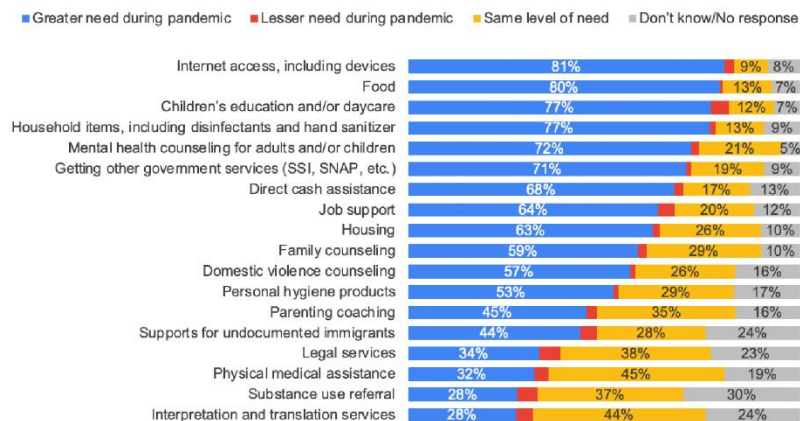
- **Extend and baseline \$3.3 million to maintain the 25 shelter-based DOE Community Coordinators currently funded with City dollars.** To help address barriers for students living in shelters, the DOE is hiring 100 shelter-based community coordinators to help students with attendance and accessing educational support. These community coordinators provide an array of services, including arranging for transportation, connecting families with early childhood education programs, coordinating mental health services, and accessing proper special education evaluations and services. These community coordinators can make a crucial difference in the lives of students and families in shelter, but city funding for 25 of these coordinators will expire at the end of FY23. Given the rising number of students living in shelters and their high rates of absenteeism, CCC urges the city to fully fund these roles.

### **Child Welfare**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, countless New York City families struggled to put food on the table, pay rent, and access the child care or the behavioral health care they desperately needed. Too often, poverty has resulted in families being thrust into the child welfare system, with a disproportionate impact on children and families of color. COVID-19 only heightened these needs and exacerbated the risk of child welfare involvement.

CCC and the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) conducted a qualitative survey in New York City survey in February 2021 which shed light on the experiences of families and prevention service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and points to both long-standing and emerging challenges that demand policy action. Namely, the survey revealed a wide range of needs that increased because of the pandemic. Providers pivoted to meet the needs of families by increasing cash and non-cash support and offering alternatives to in-person visits, such as video conferencing and phone calls, to ensure consistent communication and social distancing. However, prevention service provider agencies reported crucial challenges with funding and staffing that limited their capacity to meet families' needs.

### How have families' need for the following services changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?



The survey data showed that since the pandemic began, 81% of providers observed an increase in clients' needs for internet access and devices; 80% reported an increase in the need for food; 77% reported an increase in education and childcare needs; 77% reported an increase in the need for household items, including PPE and disinfectants; and 72% reported an increase in the need for mental and behavioral health counseling. While these needs and barriers to service access were present prior to the pandemic, attention is urgently needed now to respond to persistent heightened needs – this will require investment in these service areas as well as in prevention. The survey also showed significant workforce concerns that providers are experiencing, as providers are struggling to recruit, hire, and sustain the staff that is needed to be responsive to children and families.

It is evident that robust prevention services and funding are needed in order to support families and the workforce. However, the Preliminary Budget has outlined numerous vacancy reductions, including \$107,000 for ACS and hundreds of staffing reductions across the social service agencies that are so critical for supporting struggling families, including those that offer services like cash aid, food assistance, and housing supports. **We know that vacancy reductions will harm city agencies' ability to provide needed prevention support to families, and urge the City Council and the Administration to reject the elimination of positions that can strengthen families and keep them together.**

We also know that poverty is a significant driver of child welfare involvement. In New York City, Black and Latinx families have the highest poverty rates in the city, make up nearly 80% of child welfare investigations and 89% of the foster care population despite being 57% of New York's child population.<sup>iii</sup> If families were provided with financial assistance and other supportive services when they needed them, then there would be fewer child welfare investigations and more families able to remain together.

**We therefore call upon the City Council to bolster their investment in programs that will create more pathways for primary prevention and allow families to receive strong support without a child welfare case, as well as ensure city-level general prevention services are robustly funded.**

We applaud Speaker Adams for proposing \$5 million towards a guaranteed income program to provide direct anti-poverty assistance payments to low-income mothers with infants and to youth at risk of poverty due to engagement with the foster or justice systems. These types of investments are critical for addressing the fundamental economic barriers that too often result in greater system-involvement for young people and families.

Additionally, the Department of Education is mandated to ensure that students in foster care receive transportation to and from their school. Unfortunately, the DOE has yet to comply. Being in foster care is disruptive enough for a young person; the DOE must do everything in its power to ensure that students in foster care are supported and, at the bare minimum, can get to school. During the 2019-20 school year, one in five NYC students had to change schools upon their initial placement in foster care. This disruption of students' lives and education is unacceptable and unjust. **We ask the City Council to ensure that the budget includes \$5 million for the DOE to provide bus service or other door-to-door transportation to the relatively small number of students in foster care who need it to maintain school stability.**

Finally, we appreciate the funding in last year's budget for Fair Futures, which increased funding and expanded the model to justice-involved youth. When system-involved youth receive tailored, one-on-one mentoring, it has a positive impact on their wellbeing and outcomes. **We therefore urge the City to ensure that this program is also made available to Runaway and Homeless Youth and that Fair Futures coaches are paid a living wage.**

## **Youth Justice**

In face of the rhetoric that has dominated many recent news articles on crime in New York City, we believe it is essential to make clear that youth crime is not rising in New York City. Youth arrests and index crimes<sup>1</sup> have continued to decline over the past ten years. Furthermore, young people are much more likely to be a victim of a gun crime than a perpetrator of a gun crime. The fear mongering around crime that is currently permeating many media outlets is destructive and dangerous and distracts from the concerted attention needed to invest in our youth and address their needs.

Any incident of violence is unacceptable, and we strongly support efforts to reduce violence in communities and support victims of violence. But the path to true safety and wellbeing is not through criminalization but is instead through investments in youth and communities. Young people in New York City have clearly expressed that they need and want access to housing, behavioral health care,

---

<sup>1</sup> Index crimes are serious property and violent crimes reported to the police.

afterschool programs, year-round employment opportunities and holistic supports – not further criminalization.<sup>iv</sup>

Youth justice is achieved through community investment. CCC knows that investing in youth services is a key way to achieve community wellbeing, and youth across the City agree. In their 2023 Youth Agenda, youth leaders from the CCC Youth Leadership Course, CUNY's Intergenerational Change Initiative (ICI) and YVote named Economic Mobility for youth a top priority, and urged the expansion of SYEP and the ability of all youth to access year-round employment.<sup>v</sup> We need creative, non-carceral solutions to gun violence and urge the Mayor and the City Council to utilize the city budget to invest heavily in community programming, parks, housing, youth sports, employment, and behavioral health. In CCC's testimony to the Mental Hygiene Committee and Youth Services Committee, we highlight additional investments that are needed to meet the employment and behavioral health needs of young people.

As the city looks to add more youth programming, it is important to recognize that young people who have lived experience with the foster system and justice system may be unaware of opportunities available to them or lack resources to connect to them. **We therefore urge city leaders to increase investments in youth services and enhance supports that enable special populations of youth – including undocumented children, homeless youth, child welfare-involved youth, and justice-involved youth – to access year-round youth development programs and employment training opportunities.**

We were pleased to see the Mayor's State of the City highlight his Accelerator Apprenticeship program which aims to support the hiring of 30,000 people into apprenticeships by 2030. This is an example of an investment into non-carceral services, and we believe programs like this should be made available to teens and young adults. We were also excited to see Speaker Adams recognize the importance of supporting disconnected youth, including by expanding the Renaissance Technical Institute's program which free vocational training to young people, particularly special populations of youth such as justice involved young people.<sup>vi</sup> We strongly support continuing to expand these types of investments in youth opportunities.

As important as these proposed investments are, our city must go further to promote community safety by investing in youth-led community-rooted initiatives and meet the needs of special populations of youth. **CCC therefore recommends the following:**

- **Treat** gun violence as a public health crisis by investing in transformative community programs, including by **expanding** investment in Cure Violence, credible messenger programs, youth engagement programs and other community-rooted programs that employ a public health approach to community safety
- **Fund** comprehensive civil legal services for young people facing barriers to employment, housing, accessing public benefits, or any other legal need
- **Close** Rikers and ensure the City remains on track with the closure plan
- **Redirect** funding from school policing into opportunities for young people in schools and communities, **reject** the Mayor's proposal to hire 500 staff for school safety agent vacancies, and **reject** the Mayor's \$47.5 million "Enhancing Security Measures" proposal that would install remote surveillance technologies in our schools.

- **Restore** the PEGs of \$13.6 million in FY23 and the \$20.5 million in outyears for New York Public Libraries as they are essential community hubs.

This is a pivotal moment to shift how we approach community safety, and we must commit to resourcing systemically neglected communities and building support networks.

### **Food and Income Security**

New York leaders must address the widespread hunger crisis that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Investments in many federal hunger prevention programs have lapsed, leaving children and families struggling to afford healthy meals and groceries. The expiration of federal emergency SNAP allotments and the backlog of SNAP applications (causing delays in families access their benefits) continue to adversely affect those who need these services the most. With inflation at an all-time high, it is imperative that New York continue to invest and fund resources that are vital to the health and well-being of families and children. These food initiatives play a crucial role in ensuring families have healthy food options.

As a member of the NYC Food Policy Alliance, CCC supports the urges support for the Alliance's [FY24 City Budget Platform](#). In particular, we recommend the following investments in CFY24 Budget to help fight food insecurity:

- **Increase HRA's budget baseline to engage community based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and streamline benefits applications.**
- **Direct HRA to ensure that any cuts in headcount vacancy do not impact benefits enrollment and frontline positions are not eliminated.** Increase wages to help fill critical vacancies and improve internal systems to more efficient. Delays in processing SNAP applications are causing irreparable harm to families already struggling with other high costs.
- **Increase funding to a total of \$59 Million for the Community Food Connection (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).** We urge that the \$30 million that was allocated for FY23 and FY24 be baselined and the overall budget increased to a total of \$59 Million to accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program.

Additionally, we recognize the enormous impact of Universal Basic Income models on the economic wellbeing of families and were pleased to see Speaker Adams propose expanding these models throughout the city specifically for low-income mothers with infants and to special populations of youth – those at risk of poverty due to engagement with the foster or justice systems. During the Covid-19 pandemic's height as families with young children struggled with the compounding effects of economic insecurity, several universal basic income (UBI) pilot programs provided essential income support. One NYC-based program, the Bridge Project, has provided varying cash support to mothers in upper Manhattan and the Bronx over a three-year period, and has recently expanded to include a cohort of pregnant mothers. Initial reports and anecdotal narratives from participants show the positive outcomes that UBI has on both the young child's early years and the caregiver's health, mental health, and economic wellbeing. This and other guaranteed income programs have been



proven to have a host of positive economic and social impacts on children and families. **We therefore strongly support adding \$5 million to the budget to expand guaranteed income programs in the city.**

### Human Services

CCC joins advocates and providers throughout New York in urging the City to enhance supports for its human services workforce. **We believe the City should match state demands for an 8.5% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for human services workers, and at a minimum fund a 6.5% COLA.** Without an inclusive COLA, nonprofits will struggle to retain their staff and provide key services - and workers will continue serving our city on poverty-level wages. It is essential for the human services providers to have sustainable funding to meet the needs of our communities while also having sufficient wages.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

---

<sup>i</sup> Cost of Living in New York City. Payscale website. 2023. <https://www.payscale.com/cost-of-living-calculator/New-York-New-York>

<sup>ii</sup> Average Length of Stay for Families with Children in Shelter (days). Mayor's Management Report, NYC Mayor Office. 2022. [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2022/2022\\_mmr.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2022/2022_mmr.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> New York City Administration for Children's Services, Children in Investigations by Race/Ethnicity. 2020. <https://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/1/children-in-child-abuse-and-neglect-investigations#1383/17/3/1634/99/a/a>; US Census, American Community Survey, Child Population by Race/Ethnicity. 2019. <https://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/98/child-population#11/17/3/18/62/a/a>

<sup>iv</sup> The 2023 Youth Agenda. 2023. Retrieved from: [https://www.canva.com/design/DAFWzjE8Aj8/XzKyq9e-4FHi7BpWKUWLtg/view?utm\\_content=DAFWzjE8Aj8&utm\\_campaign=designshare&utm\\_medium=link2&utm\\_source=sharebutton](https://www.canva.com/design/DAFWzjE8Aj8/XzKyq9e-4FHi7BpWKUWLtg/view?utm_content=DAFWzjE8Aj8&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton)

<sup>v</sup> The 2023 Youth Agenda. 2023. Retrieved from: [https://www.canva.com/design/DAFWzjE8Aj8/XzKyq9e-4FHi7BpWKUWLtg/view?utm\\_content=DAFWzjE8Aj8&utm\\_campaign=designshare&utm\\_medium=link2&utm\\_source=sharebutton](https://www.canva.com/design/DAFWzjE8Aj8/XzKyq9e-4FHi7BpWKUWLtg/view?utm_content=DAFWzjE8Aj8&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton)

<sup>vi</sup> Adrienne Adams. State of the City. New York City Council. 2023. [https://council.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/030823.Speaker\\_Adams\\_SOC\\_2023\\_Report.pdf](https://council.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/030823.Speaker_Adams_SOC_2023_Report.pdf)



**Testimony of City Harvest to  
Before the Committee on General Welfare**

**Preliminary Budget Hearing**

**March 13, 2023**

My name is Jerome Nathaniel, and I am the Director of Policy and Government Relations at City Harvest, New York's largest and longest operating food rescue organization. Thank you, Chairwoman Diana Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee, for holding today's hearing on the FY2024 preliminary budget. We also thank the Speaker for her inspiring State of the City, which included her commitment to put people first by supporting access to fresh produce at NYCHA through Mobile Markets.

This conversation couldn't be happening at a more urgent time. As we speak, over 1.7 million New Yorkers are grappling with over \$234 million in lost SNAP benefits, or a total of 38 million lost meals due to the expiration of SNAP EA this month. As the Speaker mentioned in her State of the City, our city has not fully recovered from the economic, social or public health impacts of the pandemic. Many families are still struggling to make ends meet, including predominately Black, Brown and women-led households that make up most of the frontline and essential workforce. Many of these communities were among the most food insecure neighborhoods in our city, even before March 2020. Now is not the time to roll back benefits or support on any level of government, especially in our city.

The Pandemic's economic tolls continues to disparately impact our city overall. Since May of 2020, the unemployment rate in New York City has hovered around twice the national average at around 5.6%. The economic strain that so many New York families are facing continues to materialize at our food pantries. Compared to 2019, average monthly visits to New York City food pantries and soup kitchens remain up nearly 75 percent. To meet the need in NYC, this year City Harvest will rescue and deliver 75 million pounds of food for New Yorkers in need — nearly 20 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels.

But as a food bank that has tirelessly fought to keep food on the plate for millions of New Yorkers for nearly four decades, we know far too well that charitable food programs cannot end hunger without the foundation of effective public policy, nor without the collective power of coalitions. City Harvest is a member of the [NYC Food Policy Alliance](#), a multi-sector group of 75+ food system stakeholders from across New York, including frontline CBOs directly impacted by food insecurity.

The Alliance's mission is to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to our current economic and hunger crises, but also address the ongoing vulnerabilities and injustices of the food system. Collectively, we approach this work through an anti-racism lens to ensure communities of color and other systemically under-resourced communities benefit from public policies and funding. City Harvest stands with the Alliance's list of priorities, as you will see presented in the full platform we've printed and submitted for this hearing.

In reviewing the Mayor's Preliminary Budget, City Harvest is uplifting the following six priority areas for the FY2024 budget, all of which we believe shows urgency for the disparate need in our city and a commitment to equity:

**1. Direct the HRA to ensure that any cuts in headcount vacancy do not impact benefits enrollment and frontline positions are not eliminated**

- a. As the Speaker emphasized throughout her State of the City, it is of the upmost importance that City Government fills critical vacancies to ensure New Yorkers get the help that they need. We are very concerned with recent reporting that HRA is processing just [46.3% of applications for SNAP benefits](#). Allowing cuts to HRA and other agencies across the board will only worsen this situation. We urge the Administration to reconsider its proposed cuts to HRA and to more seriously address the vacancy rate at the agency, which is greatly contributing to the slow processing of SNAP applications. We also urge the Administration to ensure any cuts in headcount vacancy for HRA do not impact benefits enrollment and ensure frontline positions are not eliminated.

**2. Increase HRA's budget baseline to engage community-based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and streamline benefits applications.**

- a. We urge the city to increase funding for the agency and CBOs engaged in benefits outreach to meet ongoing demand and improve the administration of critical food benefit programs. The expiration of SNAP EA for over 1.7 million New Yorkers calls for an all-of-government approach to ensure that families maximize the benefits that are available to them. Increased funding for benefit outreach is a vital strategy for the city to do its part in ensuring that CBOs are equipped to help New Yorkers who have been harmed by cuts to pandemic-era programs.

**3. Increase funding for Community Food Connect to \$59 million to reflect the rising cost of food in the program**

- a. The Mayor's preliminary budget proposes baseline funding of \$23.8 million plus an additional \$30 million for a total program budget of ~\$52 million. We urge that \$30 million that was allocated for FY23 and FY24 to be baselined as well as a moderate increase for a total of \$59 Million to accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program, rising cost of produce, and continued need, including the continuing influx of asylum seekers and other migrants seeking refuge in New York City.

**4. Invest \$38.4 Million of new funding to combat hunger among older adults for home delivered meals programs and congregate meals at older adult centers.**

- a. The reauthorization of the Older American's Act, which improvements were called for in the National Strategy to End Hunger, is expected to be negotiated and enacted in

2024. New York City can set the bar for the national response to senior hunger with real investments in meal delivery programs that have scaled back since the height of the Pandemic, despite senior hunger remaining stagnant compared to other age groups. That is why we stand with the NYC Food Policy Alliance on the following budget requests:

- i. \$6.7M for inflation cost for raw foods, gas and other items for home-delivered meals
- ii. \$27.1M for inflation cost for raw food and other items for congregate meals at older adult centers
- iii. \$567k to address the DFTA's home-delivered meal waitlist
- iv. \$4M to support weekend and holiday home-delivered meals not provided through DFTA, especially as they have not seen an increase in years.

**5. Create a new food justice fund that supports employee ownership models within the food system**

- a. In October 2021, the Mayor's office announced one time funding for the Community-Led Food Project grant program through the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City (Mayor's Fund), on behalf of the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative. The one-time program offered \$5,000 grants to organizations across 19 neighborhoods that were hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic; the application process was opened for less than four weeks and operated separately from the Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP). While the grant was well intended, the funding was inadequate and inaccessible for far too many communities. Furthermore, City Harvest's direct engagement with the MOFP to include a Food Justice Fund in the 2021 published 10-year-food policy plan, also referred to as Food Forward NYC, provide a clear connection to the city's community informed plan to build food resiliency. Following extensive research and a stakeholder engagement process through the NYC Food Policy Alliance, we believe that the Food Justice Grant would be most effective in supporting worker cooperatives, Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) and other employee-ownership models within the food system. Providing access to capital for employee ownership models in the food systems is a key strategy to build community ownership within the local food system, especially in BIPOC communities that have historically had low rates of business establishment by neighborhood residents. In addition, we recommend exploring ways to de-risk the loan, waive personal guaranties and other requirements that often prevent cooperatives from accessing conventional financing.

**6. Increase opportunities for young people with \$206.5 million in baseline funding for Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and \$20 million in baseline funding for Work Learn Grow (WLG),**

- a. The Mayor's Office has expressed a commitment to investing in the future of urban agriculture, and in economic opportunities for young adults. Further investments SYEP and Work Learn Grow are systematic approaches to dismantling hunger from the ground up.

**Conclusion**



We thank the Committee on General Welfare and the Council for holding this vital hearing on the Mayor's preliminary budget. City Harvest will remain vigilant in our work to provide food for families today and in our advocacy for legislation that builds resiliency beyond COVID-19. We remain committed to working with you on budget efforts and policy solutions that help New Yorkers become more food secure.

**Jerome Nathaniel, Director of Policy and Government Relations**

[Jnathaniel@cityharvest.org](mailto:Jnathaniel@cityharvest.org)

646-412-0720



## **TESTIMONY OF CITYMEALS ON WHEELS**

**Before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare  
Honorable Diana Ayala, Chair  
Fiscal Year 2024 Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 13, 2023**

**Submitted by:  
Jeanette Estima  
Director, Policy and Advocacy  
Citymeals on Wheels**

### **Overview**

My name is Jeanette Estima, and I am the Director, Policy and Advocacy at Citymeals on Wheels. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Citymeals was established in New York City in 1981 as a unique public private model to fill a critical gap in the City's home delivered meal program, which provides only one meal per day, five days a week, excluding weekends and holidays. Since then, Citymeals has become the emergency responder for homebound older adults, beginning with 9/11 and continuing throughout the pandemic.

The need for this program has increased over the past years, and even as we have been adjusting to our new post-pandemic reality, many older adults continue to need meals delivered to them. Prior to the pandemic Citymeals was serving 18,000 older adults; today we are serving 20,000. This is in addition to the general growth in the program we have seen over the years

as the population across the country ages, and that continues to this day. Moreover, as the number of climate related emergencies has grown, the number of emergencies we have responded to has grown.

In addition to serving more people, and responding to more emergencies, we have experienced a staggering increase in our costs due to inflation. In FY22 Citymeals' food costs increased 33 percent and our fuel costs nearly doubled. Maintaining our current level of service under these extraordinary circumstances is untenable. Therefore, we respectfully request the following investments in FY24:

- **\$800,000** through the Senior Centers, Programs, and Enhancements Initiative to ensure that our emergency response infrastructure is adequately funded
  - This includes a renewal of \$500,000 through the council initiative, and \$200,000 received through the Speaker's Initiative, and an enhancement of \$100,000
- **\$4 million** in the budget allocated for Citymeals weekend and holiday meals

Finally, the entire network of service providers that ensure that older adults are able to age in place is under extreme pressure caused by increased needs, increased costs, and the low-wages dictated in their contracts with the City. Therefore, to ensure that providers are able to hire and retain the staffing levels required to meet the needs of older New Yorkers, we urge the City to **establish, fund, and enforce a 6.5% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for City-contracted human services workers.**

### **The Citymeals on Wheels Model**

Citymeals on Wheels was founded 41 years ago to fill a significant gap in city services, securing funding to provide weekend and holiday meals to those homebound older adults unable to shop and cook for themselves. While the Department for the Aging funds the one daily meal that homebound older adults receive Mondays through Fridays (excluding holidays), Citymeals funds the same network of providers to deliver weekend, holiday, and emergency meals. *Without Citymeals, the most vulnerable older New Yorkers would not have a meal for about 115 days each year.* On a 3-day holiday weekend, the most isolated older adults could go 3 straight days without a meal; and, in times of emergencies, they could go even longer without food or contact with another person. To bridge this gap, Citymeals raises around \$25 million to fund about 2 million emergency, weekend, and holiday meals annually.

In addition to providing food on weekends and holidays, Citymeals has become a citywide emergency responder for older adults, beginning with 9/11. In 2018, the opening of our Bronx warehouse solidified this role by giving us the capacity to store up to 10,000 packed and ready meals, and enough food to quickly package up to 60,000 more meals.. With this level of inventory, we can pre-supply existing program participants with nutritious, shelf-stable meals and respond to those in temporary need during extreme weather, an emergency closure, or a suspension of meal delivery service. We can turn on a dime to reach large numbers of older adults in senior housing facilities, NYCHA housing, or Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), as well as individuals living across the five boroughs. We have stepped up during citywide emergencies like Hurricane Ida, as well as more localized emergencies such as a power or gas outage. Time and again, we have illustrated the value of our agile and resourceful model.



Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than the Covid-19 pandemic, which rendered thousands of older adults effectively homebound when it very suddenly became unsafe for them to be in most public spaces. They were no longer able to access their usual food programs, such as lunches at an older adult center, or food pantries. We delivered our first emergency meals on March 5, 2020, at least a week before the city shut down, because we anticipated that something could happen which would leave older New Yorkers without enough food on hand. Throughout the pandemic, we delivered over 6 million meals to the most vulnerable New Yorkers.

In FY22, Citymeals responded to 80 emergencies with over 59,000 meals, and pre-supplied program participants with over 66,000 meals in our seasonal emergency meal packages. This is what we do, and what we hope to keep doing. Citymeals has the infrastructure and stands ready for the next emergency, provided we can access the additional funding that makes our nimble model possible.

### **More than a Meal**

Community-based meals on wheels providers ensure that older New Yorkers have nutritious meals that support their health and that they are checked-in on most days. The check-in can be almost as important as the meals. The pandemic exacerbated social isolation for this population who could not participate in many of the alternative ways we all stayed connected, like picnicking in parks or zoom parties. Unable to socialize or see family, or even risk a trip to the doctor, for two years was devastating and added another layer of stress for these older adults who were already coping with chronic health issues, income insecurity, and hunger.

Meals are brought to homebound older adults by volunteers and paid staff—some of whom have been on the same route for many years. They come to know the older adults on their route, they know their routines, and often they can tell if something isn't right. This is a strength of the Citymeals model: by funding the same community organizations who deliver meals during the week, we maintain a continuity of service that allows connections and trust to develop. These relationships are a critical component of our city's care infrastructure.

For the most isolated older adults, their meal deliverer is a lifeline. If a person does not come to the door, deliverers will call them and/or notify program directors, who in turn ensure that the person's case manager follows up with them. The sense of security that this check-in can bring to someone who otherwise feels alone and invisible cannot be overstated. That knock on the door and the ensuing chit chat provides a sense of connection to the outside world, and the comfort of knowing that someone is looking out for them.

## **The Need**

There are more than 1.7 million New York City residents over the age of 60—that's one in five New Yorkers. Increased life expectancy is a testimony to the achievements of modern science, technology, and even the social safety net. Living longer and on a fixed income presents a wide-ranging set of needs from healthcare to mobility restrictions to food insecurity. For our recipients this could look like not being able to see well enough to cook their own meals, being unable to safely walk to the store or carry groceries home, or not having someone who can come by regularly to help with these tasks. We can confidently predict, then, that more and more people will be coming

onto the HDM rolls in the years to come—indeed we have already been seeing a steady increase for years.

Being unable to shop for groceries or prepare your own meals does not warrant institutionalization; these needs can be effectively managed through a network of community services and supports. And remaining at home is not only the overwhelming preference of older adults, it's also better for their overall wellbeing, and of course, much more cost effective—for both the person and the City—than moving into a nursing home.

In addition to this rapidly growing need, inflation has driven up the cost of food and fuel further straining our ability to feed hungry, homebound older New Yorkers. In FY22, our food costs increased 33% and our fuel costs nearly doubled. While we have increased our fundraising efforts, private fundraising cannot keep pace with this need and we urgently require the support of our partners in city government to ensure we can continue to feed the most vulnerable older New Yorkers. Therefore, **we are requesting \$4 million in the City budget allocated to Citymeals** to meet the growing need for weekend and holiday meals not covered under existing NYC Aging contracts.

While the pandemic highlighted the need for emergency, supplemental food for our recipients the need is still here and growing, even as the pandemic wanes. For example, the number of climate events that create enough damage that people become unable to leave their homes to get food, whether due to power outages or unsafe streets, has grown. *The homebound older adult population is not regularly, directly served by any other citywide emergency feeding groups.* Citymeals is the only provider who can respond, at scale, to emergencies across New York City. Therefore, it is

critical that Citymeals can continue to pre-supply emergency food that can be kept in a cabinet for more minor emergencies, and quickly respond to bigger emergencies with truckloads of 3-meal bags. **Therefore, we respectfully request \$800,000 through the Senior Centers, Programs, and Enhancements Initiative to fund Citymeals' emergency meals program.**

### **Sector-wide Needs**

Citymeals joins our partners across the network of older adult service providers in advocating for a city where we can all safely remain in our communities and continue to contribute to its diverse social and economic fabric as we age. To achieve this vision, we must build a robust infrastructure of community-based services such as older adult centers, mental health care, transportation, homecare, and caregiver support.

It cannot be overstated that nonprofit human services providers are a lifeline for the City and its residents of all ages; the sector's tenacity, resourcefulness, and expertise was on full display during the pandemic. Yet the City continues to underfund the services it relies on nonprofit providers to deliver, harming not only the programs but also the workers whose low wages fail to reflect the essential nature of their work. To shore up the nonprofit providers that implement the City's critical human services programs, we support the ask of the #JustPay campaign to **establish, fund, and enforce a 6.5% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA)** across all human services contracts.

We thank the City Council for your continued partnership in ensuring that homebound older New Yorkers have food to eat 365 days a year and are not forgotten during emergencies.



Leadership, voice and vision for child welfare in New York State

**Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies**

**Testimony Presented by:**

**Dr. Sophine Charles, Associate Executive Director, Downstate**

**New York City Council**

**General Welfare Committee - Preliminary Budget Hearing**

**Monday, March 13, 2023**

Good afternoon, I am Dr. Sophine Charles, Associate Executive Director, Downstate at the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA). Our member agencies include over 100 not-for-profit organizations providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, juvenile justice, and special education services in New York State. In New York City, we represent more than 50 nonprofit agencies providing City contracted child welfare services. We appreciate the opportunity to address the General Welfare Committee regarding the need of the child welfare sector and its workforce. We want to highlight for the Council the urgent need for NYC to invest in a viable, stable, and professional workforce. Child welfare caseworkers deliver vital family stabilization services to thousands of children and families across numerous City funded programs.

We need the support of the City Council to ensure that the Mayor's Budget reflects an investment in our child welfare workforce. Without an investment in the child welfare workforce, staffing shortages, vacancies, and turnover are linked to negative outcomes for families receiving child welfare services. An investment in the human services workers is also an investment in families, and ultimately will result in a cost savings for the City, fewer out of home placements of children, and reduced lengths of stay for children in foster care.

The workforce is the backbone of the child welfare system. As essential workers, particularly during the pandemic, these workers continued to show up every day to support children, families, and communities. We acknowledge and appreciate the recent City Council's baselining of \$60 million dollars in Workforce Enhancement Funds for prevention services staff. Unfortunately, the funds do not provide the type of fiscal coverage that will permit an improvement in the quality of life for the predominantly women of color workforce. We appreciate the opportunity to identify an array of fiscal supports that we know will greatly benefit the human services workforce, the children and families receiving family supports, and the contracted agencies that provide invaluable community-based resources to keep children safely in their homes.

The foundation of our testimony is about **Workforce, Workforce, Workforce, and Workforce.**

It is within this context, we seek an FY 2024 budget that includes:

- A living wage for all human services workers;
- An annual Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) – 6.5%;
- Pay parity for City contracted agency workers;
- Professional development supports for educational and career advancement and;
- Support nonprofit Providers’ sustainability.

### **COFCCA 2023 Child Welfare Workforce Priorities**

1. **Provide a living wage** for all City funded human services workers, including child welfare prevention and frontline staff.

Most prevention and frontline staff are community members and need a living wage of at least \$21 an hour to increase retention and improve their quality of life. Equitable pay for the child welfare workforce is both a racial and gender justice issue. Human services workers are 66% female, 68% are workers of color, and over 46% are women of color (Human Services Council, 2021). We have an opportunity to confront the economically oppressive system that plaques the workforce and provide opportunities and resources for families to get the support they need during child welfare involvement.

2. **Deliver a 6.5% COLA** for City-contracted human services workers, including child welfare staff.

We strongly support the infusion of a long overdue 6.5% COLA for all City contracts in the FY 2024 budget, thereby, supporting across the board salary enhancements to all human services workers. In addition, all human services programs must be supported; prevention programs, for example, have historically been left out of the human services COLA provided in the State Budget. While COLAs alone will not address all pay inequities, to some degree, it will offset some of the rising costs of living and working in New York City.

3. **Ensure pay parity** for City contracted child welfare agency workers to increase retention at the community level.

Child welfare caseworkers are leaving the field altogether for other better paying sectors such as education and mental health, or they are moving to the private sector. Better funded government positions result in nonprofit staff leaving for government jobs to access as much as \$20,000 more in earning (Human Services Council, 2021).

4. **Provide professional development support** for educational and career advancement for child welfare workers.

Our child welfare staff tell us that in addition to salary increases, they need more support in achieving their higher education goals. We consistently hear from our child welfare workers that although they find the work very challenging, they enjoy what they do and want to continue to grow with our agencies. The non-profit child welfare sector is in desperate need of an infusion of funding to promote and secure future pathways for promotion and advancement. Underfunded City contracts make it virtually impossible for contracted agencies to support the professional development needs of a workforce and to obtain the academic and licensing credentials required for career advancement. We believe that the City needs to support the professional development needs of a well-trained and credentialed workforce as a pathway to better quality of care and service delivery to children and families. We strongly urge the Council and the Mayor to include \$100,000 in the FY 2024 budget for professional development.

**In closing, we urge the City to** invest in a well-paid, credentialed, and experienced child welfare staff to deliver quality services to children in families. Without a trained and skilled child welfare workforce, Provider agencies will not be able to manage contractual obligations, handle intense, complex family crises, and help the City continue to support efforts towards improvement in child welfare outcomes. Contracted child welfare agencies are struggling to recruit, hire, and retain an essential workforce, workers who were critically responsible for delivering a plethora of critical services to families during the pandemic.



A quality workforce is directly tied to the quality of care and overall experience of children and families in the child welfare system. Equitable pay for the child welfare workforce is both a racial and gender justice issue. We have an opportunity to improve the quality of life of the workforce and provide a living wage for workers to live and raise healthy families in this city. We urge NYC to invest in the workforce, which is predominantly women of color serving mainly women and children of color. Workforce investments through pay parity, living wages, professional development, and an annual COLA will have a direct impact on stabilizing the workforce to allow for workers and families to create and sustain therapeutic relationships, leading to better outcomes for children and families.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of workforce enhancements. We welcome the opportunity to continue the conversation with you on these important issues and to be helpful to you. We are available to answer any questions or for any assistance that you might need.

**Sophie Charles, PhD**  
**Associate Executive Director, Downstate**  
**Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies**  
**scharles@cofcca.org**  
**(212) 929-2626, ext. 212**  
**254 West 31 Street, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor**  
**New York, NY 10001**

Source: \*Human Services Council (2021) Essential or Expendable? How Human Services Supported Community Through COVID and recommendations to Support and Equitable Recovery.  
Source: \*Human Services Council (2021) Just Pay Campaign



## CONNECT

127 West 127<sup>th</sup> Street, Rm. 431 New York, NY 10027

P 212-683-0015 • [connect@connectnyc.org](mailto:connect@connectnyc.org)

March 13, 2023

### **Preliminary Budget Hearing: Committee on General Welfare**

Greetings *Committee Chair Council Member Ayala* and members of The Committee on General Welfare. Thank you for your time this morning and for your continued work to make NYC a safer, more equitable city.

My name is Quentin Walcott, Executive Director of CONNECT, a nonprofit organization based in Harlem that works with NYC's communities to prevent interpersonal violence and promote gender justice. CONNECT's mission is to create safe families and peaceful communities by transforming the beliefs, behaviors, and institutions that perpetuate violence.

Gender and race analysis are the foundations of what we do, and informs every program. Domestic violence and intimate partner violence remains a prevalent issue that is neither a private nor only a woman's issue. According to city data, the NYPD responded to 231,763 domestic incident reports (DIRs).<sup>1</sup> Domestic violence homicides increased by nearly 7% in 2021.<sup>2</sup> More than 20% of domestic violence homicides involve a child victim 10 years of age or younger.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, domestic violence has been the number one cause of homelessness in New York City.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that domestic violence and intimate partner violence impacts every aspect of society.

That is why CONNECT was among the first anti-violence organizations in New York City to recruit men as allies in ending violence against women; to engage faith communities with long-term work around domestic violence and child abuse; and to create the first collaborative with the police, hospitals, and advocates to intervene early in the experience of domestic violence. Since our inception 20 years ago, our organization has concentrated its efforts and resources on serving the city's low-income and hard-to-reach populations, in particular women of color and immigrants.

Over the years, CONNECT has developed partnerships with more than 210 community organizations throughout New York City, including libraries, schools, neighborhood-based organizations, task forces, immigrant service providers, hospitals, labor unions, and diverse faith communities. CONNECT's multicultural, multilingual

<sup>1</sup> Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence, ENDGBV 2021 Fact Sheet, 2021, [nyc.gov/assets/ocdv/downloads/pdf/Annual-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf](https://nyc.gov/assets/ocdv/downloads/pdf/Annual-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf), accessed 3/10/23

<sup>2</sup> Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence, New York City Domestic Violence Fatality Review, 2022 Annual Report, p. 3, 2022 [nyc.gov/assets/ocdv/downloads/pdf/2022-Annual-FRC-Report.pdf](https://nyc.gov/assets/ocdv/downloads/pdf/2022-Annual-FRC-Report.pdf), accessed 3/10/23

<sup>3</sup> Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence, New York City Domestic Violence Fatality Review, 2022 Annual Report, p. 5, 2022 [nyc.gov/assets/ocdv/downloads/pdf/2022-Annual-FRC-Report.pdf](https://nyc.gov/assets/ocdv/downloads/pdf/2022-Annual-FRC-Report.pdf), accessed 3/10/23

<sup>4</sup> NYC Comptroller, Housing Survivors: How New York City Can Increase Housing Stability for Survivors of Domestic Violence, 2019, [comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/housing-survivors](https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/housing-survivors), accessed 3/10/23

community educators go to partner sites in underserved and immigrant communities to facilitate women's circles, parenting groups, and support groups.

These partner organizations and coalitions rely on CONNECT for domestic violence and intimate partner violence training, technical assistance, capacity building and advocacy around domestic violence. In fact, many of the city's leading anti-violence organizations have sent staff to be trained at CONNECT, including: Safe Horizon, STEPS To End Family Violence, Sanctuary for Families, Day One, Violence Intervention Program, Children's Aid, Womankind, Women for Afghan Women, Center for Court Innovation, RISE Project, Korean-American Family Service Center, Her Justice, and Legal Aid Society to name a few.

CONNECT's programs provide transformative support, education and training to promote women's, girls' and men's mental health and wellness. Our Women's Circles, Men's Roundtables and Interfaith Roundtables provide safe spaces which foster healing and empowerment, and promote gender justice and equity. Our programs reflect our belief that transformative change must be rooted in the community, collaborative in nature and driven by those who are affected by the issue. We build the capacity of victims and survivors, activists, service professionals and people of faith to create a force-multiplier effect within their neighborhoods and organizations. We have also been exploring and incorporating more restorative justice values and practices into our programs and training and services. To this point, our unique programs address people who are harmed via domestic violence and intimate partner violence, (survivors); those committing the harm; and those impacted by witnessing the harm.

Since it is men who commit the vast majority of intimate partner violence, CONNECT believes men bear a responsibility in preventing and ending intimate partner violence and gender-based violence. As the first NYC organization to include men and boys as allies to prevent and end violence against women and girls, CONNECT moved beyond mainstream work with men as abusive partners. There have since been many similar models adopted by community-based organizations and city initiatives that involve men as allies and look at non-systems-based/non-carceral ways of addressing gender and community violence, i.e. preventative, early-intervention, and community-led solutions. By holding safe spaces for men, as well as community events such as the Annual Father's Day Pledge, CONNECT helps men redefine what manhood means, support and challenge one another, and heal together. We also model meditation practices that men can do on their own.

If you were to ask larger nonprofit organizations and city agencies what CONNECT brings to the table, they would in all likelihood reply "community." While most domestic violence, intimate partner violence and gender violence organizations focus on crisis-based services *after* an incident has occurred, CONNECT strongly believes these risks can be reduced by training and building the capacity of communities and organizations to respond to violence, and collectively develop strategies to address and *prevent* domestic, intimate partner, and gender violence.

CONNECT looks forward to our continued collaboration with the Committee on General Welfare agencies and NYC. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

**New York City Council****Committee on General Welfare****Preliminary Budget Hearing**

March 13, 2023

My name is Jayne Bigelsen, and I am the Vice President of Advocacy at Covenant House New York (CHNY,) where we serve young people experiencing homelessness and human trafficking ages 16 to 24. I would like to thank the New York City Council General Welfare Committee, especially Chair Ayala, for the opportunity to testify today.

CHNY is the nation's largest, non-profit adolescent care agency serving homeless, runaway and trafficked youth. During this past year, CHNY served over 1,600 young people in our programs. Our youth are primarily people of color and over a third of our young people have spent time in the foster care system. A disproportionately high percentage of our youth struggle with the pervasive impacts of trauma, mental health issues, and substance abuse. We provide young people with food, shelter, clothing, medical care, mental health and substance abuse services, legal services, high school equivalency classes and other educational and job-training programs, as well as specialized services for survivors of human trafficking/commercial sexual exploitation. All of these services help young people overcome the trauma of homelessness and abuse and move toward stability, security and a successful future free from exploitation.

**Needs of Migrant Youth/Legal Services**

As we all know, NYC is in the middle of an immigration crisis with thousands of new arrivals from Central and South America. Although there has been much focus on

undocumented families and unaccompanied child migrants, little to no attention has been paid to the plight of young adult migrants between the ages of 18-24, who have unique developmental needs. CHNY noticed an uptick in undocumented young adult immigrants in the Spring of 2022. Those numbers skyrocketed when the Governors of Texas and Florida began sending buses of migrants to Port Authority. CHNY soon became the entry point into the youth shelter and legal services system for these young adults. We have now seen over 70 migrant youth and are currently sheltering over 30.

Almost all of these young people have faced the trauma of starvation, neglect and violence in their home countries. Many have recounted treacherous journeys, including the witnessing of multiple dead bodies on their way to the U.S. It is all of our responsibilities to appropriately welcome these newcomers in a way that helps them heal, rather than increases their trauma.

Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) providers across the city have stepped in to meet the immediate needs of this population, including food, clothing, and shelter, as well as providing medical and mental health care. We now must turn our attention to their long-term needs, of which one of the greatest needs is immigration legal services. Prior to the migrant crisis, CHNY typically only served a handful of youth in need of immigration services and those cases would be referred to outside legal service providers. But the referral pipeline for immigration cases is well beyond capacity with few to no immigration legal service providers in NYC currently accepting new cases. Previous referral sources for immigration legal services have hundreds of people on their waiting lists. As asylum claims must be filed within one year of entering the country, and claims for Special Immigration Juvenile Status must be filed in family court prior to a young person's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, time is of the essence. We cannot in good conscience leave our youth waiting on a list. This has forced our one legal services attorney to transition to almost full-time immigration work thereby causing other legal services cases that we previously would have handled promptly in house to require outside referrals or significantly longer periods of time before resolution. CHNY is especially grateful for the assistance of the City Bar Justice Center who is holding legal clinics with pro bono attorneys for

our immigrant youth and assisting with some of their immigration cases. However, this pro bono assistance only begins to scratch the surface of these young migrants' legal needs. Additional resources are urgently needed to meet the legal services needs of both immigrant and US Citizen youth experiencing homelessness.

### **Translation and Mental Health Care for Migrant Youth**

Our Spanish speaking staff are doing everything they can to help our migrant youth at all hours of the day and night. We now have ongoing Spanish speaking groups for these newcomers where they can process the complex and overlapping traumas from both their home countries and their journeys and adjustment to the US guided by our clinical staff. However, the RHY community needs more Spanish speaking staff as well as onsite English classes. Overall, the RHY system needs dedicated youth immigrant beds and services, especially immigration legal services, and appropriate translation and mental health services. Appropriate resources will enable these young immigrants to reach their full potential so they can both legally stay and thrive in their new country.

### **Human Trafficking**

Due to their undocumented status, migrant youth are at especially high risk for human trafficking. Prior to this migrant crisis, we had already noticed an increase in the number of attempts to lure young people experiencing homelessness into situations involving commercial sexual exploitation. Research has demonstrated that as many as one in five of the young people we serve have had experiences that fit the New York State and federal definitions of human trafficking. The service needs for these young survivors are extensive, and funding is needed to continue our programs that serve both immigrant and domestic survivors so that they can embark on new futures filled with safety, freedom and hope.

### **Right Size DYCD Contracts/COLA increase for Human Service Workers**

DYCD-funded RHY provider contracts continue to fall short of covering the true cost of running these program, and NY City and State continue to underfund social services for vulnerable populations. Sadly, it is the human services workforce that bears the brunt of the

inadequate funding, thereby leaving the average human services employee living at or below the poverty line. It is unconscionable that essential workers with full-time jobs, who jeopardized their own health during a pandemic and continue to show up for our youth despite emotionally demanding positions and limited resources, could be living at the poverty line. Additionally, low and stagnant wages due to insufficient state and city funding cause staff turnover rates in parts of the nonprofit sector that are over 40%. High turnover rates are detrimental to the young people we serve as it is important that our youth develop rapport with the adult staff who act as mentors and guides as they rise out of poverty. Frequent staff changes can disrupt that rapport and make it more difficult for youth experiencing homelessness to leave poverty behind. We are echoing the request by the Coalition for Homeless Youth that all current DYCD-funded crisis and Transitional Independent Living (TIL) Program contracts be increased to the 2019 contract rate of \$50,410, and that a 10% general contract increase be implemented for all current DYCD-funded residential, street-outreach and drop-in center RHY contracts. We are also requesting a 6.5% COLA increase for all frontline human services workers, in line with the ask of the [#JustPay Campaign](#)

I again thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Jayne Bigelsen,  
VP of Advocacy  
Covenant House NY  
[jbigelsen@covenanthouse.org](mailto:jbigelsen@covenanthouse.org)



**Testimony Submitted by  
Iyeshima Harris-Ouedraogo, Policy Manager, Equity Advocates  
For the General Welfare Budget Hearing on the FY24 NYC Budget**

**March 13, 2023**

My name is **Iyeshima Harris-Ouedraogo, Policy Manager, Equity Advocates**. Thank you to Councilwoman Caban for holding today's budget hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Equity Advocates builds the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address the underlying causes of food inequity through policy and systems change. We partner with New York-based organizations working to alleviate hunger and poverty, providing them with the tools they need to be more civically engaged—including policy education, advocacy training and coalition leadership, such as convening the NY Food Policy Alliance since March 2020.

[NYC Food Policy Alliance](#) is a multi-sector group of 75+ food system stakeholders from across New York, including frontline CBOs directly impacted by food insecurity. The Alliance's mission is to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to our current economic and hunger crises, but also address the ongoing vulnerabilities and injustices of the food system. Collectively, we approach this work through an anti-racism lens to ensure communities of color and other systemically under-resourced communities benefit from public policies and funding.

Our city has not fully recovered from the economic, social or public health impacts of the pandemic. Many families are still struggling to make ends meet and our partners are seeing an unprecedented demand for emergency food assistance. Since May of 2020, the unemployment rate in New York City has hovered around twice the national average at around 5.6%. The most recent United States Department of Labor data shows that inflation rose to a record 9.1% in June 2022, the largest gain in nearly four decades, reflecting increased food, shelter, and fuel costs nationwide. In that same time period, 64% of respondents had difficulty paying for usual household expenses<sup>1</sup>. With a national economic recession looming, we are concerned that the poverty rates, inequality and need for food assistance we are already seeing across the city will worsen.

Access to healthy, culturally appropriate food is a continuous issue that New Yorkers face and yet the Mayor is proposing flat funding across the board for critical food assistance programs which will place an increased demand for food on pantries, farmers and supermarkets. We are very concerned with recent reporting that HRA is processing just [46.3% of applications for SNAP benefits](#) and we know agencies are already understaffed due to job vacancies. Funding cuts to HRA and other agencies across the board will only worsen this situation and urge the Administration to reconsider

---

<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau Household Pulse Data Survey results from September 2022.



its proposed cuts to HRA and to more seriously address the vacancy rate at the agency, which is greatly contributing to the slow processing of SNAP applications. We also urge the Administration to ensure any cuts in headcount vacancy for HRA do not impact benefits enrollment and ensure frontline positions are not eliminated.

In our policy recommendations below, we advocate for solutions that will assist with alleviating the burden that is placed on the food systems stakeholders. We support streamlining food assistance applications, investing in community based food businesses as well as urban agriculture and gardening programs, and increasing investment in healthy school food and nutrition education.

We stand in support of the nearly [80 organizations calling for a reduction](#) in the scope and budget of the NYPD. Instead we demand an equitable budget that restores and increases investments in human and social services, education, housing, community food programs. We respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following recommendations in the FY24 New York City Budget:

*Utilizing The Food System As The Catalyst To Build Wealth In Communities*

- **\$4.9 Million for Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative (WCBDI).** We support the [NYC Network of Worker Cooperative](#) in its call for increased funding from \$3.7M to \$4.9M in FY24. This local discretionary initiative funds 15 worker cooperative support organizations that coordinate education and training resources as well as provide technical, legal, and financial assistance for the start-up of new worker cooperative small businesses, and provide assistance to existing cooperatives. We urge that this increase in allocation help put worker cooperative support organizations that prioritize food businesses—such as RiseBoro Community Partnerships' [Worker Coop Development Program](#)—on the path to partnership within WCBDI. This focus on cooperative businesses within the food system will foster local food growers, aggregators, transporters, packagers, cooks, sellers and educators.
- **Create a new Food Justice Fund to allocate \$5 Million in Revolving Loans** that can support worker cooperatives, Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) and other employee-ownership models within the food system. There is a need to fund small and working size ESOPS in zip codes that reflect a high BIPOC demographic. Providing access to capital for employee ownership models in the food systems is a key strategy to build community ownership within the local food system, especially in BIPOC communities that have historically had low rates of business establishment by neighborhood residents. In addition, we recommend exploring ways to de-risk the loan, waive personal guaranties and other requirements that often prevent cooperatives from accessing conventional financing.

- **Partner with and support community food hub models** like Universe City and GrowNYC, and community-owned food retail such as Central Brooklyn Food Coop, to leverage existing and growing community-owned food, health, farming and retail infrastructures. We urge the City to fund these community-led groups to create food security plans and reduce barriers that prevent these types of projects from participating in city procurement contracts. In addition, we ask for the City to work with food hub CBOs to create a food security plan that can provide community wide food access and to establish pathways in the development of community food hubs..
- **Fully Fund the Citywide Community Land Trust Initiative at \$3 million.** We prioritize the notion that moving public land with insecure tenure to trust land will strengthen land security and sovereignty and prioritize access to lands for people who have deep and historic community connections, especially BIPOC farmers, growers and community gardens. Launched in FY2020, the citywide CLT discretionary funding initiative has helped catalyze CLT organizing, education, training and technical assistance. We support the [NYC Community Land Initiative \(NYCCLI\)](#) in its call for full funding to support 20 organizations working to develop and preserve deeply-affordable housing, community and commercial spaces, and advance a just recovery in Black and brown NYC communities. Public land must be used for public good, and be reserved for CLTs that provide for meaningful community control. It is also critical to raise awareness that CLTs can be utilized for commercial urban agriculture. We believe that this embodies the ability to balance local land control and long-term, stewarded development that addresses changing community needs. Supporting both Community-owned businesses and Community-controlled land together is part of an effort to democratize economic development in NYC's food system.
  - We also support the passage of the [Community Land Act](#), an urgently-needed set of bills that give community land trusts (CLTs) and other nonprofits tools to develop and preserve permanently-affordable housing, community and commercial space, and other neighborhood assets.

#### *Urban Agriculture & Youth Development*

- **Allocate funding for the new Office of Urban Agriculture** housed within the Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability (OLTPS) to maintain appropriate levels of staffing and increase transparency about Office goals and activities among the community of urban agriculture practitioners. Use funding to create a position dedicated to ongoing, intentional community engagement to inform the urban agriculture advisory's development of a set of recommendations as outlined in Local Law 123.

- As it is within the Office's duty and power to make recommendations to the "heads of relevant agencies with respect to protecting and expanding urban agriculture," we urge the Office to partner with the Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD) to ensure that interested youth can meaningfully participate at urban agriculture sites through both Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and Work Learn Grow (WLG). The Office of Urban Agriculture can play a leadership role in managing the placement of youth participants at community gardens with the collaboration of local CBOs, expanding participation of local compost operations as worksites, aligning the program timelines to allow for youth participants to be matched with an urban agriculture worksite year-round through both programs.
- **Increase funding to train the next generation of farmers and strengthen viable urban agriculture career pathways for youth** by expanding the DOE's Career and Technical Education program to strengthen its Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources and investing in local training programs with a commitment to social justice such Farm School NYC.
- **Establish a grant program** managed by the NYC Urban Agriculture Office targeted to residents in low income communities to invest in and provide technical assistance to urban agricultural startups and their acquisition of equipment, land and indoor growing space as well as staff.
- **Invest in GreenThumb at \$4.8 Million** to support the hiring of additional Community Engagement Coordinators, creating a permanent full-time Youth Engagement Coordinator position for the current seasonal position, and providing compensation for both youth and community gardeners that take leadership roles within GreenThumb Youth Leadership Council program, which is currently unpaid.
  - Direct the Parks Department to reduce administrative barriers to providing direct stipends from the City to community gardeners and youth to ensure Greenthumb can compensate community gardeners to teach workshops and train youth to run these programs, making existing gardening programming sustainable.
- **Increase opportunities for young people with \$206.5 million in baseline funding for Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and \$20 million in baseline funding for Work Learn Grow (WLG),** the complementary school-year youth workforce program. Mayor Adams has expressed his commitment to investing in the future of urban agriculture, yet current DYCD regulations create a barrier for urban agriculture worksites that would provide meaningful experiences for young people. We urge the DYCD to commit to a reassessment of these programs to ensure successful partnerships with food systems and urban agriculture worksites by:
  - Increasing baseline funding for employer placements and supporting CBOs that are working with DYCD.
  - Advocating for the reallocation of funding for the program to be directed to out of school programs.
  - Ensuring youth interns are placed at their selected work site based on their interests.

- **Maintain \$7 million in funding for NYC Composting programs.** We applaud Mayor Adams for [announcing a roadmap](#) to create the first citywide curbside composting program ever by the end of 2024. These programs are vital to the community because they create local sustainable jobs, reduce landfill waste, gardeners and residents having access to resources in their communities, are eco-friendly and sustainable, and promote community involvement. We want to uplift the support for:
  - Incorporating the NYCHA and public housing in the compost programs initiative to encourage community engagement and divert food waste from landfills.
  - Developing more transparency for accessing foodscap bins so that community members can register for food scraps collect services.
  - Partnering with and increasing funding for local foodscrap hauling CBOs to collect foodscrap from households who are interested in the initiative. Residence should also be provided with the assurance that they can drop off their food waste at local drop off locations in their neighborhoods.
  - We urge the city to prioritize food waste reduction efforts to alleviate the waste management burden on city agencies and CBOs.

#### *Emergency Food & Benefits Access*

- **Increase funding to a total of \$59 Million for the Community Food Connection (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).** The Mayor's preliminary budget proposes baseline funding of \$23.8M plus an additional \$30 million for a total program budget of ~\$52 million. We urge that \$30 million that was allocated for FY23 and FY24 to be baselined as well as a moderate increase for a total of \$59 Million to accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program, rising cost of produce, and continued need, including the continuing influx of asylum seekers and other migrants seeking refuge in New York City.
- **Invest \$38.4 Million of new funding to combat hunger among older adults for home delivered meals programs and congregate meals at older adult centers.**
  - \$6.7M for inflation cost for raw foods, gas and other items for home-delivered meals
  - \$27.1M for inflation cost for raw food and other items for congregate meals at older adult centers
  - \$567k to address the DFTA's home-delivered meal waitlist
  - \$4M to support weekend and holiday home-delivered meals not provided through DFTA, especially as they have not seen an increase in years.
- **Direct the HRA to ensure that any cuts in headcount vacancy do not impact benefits enrollment and frontline positions are not eliminated,** increase wages to help fill critical vacancies and improve internal systems to be more efficient.
- **Increase HRA's budget baseline to ensure it can engage community based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and streamline benefits applications.** We urge the City to increase funding for the agency and CBOs engaged in benefits outreach to meet ongoing demand and improve the administration of critical food benefit programs.

Additional administrative funding should support the SNAP program (run by NYC HRA) to have a joint application with the WIC program (run by NYS DOH). This would be a great first step in implementing Mayor Eric Adams' campaign pledge to create a MyCity applications portal for joint applications.

- **Evaluate the newly relaunched Grocery to Go Program.** This program emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as food assistance for homebound New Yorkers and has since been redesigned to provide food insecure New Yorkers who also have hypertension and/or diabetes with monthly credit to purchase groceries through an online marketplace of local grocery stores. Most participants that were originally participating in the Get Food program will not meet the new requirements for the Groceries to Go Program due to their physical health status.
  - Given the short timeframe in which the allocated funds will need to be spent (by June 2023) and the highly specific eligibility requirements, we are concerned that the DOHMH may not be able to fully enroll 5,000 New Yorkers in time to spend down all of the available funds. To make the program more impactful and ensure unspent credits do not go to waste we strongly recommend: 1) the monthly credits allotted to each participating household are increased to ensure that funds are reaching the individuals that the program is intended to serve, 2) expand the list for diet related conditions to widen the scale of the program, and 3) allow for the participation of young adults who meet the other eligibility criteria.
  - Finally, we encourage the program to allow enrollees to have the freedom to use the credits on food items of their choosing that reflect need, cultural preference, dietary or medical requirements and personal taste. We strongly encourage the DOHMH not to apply additional limitations to eligible foods and to maintain that Grocery to Go credits can purchase SNAP approved items.

*The NYC Food Policy Alliance stands in full support of the NYC Food Ed Coalition's call for quality food and nutrition education for all NYC Students, [including its FY24 City Budget priorities](#):*

- **\$37 million to provide flexible food & nutrition education funding for all NYC schools.**
- **\$3.5 million to increase compensation and head count at the DOE's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS).**
- **Renew \$500,000 in City Council discretionary funding for the Food Ed Hub based within the Tisch Food Center.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Iyeshima Harris- Ouedraogo

Policy Manager at Equity Advocates

[iyeshima@nyequityadvocates.org](mailto:iyeshima@nyequityadvocates.org)



# Family Legal Care

Justice for All. One Family at a Time.

## Testimony to the New York City Council's General Welfare Committee

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
OFFICER**  
Cathy A. Cramer

Monday, March 13, 2023  
Remote Hearing  
Diana Ayala, Chairperson

### **BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**CHAIR**  
Gabriella Nawi

**VICE CHAIRS**  
Abigail Sheehan Davis  
Robert Schiffer

**TREASURER**  
Jane Koltsova

**SECRETARY**  
Nancy Hart

Ellie Becker  
Corey M. Chambliss  
Wendy H. Dessy  
Valerie Farkas  
Dale Goldstein  
Ria Harracksingh  
Anna Klein  
Nonny Onyekweli  
Sheri-Cyd Sandler  
William C. Silverman  
Rebecca J. Simmons  
Susan Warren  
Lisa Zeiderman

**CO-FOUNDERS**  
Leslie Abbey  
Liberty Aldrich  
Karen Simmons

My name is Cathy Cramer and I am the Chief Executive Officer at Family Legal Care, formerly Legal Information for Families Today. Thank you to Chair Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to testify about the issues families with cases in New York Family Court are facing.

On behalf of Family Legal Care, I'd like to thank the New York City Council for its continued support and focus on issues impacting New York's parents and caregivers in Family Court. Without funding from the New York City Council we could not do our vital work to assist families confronting issues at the heart of their well-being, including child support, custody and visitation, and domestic violence.

Family Legal Care's mission is to increase access to justice in New York State Family Court. We combine legal guidance, easy-to-access technology, and compassionate support to help unrepresented parents and caregivers self-advocate on critical family law issues, while working on reform that improves the system for everyone. We reach approximately 25,000 individuals throughout the state every year through our Family Law Helpline, legal consultations with both Family Legal Care staff and pro bono attorneys, community outreach workshops, Tech Hubs and digital justice tools, and our Legal Resource Guide library.

Our organization was launched inside the Manhattan Family Courthouse in 1996, where we answered questions and distributed Know Your Rights pamphlets from a table in the lobby. Today, we are the only legal services organization dedicated solely to empowering parents and caregivers to represent themselves in New York Family Court.

Our model of providing limited scope legal services is unique: we have found that when we help pro se litigants get started on the right track, and provide additional support as needed throughout their case, they are able to achieve positive outcomes for their families without full

representation. In this way, we maximize the number of clients we can serve, both broadening and deepening our impact.

The New York City Family Courts have been under-resourced and overburdened for decades, and 80% of litigants come to Family Court without a lawyer. These unrepresented litigants are disproportionately low-income, from communities of color, often undocumented immigrants, or speak monolingual Spanish or some other language. Because the family courts are understaffed, there is a justice gap for many of the litigants. Organizations like Family Legal Care and others have worked closely with the Court to close this justice gap, but serious issues remain even as we have moved from the crisis response of the pandemic into navigating a new normal of hybrid court proceedings.

Currently, most hearings and trials for the unrepresented litigants we serve are happening virtually. For the litigants who have access to technology, this is a positive change. They no longer have to take a day off work, secure childcare, and spend hours traveling to and waiting in a courthouse. But what about the many parents and caregivers whose only access to Wi-Fi is at their closest library or subway station?

Family Legal Care developed the Tech Hub Program and Digital Justice Initiative to increase access to the hybrid courts. Digital Justice has two components: 1) access to hardware, and 2) access to software and information. Family Legal Care works to address both of these concerns.

At our Tech Hubs, we have all the computer equipment an unrepresented litigant will need to attend their virtual hearing or submit documents related to their cases. We have also created digital justice tools to help them navigate the Family Court system. Our Family Law Navigator helps litigants understand which forms they need for their specific situation, and our Guided Court Forms make it easy to fill out this paperwork. By providing a safe, quiet space with computer equipment and a stable internet connection, we are able to increase access to the Courts for litigants who have nowhere else to turn.

The communities with the fewest resources, a disproportionate number of whom identify as people of color, are bearing the brunt of the Court's systemic failures. The Court's decisions touch the lives of thousands of children and families with profound, long-lasting effects on their safety, economic security, health, and well-being. The demand for free, expert legal advice has never been greater, continues to grow, and Family Legal Care is the only organization in New York City filling this need.

The City Council provides Family Legal Care with core funding that is essential to us being able to serve over 25,000 people every year. Strong families are

essential to the welfare of our great city and we believe we have a big impact in this unique space through Family Court. With ongoing deep support from the City Council, Family Legal Care can be part of the solution. Now is not the time to cut back – we need to look toward the future.

Thank you for the time and continued support.

With gratitude,



Cathy A. Cramer  
Chief Executive Officer



Send to: [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov)

Testimony of Good Shepherd Services  
Before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare

Submitted by  
**Nickesha Francis, Policy and Advocacy Manager**  
Good Shepherd Services

March 13, 2023

**Thank you, Chair Ayala and the Committee on General Welfare for the opportunity to testify on Mayor Adams' Preliminary Budget as it relates to the New York City Administration for Children Services (ACS) and the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS).**

**My name is Nickesha Francis and I am the Policy and Advocacy Manager at Good Shepherd Services.**

Guided by social and racial justice, Good Shepherd Services (GSS) partners and grows with communities so that all NYC children, youth, and families succeed and thrive. We provide quality, effective services that deepen connections between family members, within schools, and among neighbors. We work closely with community leaders to advocate, both locally and nationally, on behalf of our participants to make New York City a better place to live and work.

Good Shepherd Services is a provider of residential Foster Care, Family Treatment Foster Care, Prevention, Close to Home, Fair Futures and the Family Enrichment Center model.

My verbal testimony will focus on the need to address the ongoing workforce crisis severely impacting the human services sector and specifically, child welfare agencies and our call for greater investments to create salary parity with ACS positions.

Child Welfare agencies are experiencing a staffing crisis and reporting a turnover rate of 49% for frontline staff and 24% for caseworkers across the state. For Good Shepherd Services, our overall turnover rate for FY 21 was 27.09% and in FY 22 it increased to 49%. As a City, we should be concerned about these rates as high turnover rates negatively impact outcomes for children and youth and especially, for youth in care.

As the ACS Commissioner mentioned, they are hiring additional staff. In fact, their [latest](#) Youth Development Specialist job posting, has a starting salary of \$47,393 and after 5 years that increases up to \$60,031 along with a \$2,500 sign on bonus. As Chair Ayala mentioned, non-Profits cannot compete with these offers because our contracts

will not allow us to pay annual increases or bonuses. While we have seen workforce investments in the past two budgets, Mayor Adams' preliminary budget omitted a COLA all together. This is why the Human Services Council is asking for the Administration and Council to negotiate a budget that includes a 6.5% Cost of Living Adjustment. I would go further and call for salary parity now. It is time for providers across NYC to be able to pay living wages to staff that are equal to the salary compensation and benefits available to City workers.

I implore the council to support the desperate need for the infusion of funding to raise salaries for the current workforce to provide equitable and competitive salary parity with the public sector, thus allowing programs to attract diverse, highly educated and trained candidates, to reap enormous benefits for the children, youth and families served.

### CityFHEPS

Lastly, Good Shepherds continues to advocate to expand CityFHEPS eligibility for runaway and homeless youth (RHY) and youth transitioning out of foster care by counting their time spent in Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) programs and the Administration of Children Services (ACS) programs toward the 90-day. The City's adult shelter system is overwhelmed with a record number of homeless individuals entering shelter so to require vulnerable youth to enter the adult homeless shelter system to access a voucher the law already states they are eligible for, is unacceptable. I urge the Council to ensure youth in need of these vouchers can access them without any further delay.

**Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.**



**Testimony:** Amy Barasch, Executive Director

**Hearing:** City Council Budget and Oversight Hearings on The Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2024

**Host:** Committee on Immigration

**Date:** March 13, 2023

Thank you, Chair Hanif and the Committee on Immigration, – Council Member Ayala, Council Member Riley, Council Member Stevens, Council Member Ung, Council Member Caban, Council Member Williams, Council Member Lee, Council Member Restler, Council Member Hudson and Council Member Osséf for the opportunity to submit testimony on this critical matter. I am Amy Barasch, the Executive Director of Her Justice, a nonprofit organization that has stood with women living in poverty in New York City for 30 years. In 2022, Her Justice provided a range of legal help to more than 5,300 women and children in our practice areas of family, matrimonial and immigration law. Among the clients served, 92% are women of color, 83% are survivors of domestic violence and more than half are immigrants. Over a third of our clients do not speak English, which means they are effectively precluded from the legal system if language resources are not available.

Support from the City Council helps Her Justice to provide direct representation and skilled advocacy in an arena that often fails to adequately serve the legal needs of the marginalized. The pandemic exposed the access-to-justice gap in new ways. Legal services are essential services, including in times of crisis. Every day, our staff attorneys provide women with information about the legal remedies available to them and advise and strategize with clients to help them weigh their options and decide the course that is right for them and their children.

We are deeply grateful to the Committee for hosting a hearing on this important topic. The SAVE, DoVE, and Speaker's Initiative funding we have received in the past has allowed us to provide critical legal services to low-income survivors of domestic violence and low-income immigrant women in New York City. We hope the City Council will reaffirm and enhance resources to survivors and recognize legal services as essential to ensuring their economic well-being and safety. We look forward to partnering with the Committee and City Council to build a better system that supports women living in poverty because, even in the best of times, the cards are stacked against them.

### **Organizational Background**

Through our pro bono first model, Her Justice pairs thousands of well-trained and resourced pro bono attorneys from the City's premiere law firms with women who have urgent legal needs. This approach has enabled us to assist tens of thousands of women over the years, far more than we could have reached relying exclusively on direct service. By ensuring that more women have lawyers by their side in a system historically designed to have poor people navigate it alone, we ensure their voices and concerns are heard and we begin to break down systemic barriers to access to justice.

Her Justice offers information, advice, brief services and full representation in support, custody and visitation, and order of protection matters in Family Court; divorces in Supreme Court; and immigration matters under the Violence Against Women Act in Federal proceedings. We offer representation for many of the cases other legal



services organizations do not have the bandwidth to take on – child and spousal support matters, and litigated divorces, for example. Our staff responds to half of the women who contact us with a broad array of legal advice, review of papers, and tools to ensure they get the best outcomes they can on their own. The other half of the women who contact us receive free full representation on their case for as long as it takes. The remainder of cases are handled in-house to ensure that we retain the necessary flexibility to respond to emergency situations, navigate particularly complex or lengthy legal issues, and stay fully engaged in the legal issues on which we train and provide support. During the long pendency of cases, Her Justice lawyers and the pro bono attorneys who provide representation continue to work with clients and stabilize the cases.

### **Outreach**

City Council funding supports the critical legal services Her Justice provides to women living in poverty in all five boroughs of New York City. Her Justice also collaborates with organizations assisting underserved communities throughout New York City and has developed a three-pronged strategy for targeted, culturally sensitive community outreach. Her Justice provides: informational and know-your-rights presentations for women in their communities; direct legal services for clients of community-based organizations; and capacity-building trainings in family, matrimonial and immigration law for direct service staff and volunteers at small, community-based not-for-profit agencies that do not have lawyers on staff or do not have the capacity or expertise to provide the legal services their clients need.

These comprehensive trainings provide community advocates with the resources to understand the legal system, their clients' rights and the remedies available, so that they can more effectively advocate on their clients' behalf. By enhancing the capacity of community-based organizations, Her Justice further leverages its small staff, providing increased access to justice. Our outreach strategies reduce barriers to access and ensure that women living in poverty in New York City are knowledgeable about their legal rights and the remedies available to them so that they can obtain economic security for themselves and their children. The women Her Justice serves attain quality legal assistance to achieve freedom from abuse for themselves and their children and economic independence.

### **Policy Platform**

We believe that the client-centered services we provide must also be paired with policy work – through independent efforts and in partnership with peer organizations and coalitions – to advance systemic reform while meeting individual need. Advocating for policy reform in the civil justice system is a key component of any effort to lift women and their children out of poverty. The principle of our policy work is that it is informed by the lived experience of our clients – women living in poverty, whose livelihood and well-being are often determined by the civil justice system. That civil justice system is often invisible to those outside of it, which makes a focus on elevating the reforms to this area that much more essential for our clients and all who depend on it. Through this framework, we begin to break down systemic barriers that are built into our civil justice system, barriers that reinforce and exacerbate economic, gender and racial imbalances. As a trusted, long-standing organization, Her Justice seeks to elevate the issue of civil justice reform and advance economic justice for women and their children.



Child support is a key priority for Her Justice in our direct services for individual clients and in our policy reform efforts. We believe that the fairness and efficiency of the child support system should be improved to ensure that children receive the most support parents can afford. With almost all parents in New York navigating child support cases without legal representation, parents deserve greater choice in how they resolve child support in court.

Her Justice recently drafted proposed legislation, which was introduced by NYS Senator Roxanne J. Persaud (S.5269), that would authorize the development of an expedited settlement conference process in New York Family Court for parents whose income is straightforward or undisputed to agree on support in an expedited settlement conference process rather than litigate in court. For parents who choose to engage in the expedited conference option, the legislation directs that court conference staff would provide parents with certain notices to ensure that they understand the settlement conference process, their related rights, and the implications of reaching agreement on child support. Importantly, the proposed settlement conference would preserve due process protections for parents – providing court review and confirmation of any agreement reached and, for parents who do not agree on support, the option of a full hearing in Family Court. Further, the proposal includes accountability measures that direct the Office of Court Administration to evaluate the expedited conference process and make publicly available data about the effectiveness and impact of the conference option, helping to ensure that the courts are achieving their mission to deliver Family Court justice fairly and expeditiously while protecting the due process rights of litigants.

Her Justice is committed to providing legal representation in Family Court where it is most needed – for example, to parents who must utilize legal discovery mechanisms to determine income available for child support or to families with multiple cases pending simultaneously such as child support and custody or orders of protection. In those cases, our clients need more time before support magistrates during court appearances, with shorter adjournments between court dates, so that affordable child support orders can be established and support can be delivered to children more quickly. We strongly believe that if straightforward cases between parents who want to reach agreement on support are resolved through an expedited process, the courts will be able to dedicate urgently needed time and resources to complicated child support cases. The proposed solution will critically provide more resources to the Family Courts and will benefit all families in the child support system, getting support to children more quickly.

Respectfully,

Amy Barasch, Esq.

Executive Director, Her Justice  
abarasch@herjustice.org



## **TESTIMONY**

New York City Council Committee on General Welfare  
Fiscal Year 2024 Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 13, 2023

Submitted by:  
Gloria Kim  
Senior Policy Analyst  
Human Services Council of New York

### **Introduction**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Ayala, and members of the New York City Council General Welfare Committee. My name is Gloria Kim, and I am the Senior Policy Analyst of the Human Services Council, a membership organization representing over 170 human services providers in New York City. HSC serves our membership as a coordinating body, advocate, and an intermediary between the human services sector and government. We take on this work so our members can focus on running their organizations and providing direct support to New Yorkers. These are the nonprofits that support our city's children, seniors, those experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities, individuals who are incarcerated or otherwise involved in the justice system, immigrants, and individuals coping with substance abuse and other mental health and behavioral challenges. We strive to help our members better serve their clients by addressing matters such as government procurement practices, disaster preparedness and recovery, government funding, and public policies that impact the sector.

### **Support Human Services Workers with a 6.5% COLA**

We thank the City Council for the \$60 million workforce investment in the FY23 budget, which demonstrates the importance of compensating frontline workers who have been essential during the pandemic and for the recovery of New York. However, the workforce investment is not a true cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) and is less than the 4% that the City Council has stated the investment represented. There were also issues of implementing this investment as providers waited months to receive the funding to distribute to their staff. Thus, we ask that you include a 6.5% COLA in the budget to be included in every City-contracted human services contract to show your commitment to the sector.

Nonprofit human services organizations have played a critical and longstanding role in building and supporting the wellbeing of New Yorkers. They train and help keep workers in good jobs, help with insurance and benefits enrollment, provide transportation for those with mobility issues, shelter people experiencing homelessness, among many other community services. The collective services provided by human services nonprofits make the difference between success and failure for countless individuals and families. However, nonprofits operate on shoestring budgets and are often expected to offer more than they are reimbursed for.

As you know, the City reached a tentative multi-year agreement with DC37 to provide raises, which is great for those workers and for New York, but misses that there is another sector that government is the predominate funder of that also needs investment.

Government is not just the predominant funder of human services, but is also the main driver of human services salaries, and either directly sets salary rates on contracts or does so indirectly by establishing costs for a unit of service along with required staffing on a contract. Government contracting practices have created an intolerable situation of extreme pay disparities where human services workers make on average 71% of what government employees make, and 82% of what private sector workers receive. With the threat to sustainability and deficiency of resources, the sector faces recruitment and retention issues impacting the overall viability of organizations and program services. **A 6.5% COLA on the personal services line of all City-funded human services contracts is needed in the FY24 budget to ensure this vital workforce does not slip further into poverty.**

### **Mission-Driven Organizations**

During the pandemic, human services workers were at the frontline risking their lives to support their communities and faced increased need for services even when they did not have the resources to do so. Currently, providers are serving people seeking asylum and other reasons for migration in which 96% of organizations consulted by HSC reported providing services to people seeking asylum entirely or partially out of pocket. Forty percent reported that a government entity (predominantly Mayoral offices and City agencies) asked them to provide services for people seeking asylum. Less than 13% reported that complete governmental funding was offered for these partnerships (with 80% of funds offered as reimbursements). Providers are over capacity and straining to meet existing needs, especially after prior enforcement policies, concurrent COVID-19 recovery, and overall migration trends. And yet, human services organizations continue to help the City try to meet the reputation its leaders boast: a sanctuary for oppressed people here and abroad.

### **Conclusion**

Systematic underinvestment in nonprofits is not an accident. Veterans of the sector strongly believe human services organizations are devalued because of who they serve and who they employ. The City and State budgets are balanced on the backs of low-income neighborhoods and BIPOC communities who get reduced services, and a workforce that is predominantly made up of women and people of color who are paid poverty-level wages due to insufficient contract funding. The lack of COLAs and livable wages for workers not only disadvantages communities who rely on these workers for lifesaving services but represents a critical and overlooked economic equity issue. A 6.5% COLA on the personal services line of all City-funded human services contracts is needed in the FY24 budget to support the sector to continue to provide lifesaving services to all New Yorkers.

We look forward to continuing our work with the City Council and ask that you support the [#JustPay campaign](#) and include a 6.5% COLA to fairly pay the low-wage workers the City relies on, who are predominantly women and people of color, to keep these programs running and uplift communities.

Thank you for your continued support and providing me with this opportunity to testify about the state of human services workers.

Gloria Kim, Senior Policy Analyst  
Human Services Council of NY  
(212) 584-3385 / [king@humanservicescouncil.org](mailto:king@humanservicescouncil.org)





## HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED

307 W. 38TH STREET, 3RD FLOOR  
NEW YORK, NY 10018  
T 212-367-1589  
www.HSUnited.org

### Homeless Services United's Testimony Before

#### The NYC Committee on General Welfare on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023 on the NYC FY24 DSS Budget

My name is Eric Lee and I'm the director of policy and planning at Homeless Services United. Homeless Services United (HSU) is a coalition representing mission-driven, homeless service providers in New York City. HSU advocates for expansion of affordable housing and prevention services and for immediate access to safe, decent, emergency and transitional housing, outreach and drop-in services for homeless New Yorkers. Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee for allowing me to testify today.

HSU is grateful to Speaker Adams and Deputy Speaker Ayala and members of the City Council for your steadfast commitment to preserving the human services safety net ensuring that New Yorkers in need can access public benefits, emergency housing assistance, and shelter when in crisis. Staffing vacancies, both at City agencies and City-contracted nonprofit providers have negatively impacted services. The City must do better to address the totality of needs of New Yorkers in crisis and ensure timely access to shelter, public benefits and rental assistance.

**The number one need for the homeless services safety net is comprehensive wage reform for all City-contracted human services workers. The City must establish wage parity with City employees and provide a 6.5% COLA for all City contracted human services staff. Nonprofit workers deserve a COLA equivalent to the collective bargaining agreements secured by City Workers; a 6.5% increase this year will help catch nonprofit staff up to their municipal counterparts, the City should further commit to comparable signing bonuses, and additional increases in subsequent years to match those that similar workers are receiving. City contracted non-profit staff deserve equal pay for equal work and we welcome the Council's support in advancing systemic reform to how salaries in City contracts are set to achieve it.** As the administration testified, HRA and DHS are facing significant challenges closing vacancies at their agencies due to the labor markets. As CM Osse noted, HRA Case Worker starting salaries are too low, paying forty-two to forty-seven thousand dollars. But wages for human services City contracts pay a *fraction* of what municipal workers earn. DHS-contracted case manager positions top out at thirty-five thousand dollars, *ten to fifteen thousand less* than municipal employees, placing non-profit city-contracted providers at a competitive disadvantage to City agencies in an already tough labor market. Providers will continue to struggle to fill and retain staff unless and until wages reach parity with equivalent positions at City agencies and clients will continue to suffer since there will still be too few hands to do the work. If the City continues to underpay the human services workforce, shelters, street outreach, and Homebase programs will continue to struggle to retain qualified staff and close vacancies for critical frontline positions like housing specialists, shelter and eviction prevention case managers, and street outreach specialists.

**The next critical priority is to stem the tide of people entering shelter by shoring up homeless prevention services. To address the increased number of households at imminent risk of eviction, we urge the City to commit \$90 million for Homebase providers, from its allotment of federal HOME ARP funding, to increase wages to close vacancies and retain experienced staff, as well as expand their overall headcount to increase their capacity to serve their communities.** Providers report struggling

with record high turnover and vacancy rates. One provider experienced 52% turnover within one calendar year! As vacancies in programs increase, caseloads climb for the remaining staff, which is a major factor contributing to burnout and further turnover. Without rightsizing wages and regular COLAs, AND expanding headcounts, Homebase providers will continue to be under-resourced to meet the current demand for assistance. While Homebase providers have accruals in their personnel lines due to vacancies, they are unable to fill those positions at current salary levels. Homebase providers need the flexibility to reallocate accruals to increase wage levels to be able to attract and retain staff, and we welcome the Council's support in encouraging the agency to grant providers that budget flexibility.

**To better serve households at less imminent risk of eviction to resolve their housing instability, we propose that HRA create a new RFP for CBOs to offer in-community rental assistance applications and housing search services paired with "undercare" services for Public Assistance maintenance.** Given the spike eviction cases but flat funding for Homebase programs, Homebase staff must prioritize the most urgent cases at imminent risk of eviction. This means that less urgent cases must wait longer for appointments to have their housing situation addressed. Establishing separate programs, similar to the old FHEPS CBO contracts, will enable greater access to in-community rental assistance services to upstream prevention efforts to assist households in resolving their housing instability prior to needing Homebase or Universal Access to Counsel services.

**We also ask the Council to ensure the FY24 budget contains sufficient funding to carry out the legislative mandates championed by the Council, including prevailing wage requirements (Int. 2006-2020) and training (Int 1995-2020) for DHS shelter security given the expansion of the shelter system to assist asylum seekers, and funding to offer competitive salaries to hire mental health professionals for DHS family shelters (Int. 522-2022).** While more comprehensive workforce investments like the creation of a comprehensive human services wage ladder will take time, it is important to ensure sufficient funding is included in the FY24 budget to enable shelter providers to comply with the legal mandates established by the Council. It is especially important that family shelter providers be able to offer competitive salaries for newly mandated mental health professionals comparable to other sectors like hospitals and clinics to ensure shelters can attract and fill these new positions.

**There are also budget neutral ways the City could better support the fiscal health of the nonprofit sector, enabling us to operate more effectively. We so ask for the Council's support in urging DSS to adopt policies which provide DHS and HRA providers the needed flexibility to address immediate program needs to preserve the fiscal health of the organization.** While DHS and HRA contracted providers have significant accruals from underspending in personnel lines due to vacancies, providers are often prevented by DSS from redeploying those funds to close gaps within the program, such as using unspent wages from vacant positions to increase the salaries of existing staff or increasing starting pay for positions which must be filled quickly. In addition, providers are experiencing increases to their OTPS budget lines, including increases to food costs and insurance premiums that these accruals could help cover. Because of the rigidity at the contracting agency level, providers are often prevented from actively managing available funds to bridge these gaps with existing City funds.

**DSS policy recommendations the Council could support to improve the fiscal health of non-profit providers include:**

- Enabling providers more flexibility to reallocate unspent funding from vacant positions to close programmatic gaps including enhancing the wages of existing staff or high priority vacant positions, as well as covering increases to OTPS costs (e.g., rising food costs and insurance premiums).
- Moving to a consolidated fiscal reporting model to allow providers to modify budgets across programs to meet the needs on the ground.
- Streamline the approval process (65a) for subcontractors to remove redundancies while maintaining oversight.
- Allow providers to establish composite fringe rates across their program portfolio to accurately reflect and draw down funding to support the cost of providing benefits for staff.
- Allow providers to bill indirect rates based off their budgets instead of a percentage of actual spending to preserve the non-profit's infrastructure and avoid frivolous spenddowns.
- Increase contract advancements from 25% to 50% of the budgeted contract while pushing recoupment from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> fiscal Quarter, to further blunt the effects of contract registration and invoicing delays on providers.

**Finally, we request the Council support increases to the HRA headcount to ensure timely access to public benefits and rental assistance.**

As the administration testified, HRA has seen a tremendous spike in the number of households applying for Public Assistance Benefits, Cash Assistance, Rental Assistance, and SNAP benefits as a result of the pandemic. While the administration testified to processing a record number of SNAP and Cash Assistance requests, staffing levels at HRA have not increased proportionate to the need. We suspect that HRA is currently relying on internal redeployments and overtime to manage the crushing workload, as providers recount receiving approvals for rental assistance at all hours of the night and even on weekends. We applaud the commitment and dedication of HRA's frontline workers to rise to the growing challenge, but ultimately **HRA must be resourced to staff up frontline staff proportionate to the need to bring caseloads back to sustainable levels.**

Currently, eviction prevention providers report diminished responsiveness of staff at HRA Public Benefits Access Centers resulting in delays accessing Public Assistance (PA) and PA budgets for rental assistance, being unable to apply for or resolve issues with State FHEPS, delays manually adding uploaded client documentation to their PA or Cash Assistance case (CA) which could result in their application being denied, and inability to receive a Public Assistance telephone interview in a timely manner. **"Failure to Keep/Complete Interview: No Schedule Appointment" was the number one reason why HRA rejected Cash Assistance cases, with 17,557 out of 50,917 total rejections through June 2022 citing that as the reason<sup>1</sup>!**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/news/11168-170/fy22q4/2022-Apr-Jun-CA-4-Case-Rejections-by-Council-District.pdf>



#### HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED

307 W. 38TH STREET, 3RD FLOOR  
NEW YORK, NY 10018  
T 212-367-1589  
[www.HSUnited.org](http://www.HSUnited.org)

**Just as SNAP cases now have on-demand functionality via telephones, HRA's FIA unit should be budgeted to hire sufficient interviewers to allow for on-demand PA telephone interviews,** as delays for PA interviews creates a bottleneck for opening PA and CA cases and indirectly delays the processing of a CityFHEPS or FHEPS rental assistance voucher.

Homebase Providers also report that in-community CityFHEPS applications are now taking more than 30 days *just to be reviewed* (i.e., this does not include the time it takes to cut checks if approved).

Homebases are also seeing 4-to-5-month delays at HRA processing CityFHEPS renewals paperwork resulting in the voucher expiring through no fault of the tenant, as well as delays processing landlord's annual rent increases for CityFHEPS units, leading to tenants needlessly falling into arrears. **The HRA Rental Assistance Program (RAP) unit must be adequately staffed to work through the backlog of renewals and submitted CityFHEPS applications, as well as current volumes of submissions, and possible expansions of CityFHEPS eligibility.**

Through key workforce investments to value the work of non-profit and City human services workers, reforming DSS fiscal policies to allow non-profit providers to close immediate funding gaps, the City can shore up the homeless and human services safety net. Our sector has been sorely tested by long-standing deficiencies of City Human Services contracts and disruptive fiscal policies and practices but, through stronger collaboration and investments in the non-profit organizations underpinning the City's ability to provide critical services and shelter to both new and lifelong New Yorkers, we will ensure a bright path forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and if you have any questions, please contact me at [elee@hsunited.org](mailto:elee@hsunited.org).



2023 Hearing of the NYC Council Committee on General  
Welfare - Fiscal 2024 Preliminary Budget  
March 13, 2023  
Testimony of Emilio Tavaréz, MSW,  
Director of Advocacy, Policy, and Research  
Hunger Free America

Good day. I am Emilio Tavaréz, the Director of Advocacy, Policy, and Research for Hunger Free America, a nonprofit direct service and advocacy organization which works citywide and has offices in the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan. I am honored to testify today on behalf of the approximately 1.2 million city residents who now struggle against hunger. Hunger in New York City is soaring again in all five boroughs of New York City for four reasons:

1. The pandemic's negative impact upon the City's economy has yet been fully reversed. For instance, the unemployment rate in The Bronx in January 2023 was still 7 %
2. The federal government recently slashed SNAP (food stamps benefits) for most of the 1.8 million low-income New Yorkers who rely upon them.
3. The most recent influx of migrants into this City desperately need food assistance.
4. NYC HRA is routinely violating federal law by delaying the processing of SNAP benefits beyond the required 30 days.
5. Still-high inflation rates not only make it harder for struggling New Yorkers to afford enough food, but also makes it harder for frugal non-profit groups like Hunger Free America to pay for our excellent staff and necessary rent.

We need a massive response from the City that goes way beyond merely nominally increasing funding for emergency food distributions. The most impactful and cost-effective way for the City to fight hunger is to increase participation in the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamps Program). Doing so would dwarf any other effort. If current caseloads and benefits levels stay stable, federal SNAP spending in New York City over the next year would be billions of dollars, many orders of magnitude greater than the funds that the City Council previously allocated to emergency food programs through EFAP and P-FRED. If the City did more to work with nonprofit groups on SNAP outreach and

access, and was able to raise the SNAP caseload and SNAP spending by merely five percent, that would equal hundreds of million in extra federal spending on food relief.

It is important to note that, not only is every penny of SNAP benefits paid for by the federal government, but any City money also spent on approved SNAP outreach and enrollment activities – including money sub-granted to nonprofit groups for such purposes – is matched 100 percent by the federal government, through the State. For all those reasons, the most cost-effective way for the City to reduce hunger – by far – is to fund efforts to increase enrollment in SNAP and other federally funded nutrition benefits. For example, **every City dollar that Hunger Free America spends on SNAP outreach work generates at least \$60 in federal benefits that fill the grocery carts of struggling new Yorkers.**

### **Background on The Current State of Hunger In New York City**

Hunger estimates at the borough-level are calculated using three-year averages from the USDA's data in order to increase accuracy due to small sample sizes. According to raw USDA data analyzed by Hunger Free America, across New York City, 14.5% of the population, or 1.2 million people, lived in food insecure households between 2019 and 2021. Staten Island is New York City's hungriest borough in terms of prevalence, with 23.2% of residents (120,672 people) living in food insecure households, **but every borough continued to have a serious hunger problem.**

Brooklyn contains the highest number of individuals living in food insecure households, reaching 376,201 people between 2019 and 2021. Trends in hunger between 2016-2018 and 2019-2021 mainly showed an increase in the rate of hunger across the boroughs, except for the Bronx. The rate of food insecure individuals was the same as pre-recession levels of 14.5% between 2006- 2008. One out of every five children (20.2%) in New York City experiences food insecurity, while more than one quarter (28.7%) of children in the Bronx are food insecure. Food insecurity among employed adults increased in nearly every borough, when comparing 2019-21 to 2016-18 levels. The number of food insecure older New York City residents increased to 215,188 between 2019 and 2021.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Census Bureau launched the Household Pulse Survey (HPS) to collect timely data on household experiences during the pandemic. The HPS measures food sufficiency, which is not directly comparable to the USDA's food security measurement due to different methodologies, response rates, and time periods covered. The number of New York State residents without enough food over one seven-day period was 34.6% higher in October of 2022 than in October of 2021. This was slightly higher than the 29.6% increase nationwide. Hunger Free America attributes that surge to the expiration of the expanded Child Tax Credits and universal school meals, coupled with the impact of inflation.

### **Number of People without Enough to Eat, October 2021 vs October 2022** **Changes in Food Insecure Individuals from 2019 to 2020**

	October 2021	October 2022	Percentage Change
National	19,859,009	25,734,272	+29%

New York State	1,171, 123	1,576,641	+34.6%
New York City Metropolitan Area*	1,218,736	1,641,037	+34.7%

*\*The NYC Metro Area includes parts of NJ, CT, and PA*

Citywide in New York, in a Hunger Free America survey, more than a quarter of respondents (29.9%) said they did not distribute enough food to meet current demand. Nearly three-fourths of respondents (73.1%) said they served more people in 2022 than in 2021.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of City residents eligible for federally funded benefits do not receive them. The best under-participation estimates that we have for SNAP that are official are old (for 2018, pre-pandemic). For technical reasons I would be glad to discuss, I think USDA's estimates, even in 2018, undercounted those who are eligible but did not then receive SNAP. But even if USDA's numbers were correct, that still meant that 1-10 people overall, 25 percent of working people, and 30 percent of older New York State residents who were eligible for SNAP did not get it. Given the huge spike in unemployment since then, those numbers are surely far higher now. The percentages are likely even higher for the City than the state as a whole.

As for federally funded WIC benefits (for pregnant women and children under five), also in 2018, USDA estimated that whopping 39% of the pregnant women and children under five eligible for WIC statewide did not get it. Unlike SNAP, WIC has no immigration restrictions in the program and has slightly higher income eligibility than SNAP, so this under-participation in WIC is especially harmful. The percentages are likely even higher for the City than the state as a whole.

#### **Steps the City Council Should Take to Better Fight Hunger:**

- **Increase funding for the NYC Benefits initiative.** As detailed above, every City dollar spent on SNAP outreach can generate up to \$60 in federal SNAP benefits.
- **Prompt the Adams Administration to accelerate roll-out, and ensure effective operations, of the MyCity applications portal for joint applications.** This would help reduce HRA processing delays. This system should include WIC benefits for pregnant people and children under five, even though WIC is run by the State, not the City
- **Urge the state to raise the minimum wage, index it to inflation, and end the sub-minimum wage for tipped food service workers.** Currently, workers in the food service industry in the City are guaranteed minimum wages of between \$10 to \$12.50 per hour. When tips do not provide much more than that (as they often do not) these workers and their families live in poverty. Because so many workers have left or are leaving the industry because of lessened tips and increased hostility and harassment during the pandemic, hundreds of restaurants in the state are raising wages voluntarily; but those

forward-thinking restaurants say that they are at a disadvantage if they do it alone, which is why they want the state to set a level playing field with the uniform, higher wage. Governor Hochul has the legal ability to unilaterally end this sub-minimum wage, if she does not do so, the state legislature should.

- **Enact and fund a SNAP-like program, to be funded by the City, to give extra grocery funds to immigrants and working poor New Yorkers who are ineligible for federal SNAP benefits.** California recently started such a program: <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-07-13/california-takes-a-nibble-at-offering-food-stamps-to-undocumented-immigrants>
- **Ensure that all classes in all New York City public schools provide either in-classroom school breakfasts or grab and go breakfast in their hallways.** Currently, [New York City has the lowest school breakfast participation rate out of any big city school system in the United States](#), with fully 55.4 percent of kids who get school lunches failing to get school breakfasts.
- **Enact, fund, and implement a government-wide “Assets Empowerment/Middle Class Wealth Generation Agenda” to dramatically increase economic opportunity and mobility by enabling more families to transition from *owing* non-productive debts interest to *owning* assets such as first homes and small businesses.** While extra funding from the Council would be helpful in this regard, the Adams Administration can start much of this work with existing funding.





## TESTIMONY

New York City Council Committee on General Welfare  
FY24 Discretionary Budget Hearing

Delivered by:

Sierra Kraft, Executive Director, ICARE Coalition

March 13, 2023

Good afternoon, it's great to be with you today. Thank you to Chair Ayala and the Committee on General Welfare for inviting testimony. My name is Sierra Kraft, and I am the Executive Director at Immigrant Children Advocates' Relief Effort (ICARE). ICARE is a nonprofit coalition, comprised of seven legal services organization that provides free representation to immigrant children facing deportation in New York City with the ultimate goal of universal access to counsel in the coming years

I first want to take a moment to share our sincere gratitude. Since 2014, support from City Council, through the Unaccompanied Minors and Family Initiative, has made it possible for the ICARE Coalition to stand alongside over 10,000 brave and resilient young immigrants from countries around the world, defend them from deportation, and empower them to become leaders of tomorrow. Legal representation has been truly lifechanging in the lives of many young New Yorkers.

**Having access to an immigration attorney can mean the difference between life and death for immigrant children and families.** Many of the children we represent are escaping extreme violence and trauma in their home country, taking the arduous plight to the U.S. in search of protection, safety, and new opportunities. Without ICARE's representation, most of these children would be forced to represent themselves against a trained government lawyer.



Studies show that children without representation stand just a 15% chance of winning their case, many of whom have a viable form of relief. Loss of access to attorneys can result in the rapid deportation of children and families to countries where their lives are at risk. If they lose their lawyers, they lose their lives.

**Children and families are more vulnerable now than ever – as the migrant crisis intensifies, the need for legal services skyrockets.** In FY2022 alone, Customs and Border Protections arrested over 150,000 unaccompanied minors at the border. New York continues to rank 4<sup>th</sup> in the country for highest number of unaccompanied arrivals released to sponsors. Every year, nearly 2,000 young New Yorkers are placed in removal proceedings facing the possibility of deportation without due process if they cannot afford a lawyer. These children are our friends, neighbors, and our future.

**ICARE attorneys are on the front lines every day protecting immigrants' rights and defending New York values.** ICARE seeks to ensure that quality legal services are offered to *all* children, not only those who are able to afford them. Children represented by ICARE attorneys have more than a 90% success rate. With our support, these young New Yorkers can be given the opportunity to obtain higher education, pursue meaningful careers and step into leadership roles in a city they now call home.

Today, we renew our call for the City to prioritize funding for targeted communities, especially the many unaccompanied minors in New York City, who are reliant on the critical legal services and immigration supports that the ICARE Coalition provides. Funding for coalitions like ours is never guaranteed, but the need for our services is greater than ever. Our request as a coalition this year is \$5.6 million this year so we can continue to serve nearly 2,000 children and families through legal screenings, know-your-rights trainings, direct representation and referrals to city and social services. No child should have to face immigration court alone. Now more than ever, it is critical that NYC Council stand in solidarity with children seeking safety, protection, and a new life in this city.



Thank you again for your tireless efforts to support all New York City's residents, and especially for continuing to champion children and providing lifesaving support so they can thrive and have a bright future. We could not have met the needs of our clients in this time without you. We look forward to our continued partnership with you in ensuring we live our values as a sanctuary city.

In Community,

Sierra Kraft  
Executive Director,  
**ICARE Coalition**  
[skraft@icarecoalition.org](mailto:skraft@icarecoalition.org)



**Testimony of the Article 10 Family Defense Organizations:  
Bronx Defenders, Brooklyn Defender Services, Center for Family Representation, and  
Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem**

**Presented Before**

**The New York City Council Committee on General Welfare  
Fiscal Year 2024 Preliminary Budget Hearing**

**March 13, 2023**

This testimony is submitted jointly by the Bronx Defenders (BxD), Brooklyn Defender Services (BDS), Center for Family Representation (CFR) and the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem (NDS) (collectively the “family defense organizations”). Our offices are the primary providers of mandated legal representation to parents who are eligible for free representation in Article 10 cases filed in family court in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens. Together, we have created a model of interdisciplinary representation for parents charged with neglect or abuse and at risk of family separation. Our model, which provides comprehensive representation to indigent parents through teams of attorneys, social workers and parent advocates, is nationally recognized as the most effective model of representation of its kind.<sup>1</sup> Together, we have prevented thousands of children from needlessly entering and languishing in the foster system and have reduced the foster system census in New York City by almost 50%.<sup>2</sup> This translates to nearly \$40 million in annual savings in foster system expenditures for New York City,<sup>3</sup> and the preservation of family bonds that are priceless to our clients, their children, and society at large. We thank the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony about the critical services our agencies provide to low income New Yorkers and the need to ensure that these services are fully funded to ensure their effectiveness.

The family defense offices have followed the leadership of directly-impacted people and adopted the phrase “family regulation system” or “family policing system” to describe what has traditionally been called the “child welfare system” or the “child protection system,” to reflect the system’s prioritization of and roots in surveillance, punishment, and control rather than

---

<sup>1</sup> See Commission on Parental Legal Representation, Interim Report to Chief Judge DiFiore 27-28 (February 2019); see also Martin Guggenheim & Susan Jacobs, *A New National Movement in Parent Representation*, 47 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 44, 45 (2013), available at <https://cfny.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-New-National-Movement-in-Parent-Representation-Clearinghouse-Review.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Guggenheim and Susan Jacobs, *Providing Parents Multidisciplinary Legal Representation Significantly Reduces Children’s Time in Foster Care*, American Bar Association (June 3, 2019), available at [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/january---december-2019/providing-parents-multidisciplinary-legal-representation-signifi/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/january---december-2019/providing-parents-multidisciplinary-legal-representation-signifi/)

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

genuine assistance to and support of families living in poverty.<sup>4</sup> The primary goal of our work is to provide high quality legal representation to parents in high stake family regulation cases and ameliorate the underlying issues that drive families into this system, such as lack of access to quality health and mental health treatment, basic necessities and appropriate education and services for children with disabilities. We also aim to reduce the harm of the consequences of system involvement, such as criminal charges, housing and income loss, education issues and inability to adjust immigration status. Collectively we represent thousands of parents each year. Since 2007 when New York City first contracted with family defense organizations to represent parents, we have represented more than 43,000 parents in family court, touching the lives of close to 100,000 children, the vast majority of whom are Black and Brown and live in the most marginalized, low-income communities in New York City.

Since fiscal year 2020, we have also provided two critical services to low-income parents, in addition to our mandated representation in court, made possible only with City Council funding of the **Right to Family Advocacy Project** through the Family Advocacy and Guardianship Support Initiative:

- We provide support, guidance, and legal representation to parents during an investigation by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), with the primary goal of preventing family separation and unnecessary family court filings.
- We provide legal representation in administrative proceedings to help parents clear or modify (amend or seal) their Statewide Central Register (SCR) records that result after ACS investigations, thereby preserving and expanding low-income New Yorkers' employment opportunities.

The City Council plays an important role in monitoring the provision of ACS services and in ensuring that the families affected by ACS involvement have legal representation that is adequately funded to achieve positive outcomes for families. This testimony addresses the importance of adequately funding the family defense organizations' provision of legally mandated representation to parents charged with abuse and neglect and adequately funding the City Council's Right to Family Advocacy Project. Specifically,

- **We ask the City Council to demand that an additional \$30 million is earmarked in the FY24 budget for Article 10 legal providers. This is above the \$50 million that is baselined in the current budget.**
- **We ask the City Council to continue supporting the Right to Family Advocacy Project and increase the funding from \$2.6 million to \$3.3 million to increase capacity and address increased costs.**

---

<sup>4</sup> See, Dorothy Roberts, *Abolishing Policing Also Means Abolishing Family Regulation*, The Imprint (June 16, 2020), <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/abolishing-policing-also-means-abolishing-family-regulation/44480>.

## **I. The City Should Adequately Fund Mandated Institutional Representation for Parents in Article 10 Cases.**

The family defense organizations provide an essential service on behalf of the city, fulfilling its legal mandate to provide legal representation in Article 10 cases in family court and related cases to parents who cannot afford to hire an attorney. The model also saves the city millions of dollars by reducing the time children spend in foster placements, shrinks the foster system which disproportionately harms families of color, and provides needed support to families.

### **A. Providing high quality interdisciplinary representation to parents reduces the time children spend in the foster system and is a necessary counterweight to ACS, to protect due process rights and prevent unnecessary family separation.**

In New York, parents charged with abuse or neglect in family court are legally entitled to an attorney if they cannot afford one, both by statute and under the New York State Constitution.<sup>5</sup> In 2007, New York City dramatically changed its parent representation system by offering contracts to multidisciplinary organizations which employ lawyers, social workers, parent advocates, and investigators and have expertise in a wide range of legal matters including housing, public benefits, mental health, criminal justice, educational law, and immigration defense.<sup>6</sup> Since 2007, our offices have represented the vast majority of parents in Article 10 proceedings and all related matters, including interim appeals, custody, visitation, family offense, paternity and Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) proceedings.

Over the last 15 and a half years, our offices have developed family defense practices that serve as a state and national model and have been recognized as the most effective model of representation for parents in family regulation cases.<sup>7</sup> The Commission on Parental Representation, established by Chief Judge DiFiore to examine the state of representation for indigent parents in New York State, issued an interim report in February 2019 following

---

<sup>5</sup> New York has long recognized a parent's right to counsel in child protection proceedings. In a pioneering 1972 decision, *Matter of Ella B.*, 30 N.Y.2d 352, the New York Court of Appeals recognized the equal protection and due process right to indigent parents to assigned counsel in child neglect and abuse cases. Three years later, sections 261, 262, and 1120 of the Family Court Act codified a broad parental right to counsel. Additionally, numerous provisions throughout Article 10 of the Family Court Act address implementation of the parental right to counsel in child welfare proceedings.

<sup>6</sup> Our organizations were created following the findings and recommendations of government agencies regarding the widespread inadequacy of parent representation. As early as 2000, the NYC Public Advocate issued a report "Justice Denied: The Crisis in Legal Representation of Birth Parents in Child Protective Proceedings," detailing the inadequacy of legal representation in Article 10 cases in New York City. In 2006, Chief Judge Judith Kaye's Commission on the Future of Indigent Defense Services found family law representation so lacking that they went out of their way to point it out in a report focusing on criminal defense. The deficiencies for mandated indigent representation included excessive caseloads, insufficient salaries, inadequate office facilities, lack of sufficient funding for training, investigations, experts, social work and support staff as well as a marked disparity in resources between public legal service providers and local social services agencies.

<sup>7</sup> See Commission on Parental Legal Representation, Interim Report to Chief Judge DiFiore 27-28 (February 2019); see also Martin Guggenheim & Susan Jacobs, *A New National Movement in Parent Representation*, 47 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 44, 45 (2013), available at <https://cfny.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-New-National-Movement-in-Parent-Representation-Clearinghouse-Review.pdf>.

extensive hearings, recommending that New York City's model of parent representation in family regulation cases be adopted state-wide. The Commission concluded that:

“the best chance of successful implementation of its recommendations is through statewide expansion of institutional providers and attorneys specializing in child welfare law. The use of attorneys dedicated to, and proficient in, such representation would improve the quality, efficiency, and cost effectiveness of parental representation statewide.”<sup>8</sup>

The benefit of New York City's contract with family defense organizations to fulfill the mandate of parent representation cannot be overstated: our work dramatically reduces both the number of families separated by ACS, and the amount of time children spend in the foster system.<sup>9</sup> As the Council considers the funding requests of the Administration for Children's Services, it is critical that our offices are funded at a level where we are able to provide a necessary counterbalance to the tremendous reach and power of this government agency. Our interdisciplinary family defense model ensures that parents' due process and legal rights are protected, and that ACS meets its legal obligations to families so that no children enter or remain in the foster system any longer than necessary.

Our offices actively litigate emergency hearings under Family Court Act §§ 1027 and 1028, to ensure that children never enter the foster system unless absolutely necessary and, if they do, that the amount of time they spend in the foster system is as short as possible. After the start of the Article 10 case, our interdisciplinary teams work at every stage to achieve family reunification as quickly as possible and maintain it, through advocacy at case conferences, active motion practice, investigation of the facts, and the litigation of fact finding, disposition, and visitation and permanency hearings. Adequately resourcing interdisciplinary family defense representation also ensures that the court is provided with all the information necessary to properly follow the law in maintaining family relationships. The last fifteen and half years of institutional family defense in New York City has proven that zealous in-court representation with additional out-of-court advocacy and support of families is the only way to secure the rights of parents and children while ensuring the fairness and effectiveness of the family regulation system.

Our effectiveness in reducing the length of foster system involvement is well documented. The largest study of parental representation in family court ever conducted found that holistic, interdisciplinary institutional representation in New York City significantly reduces the time children spend in the foster system.<sup>10</sup> This study compared length of foster stays for the children of BxD, BDS, and CFR's clients with the children of parents who were assigned solo attorneys pursuant to Article 18-b of the County Law, Indigent Defense Legal Panel Plan. The study found that representation by interdisciplinary offices reduced children's time in the foster system by nearly 4 months during the 48 months following the filing of the petition, through earlier

---

<sup>8</sup> *Interim Report to Chief Judge DiFiore* at 26.

<sup>9</sup> Center for New York City Affairs, The New School, *Watching the Numbers: A Six-Year Statistical Survey Monitoring New York City's Child Welfare System* (November 2016), available at [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53ee4f0be4b015b9c3690d84/t/5849a22f725e254385d753eb/1481220657883/FINAL\\_Watching+the+Numbers\\_2016.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53ee4f0be4b015b9c3690d84/t/5849a22f725e254385d753eb/1481220657883/FINAL_Watching+the+Numbers_2016.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See study at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019074091930088X>; see also *Providing Parents Multidisciplinary Legal Representation Significantly Reduces Children's Time in Foster Care*, by Martin Guggenheim & Susan Jacobs, June 4, 2019.



reunification outcomes translating to up to nearly \$40 million in annual savings in foster system expenditures for New York City.<sup>11</sup> According to the study, these outcomes were achieved without any difference in safety to children.<sup>12</sup>

**B. Most Article 10 cases stem from poverty and its related stressors, and families benefit from the support services the family defense providers offer.**

Most of our clients (more than 90 percent) are facing allegations of neglect, not abuse. These cases are poverty-related, and the allegations often include poor or unstable housing conditions, income and food instability, allegations that children are not attending school, domestic violence in the home, excessive corporal punishment or inadequate childcare. Many of our clients struggle with untreated underlying mental health and/or substance use disorders which are exacerbated by the stress of poverty, or are facing other challenges, such as cognitive disabilities. Many of our clients spent portions of their childhoods in the foster system or are young parents currently in the foster system.

While our clients may face challenges that impact their ability to keep their families together, research and our experience shows that the vast majority of these families suffer more trauma and deeper harm from being separated than from staying together with support systems in place. Family separation for any time period is traumatic for children and causes short and long-term harm,<sup>13</sup> and the state's highest court has recognized separation as a harm to children.<sup>14</sup> When children are separated from their parents for a long period of time, studies have shown that they remain on high alert, and their bodies endure prolonged and severe toxic stress as a result. If continuously exposed to toxic stress over time, damage done to the child's brain cannot be mitigated.<sup>15</sup> Even stays in the foster system of less than 30 days can negatively impact a child's ability to form attachments and may limit their capacity for social and emotional functioning, adaptive coping, self-regulation, decision making, developing secure attachments, and maintaining healthy relationships. Quality representation for parents prevents needless harmful family separation, brings children home as soon as possible, and ensures that beneficial, family strengthening services are in place. As a result of our representation, many of our clients' families stay intact during the pendency of the legal case while the parent, child, and family receive needed services.

Fewer than 10 percent of our cases involve more serious allegations of abuse, where children often are removed from their families immediately. These are some of our most complex cases and often require extensive litigation and expert testimony as well as full investigations to uncover claims of innocence, underlying medical explanations of apparent injuries, or other mitigating factors. When a case with this level of complexity arises, our responsibility and the

---

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Shanta Trivedi, *The Harm of Child Removal*, 43 New York University Review of Law & Social Change 523 (2019). Available at: [https://scholarworks.law.ubalt.edu/all\\_fac/1085](https://scholarworks.law.ubalt.edu/all_fac/1085). Vivek Sankaran. "A Cure Worse Than the Disease? The Impact of Removal on Children and Their Families." Christopher Church and Monique Mitchell, co-authors. *Marq. L. Rev.* 102, no. 4 (2019): 1163-94.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., *Matter of Jamie J.*, 30 N.Y.3d 275, 280 n.1 (2017); *Nicholson v. Scopetta*, 3 N.Y.3d 357 (N.Y. 2004).

<sup>15</sup> See Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, Toxic Stress Derails Healthy Brain Development, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVwFkcOZHJw&feature=youtu.be>.



work required to protect the due process rights of families is increased and our offices are staffed with highly qualified, experienced, and zealous attorneys who are ready to litigate more complicated claims.

### **C. Interdisciplinary representation reduces the harm of structural racism inherent in the foster system.**

The foster system is a system that starkly disproportionately punishes, controls, surveils, and forcibly separates low-income Black and Brown families. Just as our modern police systems descend from slave patrols, the family regulation system derives from our country's history of separating Indigenous, Black, and low-income children from their families.

The family regulation system's origins are in the separation of enslaved Black children and parents to profit from their labor, and in the government-supported separation of indigenous children from their parents meant to destroy the Indigenous communities whose land the government was seeking to colonize. The System continued with "Orphan Trains" of the late 1800s and early 1900s, when The Children's Aid Society, still in operation in New York City today, separated thousands of poor Italian and Irish immigrant children from their families, and sent those children to the Midwest to work in indentured servitude. Family connections in impacted communities were considered inferior and therefore breaking those connections was considered to their, and more importantly, to society's benefit.

The family regulation system that ensnares families today is rooted in this history, but its funding did not explode until public assistance programs were slashed in the 1980s and 1990s in response to Black families demanding equal access to social programs through the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. These cuts were coupled with billions of dollars in new funding for the foster system. In 1981, the federal foster system budget stood at less than \$500 million. By 2003, it was at \$4.5 billion. With this huge increase in funding, family regulation agencies targeted the Black community, using the same racist and classist ideology motivating the war on drugs and the cuts to public assistance. In New York City today, for every white child in the foster system, there are 13.2 Black children and 6.2 Hispanic children.

Research from all corners, from the Federal Children's Bureau to the National Council for Juvenile and Family Court Judges to numbers reported by ACS itself, demonstrates that Indigenous, Black and Brown families are disproportionately represented in reports, investigations, and prosecutions by the family regulation system and that Indigenous, Black and Brown children are disproportionately represented in the foster system. This is not the work of a few bad apples. These outcomes, demonstrated reliably and consistently across a variety of social science research, are a result of structural racism masquerading as social betterment. An internal ACS racial equity audit "described a 'predatory system that specifically targets Black and brown parents' and subjects them to 'a different level of scrutiny.'<sup>16</sup>"

When the communities we represent are investigated by ACS, caseworkers often use misinformation and the threat of family separation and police involvement to coerce vulnerable

---

<sup>16</sup> Andy Newman, Is N.Y.'s Child Welfare System Racist? Some of Its Own Workers Say Yes., *New York Times*, (Nov. 22, 2022), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/22/nyregion/nyc-acr-racism-abuse-neglect.html>

families to relinquish their constitutional rights before a court is even involved<sup>17</sup>. Hospitals target pregnant low-income Black and Brown parents to drug test them without consent, regardless of whether there are any actual child safety concerns, a legacy of the now-debunked racist “crack baby” myth. The family regulation system has become a weapon used by landlords seeking to harass tenants, jilted lovers, and vengeful family members by allowing anonymous reports to be filed with little accountability, leaving families to pick up the pieces after the resulting intrusive investigations.

All these processes create a dynamic that entangles low-income Black and Brown families into a system that, more often than not, tears them apart. For the people who find themselves in these horrifying circumstances, their attorney is the lifeline to bring their children home, which is why our services are critical and must be properly resourced and supported by the city.

**D. The family defense model provides consistent high-quality representation through the following key elements:**

**Interdisciplinary practice:** Our interdisciplinary practices, which treat lawyers, social workers, paralegals, and system-impacted parent advocates as equal partners in our client-centered representation, are the key to our success. Parent advocates are often parents with lived experience of child welfare involvement, “credible messengers” that offer peer-to-peer support for parents experiencing the family regulation system. Social work and parent advocate support is vital to addressing the complex needs of our clients and ensuring that we support them both inside and outside of the courtroom. Social workers and parent advocates support clients through every step of their family court case, often meeting them on their first day in court and connecting them immediately with services, such as domestic violence shelter placement, family therapy, education consultants, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, or other vital resources needed to avoid family separation. Paralegals help attorneys file motions, in particular, motions seeking the return of children home or increased visits which are so crucial to family reunification, assist attorneys with obtaining, digesting and organizing discovery, draft subpoenas; help with appeals and assist with intake of new clients.

Social workers, parent advocates, attorneys and clients work closely as a team to develop a legal strategy and a service plan based on the client’s goals and the needs of their family. Unlike ACS caseworkers, our parent advocates, and social workers center parents in solutions for their families and work to support the family together, rather than through separation or the threat of separation. Social workers perform comprehensive and on-going family assessments that help identify the family’s needs to ensure that appropriate services and interventions are put into place. Social workers advocate for clients at ACS and foster-care agency conferences and collaborate with attorneys to ensure continuity between in-court advocacy, agency practice and the evolving circumstances of our clients’ lives.

One of the most important roles of our social work and parent advocate teams is to build trusting relationships with clients and ensure their voices are heard outside of court. Social workers and parent advocates attend ACS and foster agency conferences across the five boroughs to advocate for appropriate visitation and service plans that meet the needs of the individual family and move

---

<sup>17</sup> Eli Hager, Police Need Warrants to Search Homes. Child Welfare Agents Almost Never Get One, ProPublica (Oct. 13, 2022), available at <https://www.propublica.org/article/child-welfare-search-seizure-without-warrants>

the case towards family reunification. Our out-of-court staff use their deep understanding of each individual client's situation and their encyclopedic knowledge of New York's social services landscape to connect parents with the material resources they need to care for their children, and help parents navigate the shelter and benefits systems. Social workers also help mediate and problem-solve issues that can arise between clients and ACS and foster agency workers, foster parents and/or service providers.

Our offices develop close relationships with community-based programs serving New York's immigrant communities to connect clients to culturally competent service providers and access to services in their native language. For clients who do not qualify for medical insurance, our social workers identify programs that will accept clients on a no-fee basis.

**Supervisory structure:** Our supervisory structure is also critical to the quality of our representation. Our structure provides accountability and ensures that our staff is providing high quality representation and operating efficiently and effectively to achieve client goals. Supervisors ensure quality control through in-court and out-of-court supervision, review of legal filings and trial preparation, and performance evaluations. Supervisors become familiar with clients' cases and can respond in emergencies; step in to cover hearings, conferences, or motions; and provide continuity when attorneys or advocates leave the practice. The supervisory structure also provides a mechanism for clients or other stakeholders to provide feedback on staff performance. It is critical to quality representation and efficient court operations.

**Training of staff:** Our extensive and in-depth training of new staff imparts the information and skill-building they need to provide high quality representation in a complex area of law from the very start. Our offices provide extensive training programs for new attorneys, social workers, and parent advocates covering every aspect of Article 10 proceedings, including both substantive law and practical litigation skills for attorneys. Our offices also collaborate to present regular workshops and training to enhance staff's professional development and build on their substantive knowledge and skills.

**Language access:** Our offices recruit staff from different backgrounds who speak many languages because clients greatly benefit from working with staff who speak their primary language. Bilingual staff also develop contacts with community-based agencies and are familiar with a client's cultural or religious background, a factor which is often relevant in an Article 10 case. Attorneys who can communicate with clients in their primary language enhance the attorney-client relationship and vastly improve the quality of representation.<sup>18</sup>

**Specialized expertise in substantive areas:** Over time our offices have identified attorneys and social work staff who specialize in particular areas of law or practice, thereby developing skills and institutional knowledge and improving the quality of representation and making our practice more efficient, including expertise in appeals, custody, Termination of Parental Rights (TPR), education, immigration and medically complex matters.

**Motion practice:** Our offices leverage our institutional knowledge to great advantage with our robust motion practice. We improve efficiency by maintaining databases on model briefs and

---

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Jayesh M. Rathod, *The Transformative Potential of Attorney Bilingualism*, 46 U. Michigan J. Law Reform 863-920 (2013).

motions. Attorneys use these models as starting points to engage in zealous motion practice in settled and emerging areas of the law. For clients seeking to reunify with their children, our motion practice keeps the process moving forward. Attorneys regularly file motions to compel ACS to provide our clients with necessary services, including in the client's primary language, and to increase visitation. For our clients whose children are home and who face meritless neglect allegations or where the aid of the court is no longer necessary, we file motions seeking dismissal. We also file motions to seek the end of supervision of cases where the family has completed services and there is no longer a child safety concern nor need for court involvement. Our highly skilled motion practice helps resolve cases more quickly and helps speed up reunification.

**Technology/data that provides accountability:** Our offices have online case management systems, developed and improved over many years, enabling our offices to produce data on client demographics and court procedures and outcomes for the city, ensuring accountability. These systems also allow staff members to access up-to-date information on cases, enhancing our ability to respond to frequent emergencies, and enable our attorneys and out-of-court advocates to share information about cases. Our relationship with the court has allowed us to access court data as well, which enhances our ability to advise clients and ensure our records are updated.

**Collaborations with the court and other stakeholders:** Our offices are involved in numerous collaborations with the court and the players in the family regulation system with the goal of improving efficiency in the court system and enhancing outcomes for children and families. We meet regularly with court personnel to discuss issues of shared concern regarding the effective operation of family court. We are involved in ongoing, fruitful collaborations with ACS and attorneys for the children to decrease the number of children unnecessarily removed from their homes without court orders, expand visitation between separated parents and children, improve access to housing assistance for ACS-involved families, design and implement fair and effective guidelines for working with parents affected by mental illness, enhance access to preventive services tailored to parents with intellectual disabilities, and increase families' access to services in their primary language.

**Leveraging pro bono and law school and social work resources:** Our offices expand our limited resources through collaborations with the major New York City law firms which co-counsel with us on some of our most complex cases. Clinics from the New York City area law and social work schools also greatly enhance the efficiency of our practices with added resources to support the work of our attorneys and social workers.

#### **E. Caseloads are More Complicated and Last Longer, Raising the Stakes for Parents and Families and Adding Service Needs for Clients.**

Even though Article 10 filings are down, data shows that placements of children in the foster system are creeping back up since the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the work of family defender agencies has not decreased. The nature and complexity of cases filed during the pandemic differs from those filed before: we now see more clients who are experiencing mental health issues, including

---

<sup>19</sup> Andy Newman, Pandemic Shows New York City is Too Quick to Split Families, Advocates Say, The New York Times, (Mar. 15, 2023), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/15/nyregion/child-abuse-pandemic.html>.

an increase in psychiatric hospitalizations, families impacted by the adolescent mental health crisis, domestic violence, and homelessness. These cases are more complex and require greater social work support. There is also a reduction in available supportive services generally for all our clients and a rise in non-citizen clients, related to the influx of asylum-seekers to the city. In addition, for the past three years, as described below, the practice has dealt with the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on the lives of those we represent and on the court system which has contributed to a lengthy backlog and delay in resolving court cases.

ACS did not reduce court filings because they believed filings were unnecessary. Rather, during the pandemic, the family court decided not to allow ACS to file Court Ordered Supervision (COS) cases. Historically, almost half of ACS petitions sought solely COS whereby the children remain at home and the family court supervises the family and ensures compliance with a service plan. Following the court's directive, ACS stopped filing these cases and has only been filing petitions in cases seeking removal of children and separation of families through exclusion orders. The cases we have picked up since 2020 now consist primarily of cases where ACS is seeking to remove a child from their home or seek the exclusion of a parent. These cases are far more resource intensive as we work towards family reunification, requiring more extensive litigation and social work support, and make up the bulk of our current workload. Furthermore,

Since the start of the pandemic, ACS has increased its practice of filing pre-petitions, including 1034 petitions, which are designed to provide judicial oversight of ACS investigations and determinations of whether to separate a family. We have seen a dramatic increase in these petitions with ACS seeking orders for parents to produce children, or secure an order to enter a family's home, or to issue an order of protection on behalf of one parent while it investigates the other. While we are often able to resolve these cases without a family separation, the cases remain part of our workload and require intensive advocacy from both attorneys and social workers.

Increasingly, ACS is achieving family separation by advocating through the District Attorney's Office for a full criminal court order of protection separating a parent from their child without subsequently filing a companion Article 10 case in family court. Where there is no companion Article 10 case, a parent must address the family separation issue in criminal court. In June of 2021, the appellate division held that parents are entitled to a due process hearing when they are separated from their children by virtue of a criminal court order of protection. This has resulted in our attorneys and advocates lending their expertise to their colleagues in criminal court, litigating hearings, and negotiating with ACS and the district attorney in criminal court proceedings.

**Increase in the length of cases:** As family court struggles with an insufficient number of judges and having only recently permitted in-person proceedings, the family court continues to address a backlog of cases that developed during the pandemic, nearly all of which involve children who are still in foster placements. During the pandemic, the time it took to resolve a family's case increased dramatically: for example, the average length of time CFR worked with a client increased, from 2 years prior to the pandemic, to 2.6 years in FY22. In Brooklyn, the average length of closed cases has increased by 20% compared to pre-pandemic norms. Before COVID-19, 47% of BDS cases lasted more than two years and this has gone up to 66% of our cases while the number of cases that are open more than five years has almost doubled between FY19 and

FY22. Before COVID-19, 15% of NDS cases lasted more than two years, and since the pandemic that number has ballooned to nearly 41%; the number of cases lasting three or more years at NDS went from about 5% pre-pandemic to nearly 25% today. At the end of FY18, 17% of BxD cases had been pending for over two years, with 9% pending for over three years. Presently, 27% of pending cases have been open for two or more years and 17% of our cases have been open for three or more years. At CFR, in FY18, approximately 15% of CFR's clients still had matters pending after 36 months; three years later, at the end of FY21, 26% of clients had matters pending longer than 36 months. At the end of FY22, 43% of CFR's clients had pending petitions that were over two years old. This data demonstrates that we need adequate staff to handle older, and more complex cases.

That cases are lasting longer is especially significant because the longer a child remains in the foster system and the longer a resolution is delayed, the more likely it is that additional matters—petitions to permanently terminate a parent's rights (TPR), custody petitions, and new allegations of neglect—will be filed against a client. These additional proceedings require more legal work and often intensive casework outside of court by our social workers and other support staff to achieve positive outcomes in our cases. Often referred to as the “civil death penalty,” TPRs involve the permanent dissolution of the legal ties between a parent and a child. TPRs are often the result of the inability of a parent to access needed services or, particularly in New York, safe, permanent housing. With few exceptions, federal law requires that parental rights be terminated where a child has been in a foster placement for 15 of the most recent 22 months, and *this law was not suspended during the pandemic*, despite the abrupt and widespread disruption or discontinuance of both rehabilitative services and visits for families separated by the foster system.

**Intake:** Before the pandemic, our initial contact with clients was in family court, face-to-face, when clients came to court after ACS told them that a case would be filed. Our attorneys and social workers would meet with clients and walk them through the arraignment process, advocating with ACS every step of the way and accomplishing many meaningful tasks together. Our clients were able to quickly develop the trust needed to delve into their personal lives because they were able to see and feel firsthand that we were competent, passionate advocates with positive reputations in court. We were able to make eye contact with our clients and reassure them that they could trust us to fight as hard as we could to keep their families intact.

While intake is supposed to be in person now, most parents continue not to appear in court in person and rarely appear at the first appearance. We hear from our clients that ACS caseworkers tell them they do not have to attend court in person and can call in or appear on video, missing a crucial opportunity to meet their legal team in person. Responsibility for reaching out and arranging for clients to appear for in-person court appearances falls largely to our staff. Our initial attempts to contact clients often result in endless ringing and unanswered voicemails. When we do reach our clients, we are just an unknown voice on the other end of a call from an unrecognized phone number. It takes much longer to build trust and rapport, which makes it that much more difficult to get the information from clients that we need to effectively advocate for them.

**Services:** In almost all our cases, ACS requires our clients to engage in services such as individual therapy, dyadic and family therapy, parenting instruction, and in some cases anger

management courses or treatment for substance misuse, regardless of whether they have been found to have engaged in any wrongdoing. If the family court makes a finding of child neglect or abuse against our clients, they are often required to engage in and complete similar services. For clients whose children have been separated from them, these services can be especially important, as compliance with services is often a prerequisite to reunification, along with visitation. During the pandemic, unfortunately, many service providers drastically reduced their capacity, canceled services for significant periods of time, or closed altogether, leaving our clients unable to work towards reunification and/or unable to comply with court orders requiring engagement in services, both circumstances leading to delays in family reunification and resolution of cases, which continues to impact the workload today.

**Court proceedings:** As the family court limped towards creating protocols and processes for conducting virtual court proceedings throughout 2020, 2021, and 2022, our respective staff met the challenge, litigating virtual hearings and trials from their homes. Although most hearings and trials are now held in person as per court directive, many conferences and proceedings are still held virtually or hybrid, including with virtual witness testimony. While this virtual option in many ways creates more opportunities for our clients to appear, there are still many technological issues that arise in representing our clients in court, including the inability of the court to admit parties and attorneys from the virtual waiting room, uncooperative computer microphones and cameras, background noise and feedback, and subpar bandwidth in our clients' homes. Many clients have complained that during virtual court, they do not know who everyone is, who is talking or what is happening, leaving them confused after court appearances.

These ongoing challenges contribute to the length of the case. In these cases, have taken a toll on our staff. Today, our offices are experiencing very high rates of attrition. When an attorney or social worker leaves a family defense practice, their cases must be transferred across to the remaining staff. Although a case can easily be transferred, the relationship between advocate and client cannot and both have to work very hard to build trust and cooperation once again, sometimes in the middle of a consequential moment of the case. Finding the time and bandwidth to dedicate energy to building a new foundation with a client whose case has been transferred can be very difficult to do as most attorneys are already representing far greater numbers of clients than recommended by ILS when they receive these transfer cases. Bandwidth and capacity of staff continue to spread thinner, resulting in more attrition. New staff are hired, but most are recent law graduates who require extensive training and cannot take on a full caseload or the demands of more than a few transfer cases.

All of these changes have contributed to the increased length of stay for children in the system and, as a result, the likelihood of a TPR petition being filed. Our continued ability to work around these obstacles and implement creative solutions is more critical than ever.

**F. An Additional \$30 million is Needed in the Budget to Ensure our Organizations Meet Caseload Standards Developed by the NY State Office of Indigent Legal Services.**

Despite over 15 years of excellent interdisciplinary representation that has saved the City millions of dollars in foster system costs and the vast improvements our model has made to parent representation, the City has never adequately funded and supported parent defense. Recent



caseload standards implemented by New York's Office of Indigent Legal Services<sup>20</sup> (ILS), *Caseload Standards for Parents' Attorneys in New York State Family Court Mandated Representation Cases* (ILS Caseload Standards), make clear what we have been arguing for years: our contracts have been deeply underfunded, putting at grave risk the benefits of our model of representation for both the City and our clients.

Years of underfunding have resulted in unmanageable caseloads and unparalleled attrition in our offices. Our offices worked with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) to advocate for the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to add revenue to our budgets in FY22 and FY23. Despite agreeing that we needed an additional \$40 million for our offices to meet those standards, the City only added \$10 million in FY23 and has not allocated any additional funds in the mayor's proposed budget for FY24.

**It is imperative that the City Council press Mayor Adams to add an additional \$30 million earmarked for family defense providers in FY24 in the final budget. Not only is this critical to meet the needs of our clients, as we have expressed them to MOCJ for years, but due to an upcoming deadline on the Request for Proposals (RFP) for this work, there must be sufficient funding to assure we can propose programs that meet the standards in our field.**

## **II. Right to Family Advocacy Project**

The Right to Family Advocacy Project, funded through the City Council's Family Advocacy and Guardianship Support Initiative, provides legal and social work representation to parents and caregivers at two critical stages of the family regulation system process:

1. During an ACS investigation, which strengthens family stability, avoids court intervention, and prevents family separation.
2. In administrative proceedings to amend and seal parents' and caregivers' records with the State Central Register, which expands employment opportunities and economic stability for families.

This Project provides desperately needed due process protections and advocacy for the primarily Black and Brown families targeted by the family regulation system, who would not have access to counsel at these critical junctures without this initiative. City Council funding for the Right to Family Advocacy Project is essential as these services are not currently funded through our Article 10 contracts with MOCJ.

**The family defense organizations are requesting \$3.3 million (\$825,000 each) for FY24.** The current City Council funding for this project is \$650,000 per organization. Our request to increase this to \$825,000 will help ensure we can meet the needs of as many impacted families as possible as well as help us absorb increased costs.

---

<sup>20</sup> New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services, *Caseload Standards for Parents' Attorneys in New York State Family Court Mandated Representation Cases* (June 4, 2021), Available at <https://www.ils.ny.gov/files/Caseload%20Standards%20Parents%20Attorneys%20NYS%20Family%20Court.pdf>



**A. Low-income parents do not have a right to counsel during ACS investigations, but this project provides access to counsel through our organizations.**

Currently, parents with family regulation involvement who cannot afford to hire counsel are not provided assigned attorneys until ACS files an abuse or neglect case against them in family court. Before a case is filed in court, however, critical decisions are made that have grave consequences for how cases proceed, including whether the family will be diverted to prevention programs and services, whether the case will be filed in court, and, most significantly, whether children will be separated from their parents and, if so, who will care for them. Without access to counsel during this critically important investigative stage of an Article 10 case, parents are forced to meet with ACS, make critical decisions impacting the integrity of their family, discuss the allegations against them, and navigate the state's intervention in their family without any formal support. In contrast, ACS has access to legal representation throughout their investigation.

Because families are too often separated by the family regulation system, the Commission on Parental Legal Representation established in 2018 by Chief Judge Janet DiFiore recommended that parents be granted access to counsel during a child protective investigation.<sup>21</sup>

“Giving parents representation when it matters – before they appear in court - is consistent with principles of equal protection and due process; can prevent unnecessary and prolonged separation of children from their parents; and can mitigate the disruption and trauma that accompanies State intervention into the family. Timely access to counsel may also help reduce the disproportionate percentage of children of color in New York's foster care system.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the standards of practice for parents' attorneys adopted by the American Bar Association in 2006 recommend that attorneys actively represent parents during an investigation.<sup>23</sup> In recently issued eligibility standards, ILS also recommended that counsel be assigned to parents during the investigation stage of a case. These standards were recently codified as a court rule by the Office of Court Administration. Fam. Ct. Rule 205.19. Representation at the investigation phase of a case is an effective and much needed bulwark against a multitude of avoidable harms to the low-income, predominantly Black and Brown families most often targeted by the family regulation system.

This project of the City Council is a critical element of keeping families together whenever possible. Our staff meet with parents, discuss the allegations and potential solutions and help parents navigate the investigation process, which can often be extremely intrusive. In addition, social workers funded by this project can work to put services in place that may result in ACS deciding not to file a case at all.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Interim Report to Chief Judge DiFiore.*

<sup>22</sup> Commission on Parental Legal Representation, Interim Report to Chief Judge Defiore, 16 (February 2019), <http://ww2.nycourts.gov/doc/15446>

<sup>23</sup> See American Bar Association, Standards of Practice for Attorneys Representing Parents in Abuse and Neglect Cases 10 (2006), available at [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child\\_law/aba-parent-rep-stds.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/aba-parent-rep-stds.pdf)

In all, this critical funding is worth much more than we receive in reduced court filings, reduced child removals and empowerment of people who are illegally and/or inappropriately targeted by ACS.

**B. Low-income parents do not have access to counsel in SCR hearings and are unjustifiably denied opportunities in employment and to care for their relatives' children.**

At the conclusion of an investigation, ACS will determine whether the report should be “indicated,” which results in the name of the parent or caretaker being placed on a registry, the SCR, that then precludes them from many employment opportunities. This is true even if the case was never brought to court. Indeed, the majority of indicated cases are never brought to court for review, yet the consequences for an indicated case are enormous, can last for decades, and fall disproportionately on families of color.

In New York City, Black and Hispanic children represent 82.5% of all SCR reports. Unsurprisingly, given their gross overrepresentation in SCR reports, 57.1% of all indicated reports in New York City involve either Black or Hispanic children.<sup>24</sup> New York parents who are listed on the SCR are routinely denied employment as daycare workers, nannies, teaching assistants, substance abuse counselors, home health aides, medical supply delivery people, drivers for the disabled, an array of positions in hospitals, and more, based on unproven allegations of child abuse and neglect.<sup>25</sup> Black and Brown New Yorkers are disproportionately impacted by the loss of opportunity in these professions: eighty-five percent of care workers, such as nannies and health aids, are women of color.<sup>26</sup> SCR records remain accessible to employers and others for years and restrict parents' ability to work and support their families.

The impact of an indicated case also goes beyond employment. Courts making custody determinations frequently consider indicated reports from the SCR and are significantly less likely to award custody to a parent with an indicated report. Moreover, an indicated report may pose risks for an individual assuming custody of children through kinship care—an alternative to the traditional foster system where care is provided by relatives. When parental care is not available, kinship care is widely recognized as the next best option. Yet kinship care arrangements are routinely rejected based on indicated reports, even if the report was outdated and the only other option is foster placement with strangers.

Although there is a process to challenge this outcome in a hearing through the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), under current law, parents are not generally given access to counsel in these OCFS hearings that are necessary to amend or seal an indicated case from the SCR. At SCR hearings in New York City, ACS is always represented by counsel. The decisions often hinge on the interpretation of statutory and legal terms, such as “person legally responsible,” “collateral estoppel,” and “dismissed on the merits.” Yet parents are not assigned an attorney to inform them of their right to challenge their listing on the SCR or to

---

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2022/demographics-children-fy-2022.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> See Nikita Stewart, The Child Abuse Charge Was Dismissed. But it Can Still Cost You a Job, N.Y. Times (Feb. 25, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/25/nyregion/ny-child-abuse-database.html>.

<sup>26</sup> See N.Y.C. Dep't of Consumer Affs., Lifting up Paid Care Work (2018).

represent them. In January 2022, the laws governing SCR hearings were changed and an entirely new legal standard and process was put in place. The interpretation of many of the new provisions is being actively litigated in nearly every hearing now.

The City Council, by funding this program, is making a difference in the lives of hundreds of people who are eligible to have their names removed from the SCR and obtain employment as well as obtain custody of children who need them.

**C. The Right to Family Advocacy Project avoids unnecessary removals and removes barriers to employment for hundreds of low-income NYC parents.**

Through the Right to Family Advocacy Project, low-income parents in New York City have access to attorneys through hotlines, emails, and walk-in hours when they are faced with an ACS investigation or have been denied employment due to having an indicated case on the SCR. During an ACS investigation, teams of attorneys, social workers, paralegals, and parent advocates are available to advise parents about their rights, their choices, and the consequences of decisions during an ACS investigation. As a result, parents are more meaningfully engaged in the process and ACS is better informed about a family's situation. We are able to assist parents in providing helpful information to ACS, identifying their strengths and resources, accessing services and material assistance and addressing the issues that brought their children to the attention of ACS in the first instance. Our advocates attend conferences at ACS, schools, and with medical providers alongside our clients. This support often results in resolving cases without ACS having to go to court.

In challenging indicated cases on the State Central Registry, our attorney, social work, and paralegal teams represent parents and caregivers at administrative reviews and hearings, draft affidavits, negotiate with ACS attorneys, obtain necessary discovery, documentation, and court orders, and actively litigate cases based on the most current legal standards, to ensure clients have access to employment opportunities to support and strengthen their families.

Data from the four family defense organizations demonstrates that the Right to Family Advocacy Project works. With the funding provided by the City Council during FY22, the family defense organizations collectively assisted over a thousand parents and caretakers during ACS investigations and at SCR administrative proceedings.

Our success in having SCR reports amended or sealed during FY22 — which ranged from 89% to 100% among our offices—has enabled parents to access employment and support their families.

Through early advocacy and identification of appropriate services and resources, we avoided unnecessary and traumatic family separations and, often, kept family court cases from ever being filed against the families we assisted. Our representation during ACS investigations has also resulted in tremendous fiscal savings for the city by avoiding removals and reducing court filings, preserving valuable court resources and time for cases that require court intervention. By way of example of the extent of these savings, in FY22, 80% of the cases where BxD

represented parents during an ACS investigation were not filed in court. BDS had a similar rate of 80% of cases not being filed in court and CFR's rate is 83% of cases not being filed.

For Article 10 cases that are filed in court, early advocacy has an impact on how the Article 10 case proceeds. In the Bronx, in FY22, in 83% of the cases that were ultimately filed, children stayed home or were placed with family rather than in the foster system. At CFR, in FY22, staff in the project avoided a court filing in 83% of the cases and overall, avoided foster care in 97% of the cases, including those that went to court, which translates to 160 children. The Right to Family Advocacy Project prevents family separation and saves the city money.

We greatly appreciate this opportunity to provide you with information on the critical importance of increasing our funding to ensure that parents faced with the loss of their children are provided high quality mandated legal representation and on the importance of continuing the Right to Family Advocacy Project. Additional funds will ensure we can continue to assist all people who need our services as well as meet increased expenses.

## **SUMMARY**

**We ask the City Council to demand that an additional \$30 million is earmarked in the FY24 budget for Article 10 legal providers. This is above the \$50 million that is baselined in the current budget.**

**We ask the City Council to continue supporting the Right to Family Advocacy Project and increase the funding from \$2.6 million to \$3.3 million to increase capacity and address increased costs.**

Emma Ketteringham  
Managing Director, Family Defense Practice  
The Bronx Defenders  
emmak@bronxdefenders.org

Michele Cortese  
Executive Director  
Center for Family Representation  
mcortese@cfrny.org

Lauren Shapiro  
Managing Director,  
Family Defense Practice  
Brooklyn Defender Services  
lshapiro@bds.org

Zainab Akbar  
Managing Attorney, Family Defense  
Practice  
Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem  
zakbar@ndsny.org

# LEGAL SERVICES FOR THE WORKING POOR

City Fiscal Year 2024

City Council Preliminary Budget Hearing  
Committee on General Welfare

March 13, 2023

## **Introduction**

Thank you Chair Ayala, Committee on General Welfare and to the New York City Council at large for the long-standing support of the Legal Services for the Working Poor Coalition. My name is Mary Fox. I work for Housing Conservation Coordinators, one of the five members of the Legal Services for the Working Poor (LSWP) Coalition that also includes CAMBA Legal Services, Mobilization for Justice, NMIC, and TakeRoot Justice. The Coalition was created with support from the City Council to address the civil legal needs of working poor and other low-income New Yorkers whose income is slightly higher than the poorest New Yorkers, thus rendering them ineligible for free civil legal services while being only one missed paycheck away from facing eviction or other dire consequences. LSWP's services are critical in allowing working New Yorkers to maintain financial independence and preserving economic stability in communities across New York City. In Fiscal Year 2023, the LSWP initiative was funded at \$3,205,000 from the City Council, with each of the five Coalition members receiving

\$455,000. In FY 24, HCC, as a member of the Legal Services for the Working Poor Coalition, is requesting a full restoration of \$455,000 from the City Council to support civil legal services provided to working poor New Yorkers. A full restoration to the 5 Coalition partners would support critical legal services in the areas of employment, immigration, consumer, benefits law, housing and other areas of civil practice. We also stand in partnership with the legal services community in full support of a Workforce Enhancement Initiative Grant that would build in reasonable funding increases each year to cover salary adjustments, inflation, labor contracts and contracting delays.

We continue to see that working poor New Yorkers, who can barely make ends meet, face catastrophic consequences as a result of a civil legal problem. Among other things, common problems include, not being paid for their work or not being paid overtime; identity theft; the freezing of a bank account as a result of a collection lawsuit they did not even know about; or being denied public benefits to which they are entitled. The consequence of these problems can lead to other problems, including increased risk of eviction or foreclosure. These working New Yorkers can end up spiraling downward to join the ranks of the poor if they do not have access to lawyers to assist them. Our legal services organizations represent these New Yorkers in all five boroughs in consumer, foreclosure, immigration, benefits, employment, and housing matters in state, appellate, and federal courts, and various administrative agencies.

### **Ongoing Consequences of COVID-19 on the Working Poor**

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, working poor New Yorkers continue to disproportionately face long term health and economic consequences, and related legal problems. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, tens of thousands of New Yorkers were hanging on by a thread to their homes, their families, their well-being, and their dignity. As the crisis has laid

bare, neighborhoods of color and immigrant communities across the City have been especially hard hit by health and economic disparities. During the crisis, many New Yorkers incurred unexpected debt, which has resulted in an increase in debt collection litigation, and for some, bankruptcy; rental and mortgage arrears grew to unprecedented levels; and other legal issues have snowballed. The many working poor individuals and families who ~~we~~are adversely affected need members of our Coalition to advise them, help them navigate various complex legal processes, and fight their legal battles by representing them in the cases against them, and by advocating for them in the multiple systems that impact them. But for our legal services, the working poor community will be left alone to resolve these complicated legal issues, and the cascading effect of not being able to support working poor families at this time will quickly lead to greater homelessness, poorer health outcomes, job loss and overall instability.

## **Conclusion**

This Council's funding for Legal Services for the Working Poor is the only funding that specifically targets the civil legal needs of working people to ensure continued self-sufficiency for families struggling to survive in New York City. If we are not able to meet the legal service needs of the many people who seek our help, particularly those whose lives continue to be upended by the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and rising inflation, the human consequences will be dire: immigrant families will continue to live in uncertainty and fear; children whose families have been wrongly denied unemployment benefits, public assistance, or SNAP/food stamps will go hungry; families whose homes could be saved through aggressive foreclosure or eviction defense will become homeless; people with disabilities will be denied the disability benefits they need to live with dignity; and workers who have been cheated of wages by unscrupulous employers will go unpaid.

For the above reasons, it is *vital*ly important that the City Council not only continue to support this flexible funding stream, but fully fund it so that the legal service organizations are able to meet the needs of their clients by providing a diverse array of civil legal services to working poor New Yorkers. We urge the Council to fully fund civil legal service initiatives overall and for the Legal Services for the Working Poor allocation in particular. This year, we ask that the City Council restore FY 23 funding levels of the Legal Services for the Working Poor initiative. The positive benefits of civil legal services funding for the city's budget and its economy make it the right choice for economic, social, and humanitarian reasons. Thank you.



March 13, 2023

Legal  
Services NYC

**Testimony before the Committee on General Welfare**

Thank you, Chair Ayala, and members of the General Welfare Committee, for this opportunity to present testimony in support of our partnership with the City Council to secure justice for low-income New Yorkers. My name is Raun Rasmussen and I am the Executive Director of Legal Services NYC. Our staff of 640 advocates and support staff fights poverty and seeks racial, social and economic justice for low-income New Yorkers by providing free civil legal services to more than 110,000 New Yorkers every year. Our services help your constituents, our fellow New Yorkers, to meet the most basic needs for shelter, safety, income security, and access to high-quality education and health care.

During the pandemic, we all saw the problems of low-income New Yorkers get worse. New York City families and children lost their jobs, their incomes, their educations, their health, and in all too many cases, their lives. But the legal services your funding supports helped make life better for all we could reach. We helped thousands of New Yorkers get access to public benefits like food stamps, Medicaid, and emergency back rent grants; we fought for unemployment benefits for the recently unemployed; found safety and economic security for survivors of domestic violence; helped kids get the special education services they needed; and continued to get repairs and essential services and stopped evictions and foreclosures even

Legal Services NYC  
40 Worth Street, Suite 606, New York, NY 10013  
Phone: 646-442-3600 Fax: 646-442-3601 [www.LegalServicesNYC.org](http://www.LegalServicesNYC.org)  
Raun J. Rasmussen, Executive Director  
William T. Russell Jr., Board Chair

 LSC

while the courts were all working remotely. We and our clients have made it through the worst of times and our doors are fully reopened.

Matt Desmond, the Harvard sociologist who wrote *Evicted*, a devastating account of the national homelessness problem, stated: "Without shelter, everything else falls apart." And thank goodness there is a Right to Counsel in NYC that allows us to provide eviction prevention services to low income tenants.

But it is also true that, without safety from domestic violence, everything else falls apart.

Without a sufficient, stable income, everything else falls apart.

Without a high quality education, and access to health care, everything else falls apart.

Poverty makes things fall apart.

Your funding for Legal Services for Low Income New Yorkers is so critical because it allows us to provide the full range of services that New Yorkers need: Our staff helps our clients hold their lives together, in all the ways that are so critical. We ask that you increase that funding in FY24 to \$9 million for the five organizations that receive those dollars and provide those services.

We also ask that you restore funding for Legal Services NYC's Veterans Justice Project to \$150,000, a return to FY 2020 levels. Our city-wide Veterans Justice Project has provided civil legal services to thousands of veterans, service members and their families since we began the Project in November 2011. These services are critical so that our veterans can remain housed and stabilize their incomes and re-entry after their service to our country.

One of the most devastating impacts of the pandemic, because it is potentially life-altering in the long term, is the way New York City's children's educations have been adversely affected. We are working hard to address these issues, and ask that you provide \$500,000 to

support our Access to Education Project, which will deliver legal services designed to help children catch up and keep up with their educations so that they are not further hurt by the pandemic, which left so many of them struggling. These services will help kids with special needs and disabilities, will provide language access advocacy for English language learner students and their limited English proficient parents, and will work with the schools to implement restorative healing programs so that children who have been traumatized by sexual harassment or violence in the schools can be responded to with measures that are supportive and not punitive.

Finally, you will hear from the legal services community more broadly—the criminal and children and family defenders, along with the civil legal services community—that both the state and the city are dramatically underfunding the work that we do—by tens of millions of dollars every year. Funding is not being fairly provided for us to do the work that is so critical to the survival of low-income New Yorkers. For example, Legal Services NYC gets roughly \$30M to provide eviction prevention services to the city; but we need to raise an additional \$10-15M to hire sufficient staff to do the work that our contracts require. We cannot keep up.

You have been our partners for decades in working with us to meet the needs of ALL New Yorkers. Thank you for your help now in making sure that we are fairly paid for the work that we do; work that provides a lifeline to low income New Yorkers by helping them get and keep the benefits and services they need. Thank you for your support.

Raun J. Rasmussen (he/him)  
Executive Director  
Legal Services NYC  
40 Worth Street, Suite 606  
New York, NY 10013

[rrasmussen@lsnyc.org](mailto:rrasmussen@lsnyc.org)

## **Testimony of New York City Employment and Training Coalition (NYCETC)**

*New York City Council Budget and Oversight Hearings on the Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2024, the Preliminary Capital Plan for Fiscal Years 2024-2027, Fiscal 2024-2033 Preliminary Ten-Year Capital Strategy, and the Fiscal 2023 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report*

### **COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE**

Submitted by Gregory J Morris, CEO

March 13, 2023

I'd like to thank Chair Ayala for her leadership and the opportunity to provide testimony. I'm Gregory J Morris, CEO of the New York City Employment and Training Coalition (NYCETC) - the largest city-based workforce development association in the country. For 25 years, NYCETC has played a vital role in presenting and championing policy priorities that 1) support the alignment and coordination of our City's workforce development and economic development communities; 2) seek to reduce and/or eliminate barriers to employment based on systemic and structural racism; and 3) supply every New Yorker with the skills, training and education needed to thrive in 21st century. Over the last two years, NYCETC has influenced both the previous and current city administrations by hosting industry roundtables, annual conferences, and on-the-record [meet the candidates for office discussions](#). It has also convened public and private sector leaders (e.g. [NY Workforce Recovery Strategy Group](#)) to develop responses to the unemployment crisis caused by the pandemic (" [Recovery for All: A Vision for New York City's Equitable Economic Recovery](#) ") and proactively addressed long standing disparities in economic development, workforce development and affordable housing ([NYC Inclusive Growth Initiative](#).)

Today, NYCETC is the 'industry voice' of more than 200 workforce development providers serving 600,000 New Yorkers—primarily individuals who live in under-resourced neighborhoods, identify as BIPOC, and have low to moderate incomes—and it is the 'connective tissue' that fills strategic, operational, and programmatic gaps between stakeholders - providers and employers, business alliances and labor, city and state, higher ed and philanthropy. Each of these stakeholders have responsibility for addressing the City's siloed and under-funded workforce development ecosystem for the purpose of propelling our City forward on its path to an equitable and inclusive recovery. Two recent reports by NYCETC and its intermediary partners emphasize specific data points that highlight the economic challenges experienced by service providers and New Yorkers who can least afford to lose work and wages.

From the "[New York City's Workforce Landscape \(September 2022\)](#)" report:

- 96% of organizations stated that they saw a decrease in revenue due to reduced City contract funding, State contract funding, private philanthropy or fundraising in comparison to the previous City fiscal year.
- More than one-third of organizations reported delays in contract funding.
- Direct service providers from over a dozen organizations reported that many New Yorkers were reluctant to jump back into the same jobs they had before COVID, looking for opportunities that offer remote options, more flexibility and health protections, higher wages or room for growth.

From the "[NYC's Unsettled Covid-19 Era Labor Market: The Case for an Active Labor Market Policy \(January 2023\)](#)" report:

- New York's City unemployment rate was 6.1 percent in the third quarter of 2022, well above the nation's 3.5 percent. Black workers had an unemployment rate of 9.8 percent, compared to 3.5 percent for white workers.
- Employment rates for young males, ages 18-24, dropped from 49 percent in the six months before the pandemic to 38 percent over the second and third quarters of 2022.
- The number of city residents receiving cash assistance has surged by 112,000, or 35 percent, from February 2020 to September 2022.

Compared to the U.S. overall, New York City's economic recovery lags behind the rest of the U.S., and while the net deficit loss is 116,000 payroll jobs (compared to February 2020), the face-to-face workforce - retail and hospitality services, construction and manufacturing - lost 180,000 jobs. That loss disproportionately left Black and Latinx workers, women, young people, and individuals without college degrees unemployed. Those who are suffering from pandemic-related employment dislocations – and the many more struggling in accessing employment or affordable housing due to their age, level of education, history of justice involvement, or immigration status – are in the greatest need of support that can help reconnect them with quality job opportunities. Those New Yorkers make up the majority of the population NYCETC is committed to putting on pathways to quality jobs and economic self-sufficiency.

While recent communications from the [Adams administration](#) regarding an expansion of apprenticeship are promising, job seekers who already face discrimination in the labor market – especially young Black men who continue to experience alarming rates of unemployment – will not find access to apprenticeships without first having access to strong employment “pipelines” that include career development, pre-apprenticeships, “bridge” programs, and supportive services. To ensure an equitable pandemic recovery that centers on the training, “retraining” and retention investments individuals need to enter and engage successfully in a 21st century workforce, employers need to provide living wages, and our local and state administrations must commit to the reduction of barriers to long-term employment, especially for those on public assistance.

New York City's workforce is the backbone of its economic success. Whether it's the New Yorkers who drive our local economy today, or the young people who will make up our future workforce, the City of New York does better when its people have access to the resources and education they need to access good paying jobs that sustain them and their communities. New York City's workforce development system is as diverse and ambitious as the city itself, yet there are still too many systemic barriers and disconnections that hold us back from a truly inclusive economy. **To equalize opportunity for all New Yorkers, I respectfully request that the Council invests in workforce development now while leading efforts to increase access to quality jobs over time:**

- **Commit to investing an additional \$5,000,000 in support of Small Business Services and Workforce Development Initiatives** that position underserved New Yorkers — primarily New Yorkers of color, New Yorkers with low- or moderate-incomes, New Yorkers with multiple barriers to employment, and New Yorkers who have been left out of the growing economy due to systemic and historic marginalization — for success in the workforce. Here's how:
  - Increase funding the **Job Training and Placement Initiative** to \$10,000,000 by including the New York City Employment and Training Coalition as an additional grantee in the amount of \$1,750,000 for the purpose of ensuring that coalition members in every borough can expand access to quality jobs in the highest poverty neighborhoods in New York City.
  - Increase funding for the **Workers Cooperative Business Development Initiative** to \$5,000,000. Worker cooperatives have proven to be an effective and sustainable strategy to democratize access to business ownership and bolster local economies.
  - Increase funding for the **Green Jobs Corps Program** to \$500,000 in support of direct service providers who are working to provide New Yorkers with access to training and employment opportunities in green jobs.
  - Increase funding in **Bridge Program for Workforce Development** to \$1,500,000. This is critical given the success of the training, its connections to the growing tech sector, and the recent increase in the number of cash assistance recipients who will need training to find success in the 21st century economy.
  - Increase funding for the **Chamber on the Go and Small Business Assistance** to \$3,000,000. This is an essential investment in the businesses and entrepreneurs that are innovative, dynamic, and uniquely positioned to provide meaningful jobs in every borough.
  - Increasing funding for **MWBE Leadership Associations** to \$1,000,000. When we commit to the sustainability and expansion of MWBEs, we improve access to opportunity for more New Yorkers — and ensure that our business community reflects the diversity of our City.

- **Commit to restoring and doubling the City's investment in school-year career readiness and paid internship programs from \$9,700,000 to \$20,000,000.** Since the pandemic struck, employment rates have fallen much more sharply for young adults than any other group. Programs like CareerReady WLG and the Career Readiness and Modern Youth Apprenticeship (CRMYA) are vital to ensure our city's young adults have the skills and education they need to access good-paying careers in their communities. New York City leaders must commit to double the investment in these programs in the FY24 New York City budget. The efforts that we make in support of youth employment should match the commitment that we make to Summer Youth Employment. *This investment will serve as the on-ramp to apprenticeships.*
- **Create and fund social services that allow working families to participate in the workforce.** First and foremost, New York City must create an in-training child care subsidy program to support women and single parents who would otherwise be unable to access the skills and education they need to access good-paying jobs. Likewise, the City must ensure that it funds dual training vouchers to help job seekers pay for the short-term training they need to access new opportunities.
- **Create a citywide initiative to connect local talent to small business jobs.** Small businesses are the lifeblood of New York City and employ half of the city's workforce. Mayor Adams and the New York City Council must establish and fund a new initiative – the **Small Business Jobs for All** program – to build pathways that connect local job seekers to good-paying careers through targeted investments in skills and training programs tailored to meet the ever-changing needs of New York City's small businesses.
- **Create transparency and accountability by establishing robust workforce development goals and key performance indicators (KPIs) that align to a shared city-wide workforce agenda.** The compliance efforts must include a sub-committee for convening and oversight (*Sub-committee on Labor Market Access and Equity*), quarterly reports tracking the City's progress toward its workforce development goals, the establishment of an interactive map that assess and focuses on the needs of specific populations, neighborhoods, and sectors that require attention and investment to improve workforce access and equity.
- **Commit to pay equity between NYC's agencies and contracted providers and timely contract payments to increase retention and employment success rates; and ensure support is available to New Yorkers who need additional access and support to find, secure, and retain employment.**

NYC relies heavily on nonprofit workforce development providers to connect its residents with access to jobs; and the services and training necessary for securing long-term, family-sustaining employment. The City pays for approximately half of workforce development program offerings across the five boroughs, and relies on the non-profit and community-based organizations within the coalition to provide them to New Yorkers of all ages facing barriers to employment. The need for these services – job training and placement, career exploration, internships and apprenticeships, adult education and

literacy, college access and persistence programs, wage subsidies, employment retention and advancement services, and benefits access and tax preparation – has only increased since the onset of COVID-19. Please protect and invest in funding for workforce development in this budget to trigger and lead the collective action necessary to produce the budgetary, legislative, and regulatory city and state-level results and reforms that will maximize employer access to talent, reduce workforce barriers for underserved populations, and strengthen local economies.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the budget. For further questions, I can be reached at \_\_\_\_\_ or [gmorris@nycetc.org](mailto:gmorris@nycetc.org).



**New York City Council Committee on General Welfare**  
**City Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Testimony**  
**New Yorkers for Children**

Hi, I'm Alan Yu, the Executive Director of New Yorkers For Children (NYFC), a non-profit that works to improve the well-being of people in the child welfare system, with a focus on youth aging out of foster care. We provide educational, mental health, and financial support to over 1,000 youth annually, while also developing innovative initiatives to fill gaps in the system. We do this through our long-standing partnership with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), foster care agencies, and many community organizations.

Thank you to the City Council for the \$50,000 award this current fiscal year, which is enabling us to serve youth in our Fostering Empowerment Program and Back to School Program. For the upcoming fiscal year, NYFC is respectfully requesting that the City Council renew our award, and make deeper investments in our programs' population. Additional resources are crucial for NYFC to support our clients in more comprehensive ways and lead to increased educational attainment, mental wellness, and career development for youth aging out.

Over 7,000 students in the city spend time in foster care every year, and they are disproportionately Black and from low-income communities. Though they represent a relatively small portion of the public school population, youth in the foster system have some of the most complex educational needs and bleakest academic outcomes of any student group. One in five students in the city who spend any time in foster care drop out of high school. By State test standards, 80% of foster care students were not proficient in reading and math (and that was before the pandemic), and half are chronically absent from school.

Because many of the young people we serve have experienced multiple, overlapping traumas on the individual and systemic levels, we provide free mental health support from credentialed staff that facilitate healing and growth. Another key aspect of NYFC's programming philosophy is alleviating the root causes of poverty for the people we serve. Through our commitment to providing young people with emergency cash support, we aim to empower youth to make their own financial decisions and surmount crises that might otherwise disrupt their lives.

Overall, an investment by the City Council in NYFC means an investment in youth and families in the child welfare system in NYC. Our commitment to strengthening channels to post-secondary programs, college, and careers, particularly for students on alternative paths to graduation, is instrumental in ensuring our youth are not overlooked, creating more equitable outcomes.



new destiny  
housing

12 w 37th street, 7th floor  
new york, ny 10018

646 472.0262  
646 472.0266 fax  
newdestinyhousing.org

**TESTIMONY OF NEW DESTINY HOUSING  
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE**

**Gabriela Sandoval Requena, Director of Policy and Communications**

**March 13, 2023**

Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Brannan, members of the City Council General Welfare and Finance Committees, and Council Staff for holding this Oversight Hearing on the Preliminary Budget and the opportunity to submit written testimony.

Founded in 1994, New Destiny's mission is to end the cycle of domestic violence and homelessness for low-income families and individuals by developing and connecting them to safe, permanent, affordable housing and services. We build and manage supportive housing, and, through our innovative programs, we assist survivors in finding permanent housing and remaining stably housed. New Destiny is currently the largest provider of supportive housing for domestic violence survivors in New York and a leading advocate in the effort to obtain the resources needed to end family homelessness.

New Destiny is a co-convenor of the [Family Homelessness Coalition \(FHC\)](#), a broad group of organizations and impacted advocates committed to tackling homelessness among families in our city.

**Domestic violence has been the number one driver of family homelessness in New York City for years, followed by evictions.**<sup>1</sup> In FY 2022, 39% of families who entered the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelter system identified domestic violence as the primary reason for their homelessness.<sup>2</sup> The separate domestic violence shelter system, managed by the Human Resources Administration (HRA), was used by 10,201 adults and children in 2021, 95% of whom were families with minors.<sup>3</sup> With so few housing resources, once in shelter, survivors are far more likely to remain in shelter rather than to move to an apartment. Fifty three percent of survivors with minors that left HRA emergency domestic violence shelter in 2021 moved to another shelter instead of permanent housing. That is more than 1 in 2 families that left shelter for shelter.

The affordable housing shortage only exacerbates the plight of survivors as they strive to regain stability. Across New York State, there is no county or locality where a renter earning minimum wage can afford a one-bedroom apartment.<sup>4</sup> In New York City, over half of renters pay more than 30% of their monthly income in rent and one third pay more than 50%.<sup>5</sup> The median

---

<sup>1</sup> Silkowski, A. (2019). Housing Survivors: How New York City Can Increase Housing Stability for Survivors of Domestic Violence. New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. Retrieved from [https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Housing\\_Survivors\\_102119.pdf](https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Housing_Survivors_102119.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> New York City Department of Social Services. (2022). Reasons for Eligibility for Families with Children for Department of Homeless Services Shelter.

<sup>3</sup> NYC Department of Social Services (2022). 2021 Annual Report on Exits from NYC Domestic Violence Shelters.

<sup>4</sup> Aurand, A., Clarke, M., Emmanuel, D., Foley, E., Rafi, I., & Yentel, D. (2022). Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing. National Low Income Housing Coalition. Retrieved from <https://nlihc.org/oor>

<sup>5</sup> New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development. (2022). 2021 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey Selected Initial Findings. Retrieved from <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/hpd/downloads/pdfs/services/2021-nychvs-selected-initial-findings.pdf>

rent for a one-bedroom unit in the five boroughs has risen 20% to \$3,267 over the last three years, and in Manhattan it surpassed \$5,000 in June of last year.<sup>6</sup> While strides have been made in recent years toward improving rental subsidies and developing more supportive and affordable housing, domestic violence survivors continue to be excluded from critical housing resources. This is most stark in the lack of access to both the city-funded supportive housing and city's homeless set-aside units.

**New Destiny urges Mayor Adams to implement two budget-neutral, administrative modifications to provide survivors equitable access to housing resources:**

- **Open NYC 15/15 supportive housing to domestic violence survivors**
- **Expand access to homeless set-asides to survivors in the HRA domestic violence shelter system**

**Similarly, we call on the Council and the Mayor to fund the newly established housing stability program for survivors of domestic violence at \$6 million in FY 2024, as well as to quickly address the staffing issues at the Department of Social Services.**

Unlike New York State supportive housing programs, the city supportive housing initiative, NYC 15/15, does not include domestic violence survivors as an eligible population. For survivors to qualify for city-funded supportive housing, they must meet the “chronicity” requirement, which means they must have a lengthy stay in DHS shelter and a diagnosed disability, such as serious mental illness or substance use disorder. This effectively keeps survivors out of this important housing resource. The 180 days survivors may spend in HRA emergency domestic violence shelter are not counted toward the DHS length of stay and, while research shows that domestic violence causes a myriad of negative health outcomes, survivors rarely divulge a diagnosis for fear of losing custody of their children to their abuser. At least half of survivors experience post-traumatic stress disorder and depression;<sup>7</sup> moreover, survivors can sustain head trauma more often than football players, but they are rarely diagnosed.<sup>8</sup> Permanent, affordable, supportive housing is a lifeline for domestic violence survivors who need housing and some level of support to attain and maintain stability. **New Destiny urges the city administration to open its supportive housing program to domestic violence survivors and their families, who are among the most vulnerable.**

The New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) creates a critical pipeline from shelter to permanent housing for homeless New Yorkers by requiring most developers who receive funding to set aside at least 15% of their apartments for individuals and families in shelter. These units are commonly referred to as HPD homeless set-asides. In FY 22, HPD moved 1,600 homeless households into newly constructed units and more than 600 into re-rental apartments, none of which were made available to survivors living in the HRA domestic violence shelter system.<sup>9</sup> Despite committing “to even the playing field for all New Yorkers” in the Housing Our Neighbors Blueprint in April 2022, the Adams administration

---

<sup>6</sup> Brand, D., Faye, M., Mariam, Q., Lozano-Velez, M., Rahman, N., Soto, T., & Jimenez, J. (2022, September 13). It's Not Just Manhattan: Rents Are Still Rising Across NYC. City Limits. <https://citylimits.org/2022/09/13/its-not-just-manhattan-rents-are-still-rising-across-nyc/>

<sup>7</sup> Nathanson, A. M., Shorey, R. C., Tirone, V., & Rhatigan, D. L. (2012). The Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders in a Community Sample of Female Victims of Intimate Partner Violence. Partner abuse, 3(1), 59–75. <https://doi.org/10.1891/1946-6560.3.1.59>

<sup>8</sup> Hillstrom, C. (2022, March 1). 'The Hidden Epidemic of Brain Injuries From Domestic Violence.' The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/magazine/brain-trauma-domestic-violence.html>

<sup>9</sup> New York City Mayor's Office of Operations. (2022). Mayor's Management Report 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.nyc.gov/site/operations/performance/mmr.page>

continues to only allow individuals and families in the DHS shelter system access to these units, with rare exception. By expanding access to homeless set-asides, the city would not only make this valuable housing resource more equitable, but would likely fill vacancies more quickly, leading to significant potential cost-savings. **New Destiny urges the city administration to allow survivors in HRA domestic violence shelter equal access to this housing.**

We are grateful to Speaker Adams, Council Member Cabán, and members of the Council for passing, and to Mayor Adams for swiftly signing, Intro 153-A into law, which creates a housing stability program for domestic and gender-based violence survivors that provides low-barrier grants and connection to supportive services, with the goal of helping them maintain housing. New Destiny witnesses the beneficial impact of microgrants every day. Our rapid re-housing program, HousingLink, receives small federal service funding that can be used to cover most emergency needs, such as utility arrears, moving costs, and healthcare.

Additionally, a privately funded microgrant pilot, which was overseen by the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence and administered by Sanctuary for Families, further demonstrated that flexible funding can significantly improve survivors' financial situation, help them remain housed, and foster financial stability.<sup>10</sup> Implemented in 2020, the pilot also showed that there is high demand for low-barrier financial support among survivors of domestic violence in New York City. The half a million dollars in funding was quickly depleted and forced the program to cease receiving applications in less than 2 months. For some survivors, an immediate, but otherwise manageable, financial or health crisis can quickly snowball into a catastrophe causing homelessness. This newly created housing stability program has the potential to be a lifesaver for survivors, especially for non-citizen New Yorkers; help bridge the gap for existing federally funded initiatives that do not cover essential items, like furniture or groceries; and prevent homelessness and shelter recidivism for a fraction of the cost of shelter and re-housing efforts. **New Destiny urges the Mayor and the City Council to fund the Housing Stability program at \$6 million dollars.**

Comprising HRA and DHS, the Department of Social Services (DSS) oversees numerous critical functions to support New Yorkers, such as administering cash benefits and other major public assistance programs. Yet, DSS continues to struggle with severe staffing shortages. According to the Comptroller's report, DSS had a vacancy rate of 20% as of October 2022.<sup>11</sup> Limited capacity at HRA has significantly delayed check processing times and moves for rent subsidy recipients. This does not only prolong shelter stays unnecessarily, but it also tarnishes the credibility of rental assistance programs among property owners, property managers, and real estate agents. **We urge the administration to ensure that DSS receives the resources and support necessary to rapidly fill vacancies.**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony. New Destiny looks forward to continuing to collaborate with the Council. We welcome any questions you may have.

**Gabriela Sandoval Requena**  
Director of Policy and Communications  
[gsrequena@newdestinyhousing.org](mailto:gsrequena@newdestinyhousing.org)

---

<sup>10</sup> Holmes, K. (2021). Evaluation Summary Report: Emergency Financial Relief Microgrants Program for Survivors of Domestic and Gender-Based Violence. Retrieved from <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/ocdv/downloads/pdf/Emergency-Financial-Relief-Microgrants-Program-Evaluation-Summary-Report.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Callahan, R. (2022). Title Vacant Addressing Critical Vacancies in NYC Government Agencies. New York City Comptroller Brad Lander. Retrieved from <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Title-Vacant-Addressing-Critical-Vacancies-in-NYC-Government-Agencies.pdf>



NEW YORK

## **Testimony for the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare on the Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2024**

**March 13, 2023**

**Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning, Chair Ayala and members of the Committee on General Welfare of the New York City Council. My name is Rachel Sabella and I am the Director of No Kid Hungry New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on the preliminary budget for Fiscal Year 2024.

First, we thank the City Council for your continued commitment to protect New Yorkers from food insecurity. The City Council has long been a leader in addressing food insecurity, from supporting Breakfast in the Classroom, the expansion of universal school meals, and leading the charge for increased, baselined funding for food pantries and soup kitchens to ensuring that food insecurity remained a top priority throughout the pandemic. Now more than ever, we are grateful to count you as our partner in the fight against food insecurity. We were especially pleased by Speaker Adams' recent State of the City address and the recommendations tied to addressing food insecurity.

No Kid Hungry New York is a campaign of Share Our Strength, a national organization dedicated to ending hunger and poverty. Using proven, practical strategies, our No Kid Hungry campaign builds and supports public-private partnerships with the goal of ensuring children have access to the healthy food they need, every day. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, No Kid Hungry provided more than \$7 million in emergency grants and support in New York and Puerto Rico to help schools, food banks and other community organizations feed kids during the crisis. In addition to our grant-making, we also offered strategic assistance to hundreds of local organizations and advocated for policies to address the unique barriers and unprecedented level of need brought on by the pandemic. This included national child nutrition waivers, which allowed meal providers to adapt and streamline their federal child nutrition program operations so they could keep serving meals to kids, other program flexibilities for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Pandemic EBT to help reach more kids in need. No Kid Hungry will also continue to operate a local text line this summer – "NYC FOOD" or "NYC COMIDA" to 304-304 - to help families locate meals, and No Kid Hungry New York will work closely with the New York City Department of Education to customize the service to reflect their specific offerings. Since 2011, our No Kid Hungry New York campaign has helped connect millions of children across the state with school breakfast and summer meals.

**No Kid Hungry New York believes that all children, no matter their borough or circumstance, deserve the opportunity to be nourished and safe, so they can live up to their full potential and achieve their dreams.** Adequate nutrition, both at school and at home, helps lay the foundation for a child's physical and emotional development, educational attainment, and health and well-being. Years of data and research have demonstrated that federal nutrition programs are our nation's most effective defense against hunger and food insecurity and have helped lift millions of families out of poverty.

As the Council continues its work to improve the futures of all New Yorkers, there are numerous investments that can and must be made in the FY 2024 New York City budget to improve food access and food security for children and families across New York City. By providing needed support to expand participation in federal nutrition programs and increase coordination and innovation, New York City can help to reduce food insecurity for New Yorkers in every borough and continue to reverse the trend of drastically increased food insecurity.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2024 NEW YORK CITY BUDGET**

**Increase Timeliness in the Processing of SNAP Applications.** SNAP applications are required by USDA guidelines to be processed within 30 days, but the timeliness rate for SNAP applications in NYC dropped to 60 % in 2022<sup>1</sup>. That means 40% of the applications took a month or longer to be processed. This backlog impacts all SNAP participants. Agency explanations for this drastic reduction from previous years have included high application volume due to COVID and staffing shortages. The reality is that the nearly 2.9 million New Yorkers enrolled in SNAP<sup>2</sup> are hungry now. Families and children cannot wait on agencies to fill roles or streamline internal procedures. OTDA and HRA must cooperate and immediately address staffing shortages to unlock and leverage federal dollars to support families and fuel economic recovery. NKH NY is making great investments in frontline organizations that help enroll families in SNAP, and this work can help speed up application processing, but solutions are needed to realize these benefits and keep delays from undermining their success.

**Increase Awareness, Outreach and Enrollment for Nutrition Programs.** With many New Yorkers still facing unemployment and underemployment, especially in the face of rising food prices and rent, safety net programs are more important than ever. Federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Medicaid and the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) exist to help families get back on their feet during hard times. However, these programs only work when people can access them, which can be confusing and lead to lack of confidence in enrolling or utilizing programs. New York City must prioritize funding for outreach and education efforts to help families enroll in programs for which they or their children are eligible.

**Address Systemic Barriers for Immigrant Families.** As many New Yorkers are qualifying for benefits for the first time and the chilling effect of the rescinded Public Charge rule is still being felt by immigrant families, all programs that serve children and families must address systemic barriers to ensure equitable access for immigrant families, such as promoting language access and cultural competency, partnering with trusted community-based organizations, strengthening transportation access, removing burdensome paperwork requirements, and addressing the impacts of structural racism and discriminatory policies.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2022/hra.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

**Strengthen the Emergency Food Network by Investing in Community and School Food Pantries.** New York City must continue to add funding and support for the emergency food network in New York City. Food pantries and soup kitchens are the last line of defense against hunger for many families. The emergency food system is facing higher food costs, staffing shortages and increased need. Further, many organizations who were not directly involved in anti-hunger programs before were compelled to create new programs to address food insecurity for clients because the need is so high. It is clear that the hunger crisis is far from over. Funding for the Community Food Connections (CFC, formerly known as EFAP) program,, the Food Pantries Initiative and other new funding streams created at the start of the pandemic to support food pantries and soup kitchens should continue to be expanded. Particularly as EFAP now distributes fresh produce, it's essential to increase funds and ensure distribution of EFAP product is done in an equitable manner. In 2016, New York City created the first-in-the-nation food and hygiene pantries in New York City public schools, which provide food, cleaning supplies, menstrual products, and tools to address hygiene for families in the school community. The FY 2024 budget should invest in new school pantries, and it should prioritize their location in communities experiencing the greatest food insecurity or lack a nearby, existing emergency food provider. Likewise, the budget should invest in mobile markets, which are another important strategy to increase access to healthy food, particularly in underserved communities. Mobile markets offer an opportunity for city agencies to partner with local nonprofit organizations and businesses to bring fresh produce to communities across the city that struggle to access it.

**Provide Adult Meals at Summer Meals Sites.** The summer is often referred to as the hungriest time of year. Asked why they did not participate in the summer meals programs before COVID, many parents responded it was because only the child could eat and there weren't meals available for adults. So starting in the spring of 2020, New York City took the extraordinary step of providing meals to adults at the City's own expense during the school year and through summer 2021. New York City should continue this investment to provide adult meals at all summer meal sites so that each member of the family can have regular access to meals. While the New York City Department of Education runs the Summer Meal Program, expansion to adults would require support, resources and funding from other city agencies, including HRA.

## **CONCLUSION**

New York City is recovering from a prolonged period of unprecedented loss and challenges. Throughout the pandemic, city agencies and nonprofit organizations sustained and fed children and families. With the city reopening for business and life taking on signs of more normal existence, it is essential that no New Yorkers are left behind. As you deliberate the FY23 New York City budget, we urge the New York City Council to prioritize funding programs that ensure no New Yorker faces hunger. No Kid Hungry New York stands at the ready to work with the Council and our fellow New Yorkers to ensure all children and families have access to the food they need to thrive.





Testimony Submitted by  
Stephen Grimaldi, Executive Director, New York Common Pantry  
For the Committee of General Welfare Budget Hearing on the FY24 NYC Budget

March 13, 2023

My name is Stephen Grimaldi, Executive Director, New York Common Pantry. Thank you to Deputy Speaker Ayala for holding today's budget hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

New York Common Pantry reduces hunger and promotes dignity, health, and self-sufficiency. NYCP programs work together to meet the needs of food insecure families and individuals, providing services at our own locations as well as over 250 community partner sites citywide. NYCP runs 4 distinct but interrelated programs: Choice Pantry, Help 365 Case Management, Live Healthy!-- nutrition education services and Nourish, a CSFP program serving seniors. Last year, through all of these programs we provided over 9 million meals, over 9 million lbs. of food, accessed over 6 million in benefits, and saw nearly 600,000 visitors to our programs. We are also founding members of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access, where we join with other Emergency Food Providers to advocate for our agencies and those we serve.

NYCP has provided services since 1980 and has responded to many crises over the past 40 years - we know that the issue is not the current crisis but the people in need who are suffering and unable to consistently access life's necessities - food, shelter, and health care.

The current "four-pronged" crisis - pandemic, inflation, migration and SNAP cuts have left an overwhelming number of families still



struggling to make ends meet. SNAP cuts, the latest on this list, will surely increase need at an unprecedented rate over the next year. When SNAP cuts were enacted in 2014, we saw an increase in 500,000 meals served, and that level continued to grow. In the most recent pandemic crisis, we saw an increase in 3 million meals from FY20 - FY22, and this year, prior to the SNAP cuts, were seeing a 15% increase in FY23 numbers over FY22. These SNAP cuts, coming after the economic devastation of the pandemic and inflation, will have a far greater impact. Food providers such as NYCP, will need to serve many more families struggling to put food on the table. During the first two weeks of March, when SNAP cuts went into effect, we saw an 18% increase in our pantries. Our Choice Pantry Bronx program saw a whopping 23% increase in individuals served.

We are asking the Mayor and the City Council to provide much needed support and funding to allow us to continue meeting this intractable and growing need throughout the city. Emergency food providers provide stability for so many who would not know where their next meal is coming from without us. But in order to do this, we need the city budget to provide adequate funding for us to continue and to recognize the ever present and growing need for agencies like ours.

**We are asking the Mayor and City Council to reconsider the proposed flat funding across the board for critical food assistance programs and increase the amount available to agencies such as ours, to provide transparency in how food funding allocations are determined, and to provide escalation clauses in contracts so agencies can cover rising costs of expenses and salaries.**

**We are also asking that HRA and other agencies receive full funding to adequately staff and process SNAP and other applications and to expand CBO benefits access capability.**

**In New York City, a place of such wealth and opportunity, having access to healthy nutritious food should not be so hard.** New York Common Pantry has worked through all of the past crises to ensure that this is not so. However, these proposed funding levels and staff cuts will be devastating for us. We are respectfully requesting that the FY24 city budget appropriately reflect funding levels necessary to confront food insecurity in NYC.

# NYC Family POLICY PROJECT

March 13, 2023

Testimony Of:

Nora McCarthy  
Co-Founder and Director  
NYC Family Policy Project

Hearing:

NYC City Council  
Committee on General Welfare  
Preliminary Budget Hearing

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. This testimony is submitted by the NYC Family Policy Project (FPP), a think tank that works from the perspective that child welfare involvement emerges as a symptom when communities are under stress and duress. FPP develops policy briefs, original research and data analysis to support the work of activists, government, philanthropists and media to reverse overspending on child welfare and under-investment in families and communities.

As we hear today about the hundreds of millions of dollars that ACS spends on investigations, crisis intervention and family separation, I want to encourage City Council to think about what these numbers mean for families and what this spending could look like if we invested up front in neighborhood and family health.

Without question, tens of thousands of families each year are experiencing a terrifying investigation when, at most, they need access to basic resources and caring support. Citywide, almost 45% of Black and Latino children experience an investigation of their family by age 18. In a city where about 60% of kids are Black and Latino, they account for about 90% of children in the system. As ACS' 2019 race equity plan documented, Black families are less likely than other families to be mandated to services in place of removal, are disproportionately separated and experience longer spans in foster care. In short, NYC has built a system of surveillance, but has not grappled with a real vision to support family flourishing. In 2018, the U.S. Children's Bureau acknowledged that many families simply need peer support and "very basic concrete supports." An approach that targets community conditions and

investments in family health can better serve the majority of families and improve the overall health of our city.

### **Invest in Family Economic Security**

The primary investments needed in New York City and state are reinvestments in communities that have been intentionally marginalized by law, policy and practice. Racism and social disinvestment impact Black and Latino families' ability to achieve and maintain stability and are major drivers of child welfare involvement. Yet our city and state's policy approach does not seek to address underlying structural inequalities. Instead, our policy structure stresses and then punishes parents. Investment at the roots of family distress can lift families above survival mode and disrupt cycles of crisis and state intervention.

We know from research that upstream policies like paid family leave have direct downstream effects. An analysis of all states between 2010 and 2017 found that the more states spent on financial supports for poor families—cash assistance, housing, child care, a refundable Earned Income Tax Credit and medical care—the fewer the hotline reports, substantiated cases, foster care placements and fatalities. The study concluded that spending on benefits might be offset, at least in part, by reductions in spending to respond to suspected maltreatment.

Similarly, as Chapin Hall documented in an April 2022 report:

- Expanded Medicaid correlates with decreased neglect reports;
- Paid family leave implementation in California reduced abusive head trauma;
- Referring homeless families for permanent federal housing subsidies netted a 50 percent drop in foster care removals;
- Increasing food stamps and other nutrition assistance enrollments reduced substantiated abuse and neglect reports.

Consider the experiences of two real families in New York City:

- Ms. R was investigated when she had her oldest child stay home from school to watch his little brother while she went to work. She was charged with educational neglect.
- Ms. G's children's school reported her for neglect when she ran out of money for laundry and rinsed her children's clothes in the bathtub without detergent.

Zoom out from Ms. R and Ms. G and it's clear that economic policy has direct effects. When parent who cannot stay home to watch a child who falls ill, that reflects worker protections. New York City has a law requiring 40 hours of sick leave. Yet in 2018, roughly 60% of workers living in poverty said they were not paid for any sick days.

Ms. G's income could not be stretched to cover a basic expense like detergent. That's not unusual. One in five New York City children live in families that struggle to cover the cost of food, and high percentages of low-income households report being unable to afford minor expenses like school supplies (29%) or a \$5.50 Metrocard (20%).

New York state law explicitly recognizes that poverty does not constitute neglect, yet, as ACS itself has testified and started to address, school personnel frequently imagine CPS as a

helper and call in reports rather than directly connecting families to community supports. The result is that, while child welfare was designed to be an emergency response to abuse, it has become the primary response to families struggling with economic hardship.

It is largely very low-income families dependent on public services who end up system-involved. Children from families on public benefits or earning under \$13,000 for a family of three have made up at least half of those in foster care in New York in recent years.

New York City and state have made important investments in minimum wage and other protections but the safety net remains difficult and time-consuming to access and full of holes:

- Dramatic declines in welfare spending and housing assistance have weakened the safety net, thinned natural networks and exacerbated stress on low-income families.
- While the city defined the poverty threshold for a family of three as \$36,262 in 2019, TANF and SNAP benefits combined only net about \$17,000.
- Food stamps often do not last the month, forcing parents to borrow money or spend time accessing pantries, adding stress.
- Housing subsidies that would put stability in reach for thousands of families have failed to pass the Legislature for years.
- Children's mental and behavioral health care, especially psychiatric care, face well-documented shortages.
- Individual stresses are often compounded for low-income families because securing basic needs, like housing, can come with destabilizing tradeoffs, like the loss of community.

During the pandemic, New York City saw the immediate impacts of direct economic investment in family life. Even as the COVID-19 shutdown inflicted incredible stress on families, it led to unusual generosity and innovation in moving resources directly to people in need. Evictions were banned. Food stamp regulations were changed so that children's lunches became available through EBT cards and families were able to use SNAP for prepared foods. Major economic relief came through unemployment benefits, the federal stimulus, the child tax credit and the excluded workers fund. Foundations and nonprofits gave away millions in direct cash assistance with few strings attached.

During this time, all forms of child welfare intervention dropped precipitously, yet there is no indication that NYC children were less safe. Asked in June 2021 whether the pandemic affected child safety, former ACS Commissioner David Hansell answered, "I'm happy to say, and relieved to say, that we haven't seen any indication in New York City that that's the case."

Currently, NYC is spending \$350 million dollars on investigations alone. By making investments in family economic security and emergency cash support, New York City can begin to recoup savings in child welfare spending and reduce this budget.

### **Invest in Neighborhood Life and Community-Led Groups Unconnected to the Child Welfare System**

Another important investment in families is investment in neighborhood flourishing, which can be helped along by purposeful investment in community-led organizations, collective care and

organizing. An extensive body of research on neighborhood conditions and “collective efficacy” shows that safety grows in neighborhoods where residents look out for one another and band together to solve problems. Health is better and crime is lower in active, connected communities, even when disadvantage is the same. The social fabric, like economic policy and the physical landscape, is an independent force in neighborhoods that profoundly shapes family life.

Neighborhood infrastructure can make a difference. Consider Betsy Head Park in Brownsville. Since it was dramatically renovated, it’s been a resource for mothers. Sports programs there afford families respite. Little moments on the sidelines connect them with other moms. These kinds of opportunities can be planned. Well-kept playgrounds, quality health and mental health providers, converging transportation lines that put jobs within reach, and even a shady canopy of trees — all of these intangibles have been documented to ease the burden on parents. Neighborhood greenspaces enhance children’s cognitive functioning and social well-being. Libraries and safe places to play give parents a breather. One participant in a study about the built environment summed it up bluntly:

*“They’ve got [to have] a place to go to...Like a computer room for the kids... swimming ... Have something to do...[s]o they won’t be all in their [parent’s] face and hair all the time about every little thing. It can be aggravating...It really can be.”*

A father noted that family joys come easier when community life is well-resourced:

*“[T]hings in the community, [like] parks...just getting out and walking with your kids, jogging, different things like ice cream [shops], a lot of things that are just outlets for, you know, mentally going crazy. So, you just gotta keep yourself occupied and you know, also keep your kids on the same level.”*

In short, for parents, neighborhood assets and networks act as patches to America’s frayed safety net. But where structural disinvestment has depleted networks and neighborhood infrastructure, parents are on their own. Since research on “collective efficacy” first came out in 1997, cities nationwide have spent tens of millions of dollars on relationship-building approaches to reduce crime, starting with “violence interrupters.” Yet no concurrent effort has been undertaken to invest in the social fabric to strengthen family life.

Equitable neighborhood investment around family life has been hampered in New York City in part because no government entity holds a charter to do that work, and this investment should not come through ACS, including its well-intentioned Office of Family Well-Being and Family Enrichment Centers. Parents impacted by the child welfare system have rejected the notion that a system with the power to separate families — and that has been the agent of generations of traumatic loss and terror — should position itself as their locus of support. NYC cannot rely on the child welfare system to engage with families.

While community safety and other issues that fall at the intersection of multiple city agencies — like immigrant affairs or child care — are coordinated by a mayoral office or a team at City Hall, a “Children’s Cabinet” set up in 2014 was never meaningfully staffed for impact. It’s critical to begin a careful process of developing paths for community funding that don’t run through the

state or city child welfare system and that meaningfully invest in, sustain and scale grassroots efforts.

Every neighborhood with high child welfare impacts has community leaders who advocate for neighborhood investments and bring families together. Paulette Bazil is one of many examples. (You may remember her son, Jelani Alladin, who starred in Frozen when it opened on Broadway.) When Paulette moved to Brownsville in 1996 with her mother and two young children, she joined a church around the corner and, bearing leftover donuts that she picked up near her job on Wall Street, hosted programs for local kids at the church, at her kitchen table and in her backyard.

Bazil has also noted that many parents in her neighborhood don't have family nearby, and some that do can't get help from their families "because the freshness of the teen years comes between them." What she imagines could help families knit themselves back together is "talking through things they have never said to each other" and making agreements that "put the past in the past and put the baby's future in focus in what they do in the present."

Many groups have developed peer support, restorative and transformative justice and community safety practices that call in community around families. NYC has a growing network of organizations using restorative approaches to heal and build collective action. Organizations like H.O.L.L.A., Community Connections for Youth, Institute for Transformative Mentoring, B.R.E.A.T.H.E. Collective and many others use peacekeeping circles to heal and build accountable relationships. Projects including the Barnard Center and the Transformative Justice Hub share experiments and learning about collective care and accountability. However, the majority of publicly funded family support approaches are built on the concept of individual pathology and individual, clinical treatment. As Zuleka Henderson, Tricia Stephens, Anna Ortega-Williams and Quenette Walton have written: "Public funding should prioritize and directly support community-based cultural healers and collective healing models, and incentivize mental health programs within African- American communities that demonstrate and apply knowledge of culturally relevant healing frameworks at institutional and direct practice levels."

It's possible to coordinate direct investment in families and in trusted organizations that have a track record of responsive care in their communities, and to build up strong families and neighborhoods so that far fewer families are hitting crises—and far less of our precious NYC budget is going to child welfare.



**Testimony by the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)**

**Before the New York City Council General Welfare Committee regarding:**

**Preliminary Budget Hearing**

**March 13, 2023**

Deputy Speaker Ayala, Council Members, and staff, good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the General Welfare Committee about the FY24 budget. My name is Abby Biberman, and I am Associate Director of the Public Benefits Unit at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). NYLAG uses the power of the law to help New Yorkers in need combat social, racial, and economic injustice. We address emerging and urgent legal needs with comprehensive, free civil legal services, impact litigation, policy advocacy, and community education. NYLAG serves immigrants, seniors, the homebound, families facing foreclosure, renters facing eviction, low-income consumers, those in need of government assistance, children in need of special education, domestic violence victims, persons with disabilities, patients with chronic illness or disease, low-wage workers, low-income members of the LGBTQ community, Holocaust survivors, veterans, as well as others in need of free legal services. In FY22, NYLAG impacted the lives of nearly 113,000 New Yorkers.

NYLAG has a unique service model, which through its over 30-year history, has focused on embedding staff in partnering community organizations, allowing us to provide critical services to the most vulnerable New Yorkers by meeting them where they are. The demand for legal services outpaces the number of advocates that are available to provide high quality, meaningful representation, and continues to grow. New Yorkers experiencing poverty are facing unprecedented civil legal issues. Now is the time to recommit and increase funding to legal



services, so we may give those struggling in our city a fighting chance to protect their rights and access benefits to which they are entitled.

### **Commitment to Funding Fairness**

NYLAG is grateful to the city of New York for its deep and ongoing commitment to civil legal services. NYLAG's staff are amongst the many legal and social service providers that are doing the essential work to support our communities. Work that, in many instances, only exists because of the inequities, disparities, and obstacles that exist throughout all the systems we encounter. NYLAG's mission to achieve justice for our clients and communities is a direct result of systemic failures by the courts, administrative agencies, policies, and laws that work against our clients. There is chronic underinvestment of under-resourced communities, including underinvestment in the legal and social service providers who serve communities to mitigate these failures.

NYLAG is proud to be a provider in many of the City's hallmark innovative programming that provides much needed services to those that need it most. However, legal services providers have reached a tipping point. Despite the value of the life-changing services we provide, human services providers like NYLAG face a multitude of obstacles in the City procurement and payment process, sometimes waiting years for payment on operating contracts. Existing contracts do not allow providers to offer competitive and fair wages to the staff implementing these services. NYLAG and many other civil legal services providers have a unionized workforce that are chronically underpaid. We value the incredible work our advocates do every day and want to be able to give them fair and equitable wages. However, systemic challenges in nonprofit contracting with the City to provide services are limiting and have real impacts on our fiscal stability and the services we can provide.

Years of contracts that haven't kept pace with rising costs, coupled with systemic contracting and payment delays have threatened organizations' financial stability and resulted in extremely high rates of attrition. Underfunding and payment delays doesn't just impact our organization, but also the legal rights of all low-income New Yorkers and New Yorkers in crisis. We are calling on the City to invest in civil legal services so providers like NYLAG can continue to effectively protect the rights of New Yorkers, ensure they can access basic needs, and help them on a pathway to stability. Funding shortfalls exist because of year after year contract extensions are made that do not account for rising costs, COLAs, or inflation. Our costs rise, but the deliverables remain the same thereby requiring organizations to remedy the shortfall through private philanthropy or other less restricted program funding to maintain staffing levels to meet the demand. However, all too often, organizations like NYLAG must divert unrestricted resources to makeup the funding shortfall of city contracts.

In addition, new proposals underfund the programs from the start. Recently, NYLAG responded to an RFA for a contract that we have held for nine years and that we believe is mission aligned and provides invaluable, lifesaving, services to clients. If we are awarded, NYLAG will begin year one of the contract contributing over \$200,000 to cover the full costs of operation—a figure that will compound year over year. This is not sustainable. There is a real cost to doing business with the city.

**A budget that addresses funding fairness and contracting policies is critical.**

A stark example of the need for investment in civil legal services is the Right to Council (RTC) program. As you know, New York City is a leader in ensuring tenants' rights, as we were the first city in the nation to pass legislation that ensures low-income tenants have a right to counsel in eviction proceedings. Despite the invaluable impact RTC has on tenants, the program

has faced numerous challenges. Rapid expansion, the absence of a meaningful case standard, and insufficient funding has resulted in high rates of attrition as staff face burnout and organizations are forced to operate with a lean administrative and support structure. Demand of eligible clients facing eviction is much greater than the supply of attorneys providing this work. At the same time, NYLAG's reimbursements have been delayed, in some cases significantly. For example, budget modifications from FY21 are still being held up with no clear reason. The consequences of these operational struggles hurt low-income New Yorkers facing eviction because they cannot get representation when they need it most.

The City must lead with its values with the contracts that it sets. City contracts rates of pay drive the salary and benefits our organizations can offer our staff. Failing to invest equitably in this work means perpetuating the systemic inequities this funding is meant to alleviate. To provide organizational funding fairness, NYLAG would need an increase of \$5.2 million on our current baselined and discretionary contracts in FY24 to be able to maintain current services levels without relying on other financial resources.

NYLAG is also respectfully asking the counsel for the following initiative funding: Legal Services for Low Income New Yorkers (\$2,000,000); Immigrant Opportunities (\$600,000); Immigrant Health (\$473,000); Low Wage Worker Support (\$400,000); Legal Services for Veterans (\$275,000). We are also seeking discretionary funding for the Mobile Legal Help Center, Community Safety & Victims Services, and member directed funding for the Domestic Violence Empowerment (DoVE) Initiative). Civil legal services help vulnerable New Yorkers fight for their rights within systems that were conceived to uplift communities and families but designed to discourage access. Initiative funding is critical for our organization to help those in need.

In addition to the above funding requests, please consider the following policy recommendations that aim to improve the Department of Social Services' ("DSS") administration of benefits.

### **Human Resources Administration ("HRA") Delays**

HRA has been systemically failing to process applications and recertifications, failing to conduct eligibility interviews, either by failing to reach out to clients, or failing to maintain a phone system that clients can utilize to call back, and failing to index documents submitted by clients resulting in delays, wrongful denials, and inadequate benefit levels. Our clients rely on the DSS/HRA to administer these subsistence benefits, and the city is failing in multiple ways.

HRA is failing to process the multi-page applications and recertifications that clients complete, sign, and submit, either online, by fax, mail, or in person. HRA repeatedly acknowledges the unprecedented need, and it has a duty to serve these New Yorkers in need in the manner proscribed by applicable laws and regulations. NYLAG has also had unprecedented number of clients over the past year who have submitted their recertifications on time, only to find out the following month that HRA failed to process the paperwork and discontinued their benefits. New applicants for benefits are also experiencing delays. They complete their applications and do not receive a determination or benefits to which they are eligible by the 30<sup>th</sup> day, as required by federal and state law and regulations. Applicants are often left waiting for multiple months for benefits they desperately need.

The delays NYLAG is seeing include emergency assistance applications for rent arrears grants ("one shot deals"). Clients send in applications and never receive a decision from HRA. When NYLAG advocates intervene, they are told that their application was never received by the

unit charged with processing it, even when we have documentary proof that it was submitted, and the clients are told they must reapply. These clients are facing harsh deadlines in housing court, and the risk of eviction increases because of the HRA delays.

Applicants and those recertifying are also often unable to connect with caseworkers to complete the required phone interview. For Cash Assistance, HRA is supposed to call the client to complete the interview. Clients are not given a scheduled interview, and if they even receive a call, but miss answering in time, it is often impossible for them to connect with a caseworker again to complete the interview. HRA codes this as an incomplete application or recertification and closes or rejects the case. This contributes to administrative churn, causing some clients to temporarily lose benefits or to submit multiple reapplications before they are accepted. Meanwhile, as with the delay, these clients who are forced to reapply are missing deadlines in housing court, losing out on rental supplement programs, and at serious risk of eviction.

Finally, HRA routinely fails to index documents that are submitted online and via other methods, such as fax or in person. As a result, clients are improperly denied benefits for failure to submit documents, or they are accepted for benefits at a much lower level than they should based on their household income and expenses. For example, a client may be accepted for SNAP benefits due to their income, but a SNAP budget deducts expenses that they can document, such as rent. If the agency fails to index the documents they submit, it can result in the difference between a monthly SNAP benefit of \$20 or \$281 for an individual. For Cash Assistance recipients, most of the documentation is required to get approved for benefits, so cases with improperly indexed documents are rejected, and impacted client are forced to request a hearing or reapply for benefits, or both.

The city must address the delays and failures to administer these benefits properly. It must find ways to fill positions at HRA, whether through increasing salaries, or by making the positions more attractive with remote work opportunities. It must think creatively about how to better serve New Yorkers in need, and it must follow the laws and regulations that require timely processing of applications and recertifications. Our clients desperately need these subsistence benefits to feed their families and emergency assistance to prevent eviction.

### **CityFHEPS**

The Council is aware of that the Department of Homeless Services (“DHS”) shelter system is significantly over capacity<sup>1</sup>. The city must take steps to make space in the overcrowded shelter system, by moving people to permanent housing as quickly as possible. The following recommendations are in furtherance of this goal.

- (1) The city must repeal the rule that requires a person to be in shelter for 90 days before becoming eligible for a CityFHEPS shopping letter. This rule prevents individuals and families from obtaining stability, and it exacerbates shelter overcrowding. These households have already completed the onerous shelter eligibility application and have been found eligible for Temporary Housing in DHS shelter. There is no reason why they should need to remain in the shelter for an additional 90 days before even being able to start the process of searching for permanent housing.
- (2) The city must allocate sufficient funds to target source of income discrimination that prevents those with CityFHEPS shopping letters from securing an apartment.

Concurrently, the city must look at all of the causes of this discrimination and remedy

---

<sup>1</sup> At the March 13, 2023 General Welfare Committee Preliminary Budget Hearing, Molly Park, Acting Commissioner of the NYC Department of Social Services, testified that the shelter census was approximately 71,000.

what is in its control. For example, some landlords simply don't want to rent to CityFHEPS voucher holds because the process for getting an apartment approved for a voucher is slow and overly burdensome for landlords, and often riddled with administrative errors by DSS. If a willing landlord makes a mistake on the application, it can take many days or even weeks before that information is relayed from DSS to shelter caseworkers and back to the landlord. Clients also report that DSS is not able to schedule apartment inspections in a timely manner. Even when a landlord is willing to hold an apartment to complete the process, often, after several weeks, they are forced to rent an apartment to someone who can start the lease and begin paying rent more quickly in order to pay their bills. The city must allocate sufficient resources to eradicate the source of income discrimination and the underlying causes.

- (3) The city must expand CityFHEPS eligibility to allow more households in the community to become eligible for the voucher without requiring a shelter history or currently being in a DHS shelter. Expansion of CityFHEPS eligibility is financially prudent and humane. Households are being evicted from stable and affordable apartments because there are not enough programs available that will help them maintain their housing. When they are not eligible for a rental assistance program to prevent eviction, they are forced to enter the shelter system, where they languish until they can obtain a shopping letter and secure a new apartment. This often trauma-inducing experiencing could be avoided by making the voucher available to more households in the community to preserve their homes.

(4) The city must improve administration of the CityFHEPS program. A key component to maintaining stability in permanent housing is reliable rental assistance programs. NYLAG represents clients in housing court and people who are exiting the shelter system with CityFHEPS. Once approved, problems persist for our clients with the administration of the benefit. Clients are unable to reach anyone at HRA to report changes and missing benefits. Our clients who rely on CityFHEPS vouchers report that HRA often does not pay their rent on time and sometimes will discontinue rental payments without notice to the landlord, or fail to recertify a client who submitted their recertification paperwork on time. We routinely represent clients who are in months of arrears without being made aware that CityFHEPS payments were not being made. For some, the problems persist for so long that they end up back in housing court and at risk of homelessness once again. Without attention being paid to the administration of the CityFHEPS program, the voucher is meaningless.

### **Shelter Eligibility**

The city must improve the shelter intake process, because it delays access to shelter and prolongs the waiting period before a person can become eligible for a CityFHEPS voucher to exit the shelter system. Because of the onerous shelter eligibility process, families are often entrenched in a continuous cycle of application, denial, and reapplication, which causes considerable harm.

The application process is time consuming and often emotionally fraught, exacerbating an already traumatic experience for homeless families. For each application and reapplication, a family is required to provide a “two-year housing history” listing each address where the family has lived during the prior two years, and contact information for the third party owner or primary



tenant at each address. In cases where a family has been street homeless, the family is required to account for their whereabouts for each day during the prior two years, primarily by providing statements from witnesses who observed the family “living” at those locations, such as an automobile, subway car or public park. DHS attempts to contact, or re-contact, each owner, primary tenant, or witness in connection with each application or reapplication. Repeated calls by the DHS can negatively impact a homeless family’s relationships with family and friends. In cases where a family has left an address due to conflict at the premises, outreach from DHS can worsen the situation. In other cases, those who have housed a homeless family in the past or provided witness statements may feel irritated or harassed by repeated calls and visits from DHS and simply decide not to cooperate in the future.

Finally, families who are deemed ineligible for shelter are not eligible for the programs that assist homeless families transition to permanent housing (particularly the CityFHEPS). Without this assistance, families are unlikely ever to gain the means to leave the shelter system and thus the ineligibility finding effectively traps them in the shelter system. This is particularly problematic because life in a shelter takes an enormous toll on the wellbeing of a homeless family, as detailed above.

The goal of all families in the shelter system is to transition to the stability of permanent housing which is almost impossible without a finding of eligibility. DHS must assist clients to obtain documentation needed to prove eligibility, and DHS must not find families ineligible because a third-party has not provided a “reasonable justification” for refusing to house the family.

Thank you to the Committee on General Welfare for the work it has done to facilitate services for vulnerable New Yorkers and for holding this hearing. I look forward to a strong continued partnership with the Council and the Mayor's Office.

Respectfully submitted,

New York Legal Assistance Group

# Rethink Food

75 Broad Street | 7th Floor, Suite 707 | New York, NY 10004  
(212) 364-7040  
www.rethinkfood.org

---

## The New York City Council General Welfare Committee Preliminary Budget Hearing Monday, March 13th, 2023, 10 A.M.

**TO:** The General Welfare Committee  
**FROM:** Kathleen DiPerna, Rethink Food NYC, Inc.  
**DATE:** Monday, March 13th, 2023

Speaker Adams, General Welfare Chair Ayala, Commissioners, General Welfare Committee Members, Council, and Staff,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on Rethink Food's efforts to combat food insecurity while addressing food waste and providing support to frontline community-based organizations and struggling restaurants. In addition, we are seeking support for our citywide funding requests through the Speaker's Initiative (\$150,000) and Food Pantries Initiative (\$50,000 from the Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan and Bronx Delegations). My name is Kathleen DiPerna, and I am the Director of Government Relations at Rethink Food, a New York City-based nonprofit with the mission to create a more sustainable and equitable food system - one where every New Yorker has access to dignified, culturally responsive, and nutritious food. Currently, **we operate in 32 council districts across all 5 boroughs**; support and partnership with the Council will be critical to ensuring that Rethink can continue to operate its models that address food insecurity, sustainability, and local economic development and further the general welfare of every New Yorker.

Rethink was founded in 2017 in New York City by our CEO, chef Matt Jozwiak, who saw firsthand how much good food from restaurants goes underutilized. He started the Rethink Commissary kitchen by transforming excess food from restaurants, corporate kitchens, and grocery stores into meals delivered to CBOs – a model that concurrently tackles food waste and food insecurity. Today the kitchen prepares an average of 8K meals per week and distributes to 12 CBOs in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.

Our work has evolved to include another innovative solution to address food insecurity – the Rethink Certified restaurant program. Launched at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with food insecurity escalating and restaurants facing widespread closures, Rethink leveraged its experience to partner with restaurants to prepare meals for communities facing food insecurity. In exchange, we provide grants to support food, operating, and staffing costs. We had a unique opportunity to distribute meals to vulnerable communities and help restaurants stay open and retain staff. In 2022, Rethink and its partners delivered nearly 2M meals to 75+ CBOs, invested \$8.6M into 46 restaurants (75% of which were minority and or women-owned), and recovered nearly 570K pounds of excess food.

# Rethink Food

75 Broad Street | 7th Floor, Suite 707 | New York, NY 10004  
(212) 364-7040  
[www.rethinkfood.org](http://www.rethinkfood.org)

---

In an effort to target the areas of NYC with the greatest need for our meals, the majority of our programming in NYC takes place in vulnerable communities and those hardest hit by the pandemic, as defined and prioritized by the [NYC Taskforce on Racial Inclusion & Equity \(TRIE\)](#). These communities also report higher percentages of health and socioeconomic disparities. In addition, we respond to the emergent needs of the changing population of NYC. For instance, our programming reaches our newly arrived asylum-seeking neighbors, providing meals at Port Authority and our already partnered CBO sites receiving migrants at their locations. As of February 2023, Rethink has delivered 88K meals and invested \$350K into the asylum seeker crisis, and plans to continue to serve the incoming asylum seekers.

Based on 2020 data, on average, each meal provided by Rethink supports a CBO with: a 19% food insecurity rate; 25% poverty rate; 72% minority population served; and 26% of households on food stamps. Through a CBO needs assessment survey conducted in 2021, we learned that: 63% of CBOs clients are unemployed at any given time; 80% of CBOs clients are racial/ethnic minorities; and 42% of CBOs clients don't speak English as their first language.

Looking ahead to 2023, through Rethink Certified, we plan to provide ~30K meals per week to those individuals served by our CBO partners. Through the Commissary Kitchen, Rethink will convert donated food items from restaurants, hospitality institutions, food suppliers and grocery stores into nutrient-dense meals to deliver an average of 8K meals per week to CBOs in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan at no cost.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, and we look forward to continuing the conversation on how in partnership through our discretionary requests, we work together to promote and support the general welfare of the most vulnerable New Yorkers.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kathleen DiPerna

2 Lafayette Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10007  
T 212.577.7700 F 212.385.0331 [www.safehorizon.org](http://www.safehorizon.org)



Testimony of  
Jimmy Meagher, Policy Director  
Safe Horizon

On the Fiscal Year 2024 Preliminary Budget

Committee on General Welfare  
Hon. Diana Ayala, Chair

New York City Council

3.13.2023

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Jimmy Meagher, and I am Policy Director at Safe Horizon, the nation's largest non-profit victim services organization. Safe Horizon offers a client-centered, trauma-informed response to 250,000 New Yorkers each year who have experienced violence or abuse. We are increasingly using a lens of racial equity and justice to guide our work with clients, with each other, and in developing the positions we hold.

Whether we are called on to provide expert testimony at an oversight hearing or to assist a constituent in crisis and in need of emergency services, we are proud to partner with the City Council in a collective effort to make our city safer for all. We look forward to helping you and your staff learn how best to support survivors and connect them to the resources available in your borough and community.

Over many years, the City Council has been a key supporter of our programs helping adult, adolescent, and child victims of violence and abuse. City Council funding fills in gaps where no other financial support exists and allows us to draw down critical dollars from other sources. Moreover, this funding demonstrates the value that you and your colleagues place in helping survivors of all ages access desperately-needed shelter, support services, legal assistance, and counseling.

The City Council has also championed the human services nonprofit sector. Our sector desperately needs your help to ensure that human services workers across our sector receive the compensation and support we need. To be frank – our sector is in crisis. Nonprofit human services organizations are shuttering as a result of delayed contracts and payments. And nonprofits across the sector are struggling to hire and retain staff as a result of an unjust wage structure largely determined by government contracts.

The City of New York contracts with nonprofits to deliver the essential services so many New Yorkers rely on – for food, for safety, for shelter, etc. However, the City too often asks our community of nonprofits to do more with less and to accept the bare minimum. This means that many - too many - nonprofit human services workers, the majority of whom are women and people of color, are barely surviving on the wages paid by underfunded City contracts. Because many survivors come into victim services work to help other survivors, City funding for the nonprofit victim services sector is an economic justice issue for survivors. To live up to our shared values of equity, equality, and supporting communities, our City must commit to fully funding the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) and other fair and just investments to our sector, to fully funding city contracts at appropriate levels to allow non-profits to offer competitive living wage salaries, and to paying organizations on time for the work we have already done. Pay equity is a racial justice issue, a gender justice issue, and an economic justice issue.

My testimony today will focus on the needs of the nonprofit human services sector, with specific focus on the core asks of the #JustPay campaign. I will highlight the City Council discretionary and initiative funding contracted through ACS and HRA/DSS that Safe Horizon relies on to provide essential services to survivors of violence and abuse across the five boroughs. I will outline Safe Horizon's recommendation for funding the housing stability program created when Int. 0153-2022 was signed into law. Lastly, I will focus on our recommendations to end family and youth homelessness.

## **#JustPay**

Safe Horizon is a proud member of the #JustPay campaign, which is a racial equity and gender justice campaign committed to ending the government exploitation of human services workers. The #JustPay campaign is demanding that sector employees under contract with New York City and State be paid fair wages for their labor.

Each year you hear from providers who are struggling due to the crisis of compounding underfunding of the human services sector as City budgets are balanced on the backs of low-income neighborhoods and BIPOC communities. This practice has resulted in poverty-level wages for human services workers, who are predominantly women (66%) and people of color (68%). To address this crisis, we ask the City to immediately adopt three core reforms:

1. Establish, fund, and enforce an automatic annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) on all human services contracts.
2. Set a living wage floor of no less than \$21 an hour for all City and State funded human services workers.
3. Create, fund, and incorporate a comprehensive wage and benefit schedule for government contracted human services workers comparable to the salaries made by City and State employees in the same field.

We want to thank the Council for supporting the sector with a \$60M workforce investment and for being vocal champions of the #JustPay campaign. Unfortunately, the investment last year was much delayed, with providers waiting 6 months or longer for guidance, and the investment fell short of the 4% COLA the Council had included in budget negotiations.

**Therefore, as we ask for a 6.5% COLA this year, we also ask the Council to ensure it is included in the budget as a “cost-of-living adjustment” and not some other named initiative.** Providers have to be able to rely on the budget documents and percentage to enact wage changes, while waiting for money to flow from the City.

We believe a 6.5% COLA would cost an estimated \$200 million and would help workers just keep pace with inflation. Our workers are critical to healthy and safer communities, and our organizations struggle to attract and retain staff, which means that communities suffer when we are unable to fully staff programs.

A COLA is not a permanent solution to closing the gap in pay and compensating workers for years of underfunding. This results in increased staff turnover as underpaid staff leave nonprofits for better paying jobs in government or the private sector, depriving New Yorkers of services from the most experienced, well-trained staff and jeopardizing high-quality services. We consistently hear elected leaders telling their constituents that they care about and fight for victims and survivors of violence, abuse, and crime. Ensuring that the nonprofit human services workers who provide the very services and supports survivors need and depend on is a very real, very tangible way for the City to demonstrate that it cares about victims and survivors.

A 6.5% COLA in FY24 and more long-term, sustainable solutions would be very meaningful to organizations like ours that never stopped providing critical services during this pandemic.

### **Initiative and Discretionary Funding**

City Council initiative and discretionary funding contracted through the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and the Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services (HRA/DSS) supports the following Safe Horizon programs:

#### **Child Advocacy Centers (CACs)**

Child abuse cases grab at the heartstrings of every New Yorker. We recoil at the very thought of someone knowingly harming a child, and we entrust a number of different agencies - the police, prosecutors, child welfare specialists, doctors - to investigate and respond to these cases and help ensure the safety of children placed in harm's way. For many years, these agencies worked almost entirely in silos, focusing on their specific roles in uncovering what took place, or responding to the child, or holding the offender accountable. Such a disconnected approach required that children disclose repeatedly the painful details of the harm they endured in a variety of settings not commonly thought of as "child-friendly" - police precincts, district attorneys' office, and hospital emergency rooms. Over and over, children would be asked to talk about the violence they suffered, only to have to repeat their story yet again every time a new investigator stepped into the picture. Each time, the child wondered how many more times they would have to relive this pain so that another adult could write down some notes and ask yet another round of probing, deeply personal questions. Many child victims were left feeling as if no one believed them and felt to blame for causing disruption to their families. This method of investigating incidents of abuse was traumatizing, stigmatizing, and unjust.

For many years now, child victims in New York City who experience severe physical or sexual abuse are brought to Safe Horizon's Child Advocacy Centers (CACs), which are at the forefront of the city's response to child abuse. At our CACs, child victims of sexual and/or severe physical abuse receive the help they need quickly and in one location. The police, prosecutors, medical professionals, victim advocates, clinicians, and child protective caseworkers are all under one roof in a child-friendly environment that minimizes trauma and facilitates healing. This allows us to facilitate a swift, comprehensive, coordinated investigation and multi-disciplinary team response that significantly reduces the number of times children must disclose details of their abuse. This coordinated, trauma-informed response to abuse helps to prevent the re-traumatization of the child during each re-telling of the violence that took place. In FY22, our CACs provided services to over 8,800 children and nearly 4,000 caregivers throughout the five boroughs. The City Council supports our CACs through the **Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault**, which is contracted through ACS.

**We are requesting a restoration and an enhancement to \$1,000,000 in FY24 to sustain general operations in our CACs across the five boroughs so we can continue to provide healing and support to child victims. Additionally, we are seeking for this core funding to be baselined to ensure the City's continued investment in the CAC model.**



### Legal Services: Immigration Law Project & Domestic Violence Law Project

Safe Horizon's Immigration Law Project (ILP) and Domestic Violence Law Project (DVLP) provide expert legal services and guidance to at-risk New Yorkers seeking relief in immigration proceedings and on family and matrimonial law matters. Our team of attorneys and paralegals help their clients access temporary and permanent residency, work authorization, orders of protection, custody, visitation, child support, and divorces. In FY22, our Immigration Law Project provided full representation, advice, and consults to over 900 clients, and also provided over 4,600 telephonic information and referral services, while our DV Law Project provided services to over 1,100 clients and offered telephonic helpline services to over 400 callers seeking assistance. The City Council supports ILP & DVLP through the **Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI)** and **Safe Alternatives to Violent Encounters (SAVE) Initiative**, which are contracted through HRA/DSS.

Safe Horizon's Domestic Violence Law Project utilizes funding through the **Supportive Alternatives to Violent Encounters (SAVE) Initiative** to provide direct legal services to indigent victims of domestic violence in Family, Supreme, and Integrated DV Courts throughout the city. Our dedicated legal staff assist with orders of protection, child support, custody, visitation, and divorce proceedings. We also operate a legal helpline that provides information, referrals, and assistance to domestic violence survivors. In the months and years ahead, as our city continues to recover from COVID-19, our legal services, and the services provided by our legal partners across NYC, will be critical for the many, many survivors who are waiting for the courts to address the immense backlog of cases. **We are seeking a restoration of \$275,000 so our Domestic Violence Law Project can continue to serve survivors with the legal services they require to find safety and healing.**

Safe Horizon's Immigration Law Project utilizes funding through the City Council's **Immigrant Opportunities Initiative (IOI)** to provide expert legal advice and representation to undocumented victims of crime, violence, abuse, trafficking, and torture. ILP staff help guide their clients through complex immigration proceedings and assist them with applications for U-Visas, T-Visas, VAWA self-petitions, asylum, adjustment of status and citizenship, as well as in removal defense. Over the last several years, as a result of the prior administration's immigration policies, Safe Horizon's ILP has seen an increase of survivors seeking our immediate assistance. The steady flow of new arrivals to New York from border states, coupled with the fact that many New York-area immigration legal service providers are not accepting new intakes, drives many individuals and families desperate for immigration legal help to our office, which has remained open and serving clients even during the height of the COVID pandemic. **To help ensure that our Immigration Law Project has the capacity to respond to pressing legal cases for immigrant and undocumented survivors, we are seeking an enhancement to \$100,000 to Safe Horizon through IOI in FY24.**

### Fund the Housing Stability Program for Survivors of Domestic and Gender Based Violence

Safe Horizon is grateful to the City Council for passing Int. 153-2022 last year and to Mayor Adams for signing it into law. Too often the survivors who come to our programs for help need small amounts of money to remain stably housed, to find and secure housing, and to find safety.

These small expenses are often the one thing standing in the way of safety and healing. The housing stability program will provide survivors of domestic violence with a low-barrier grant for urgent expenses and domestic violence-related services.

In consultation with New Destiny Housing, Sanctuary for Families, Urban Resource Institute (URI), and Volunteers of America, we recommend that the City fund this program at \$6 million in FY24. We recognize that the Mayor's preliminary budget includes \$1.2 million annually from FY24 through FY27 for the fund, in addition to one program manager position in HRA. Although this is a start, we believe that this amount does not cover the vast need. If we estimate the average grant to be \$2,000/household for rent, furniture, groceries, and other essential items, the Mayor's preliminary budget would assist 600 survivors, not the many thousands of survivors living in New York City. **We are urging the Administration to reach and assist more survivors by funding the housing stability program at \$6 million, setting aside 15% to cover administrative costs for partner organizations.**

### **Policy Solutions to End Youth and Family Homelessness**

Lastly, Safe Horizon joins the calls of housing advocates across NYC in urging the City Council to work with Mayor Adams and all elected and government officials across our city to put an end to youth and family homelessness. Safe Horizon is a proud member of both the Coalition for Homeless Youth and the Family Homelessness Coalition (FHC), coalitions working to prevent and end homelessness.

With regards to youth homelessness, we are concerned with the City's handling of the groundbreaking legislation that was enacted in 2021 that would finally make youth experiencing homelessness in the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) funded Runaway Homeless Youth (RHY) programs as well as youth transitioning out of the Administration for Children Services (ACS) care eligible for CityFHEPS vouchers without having first to enter Department of Homeless Services shelter. It is our understanding that ACS's and DYCD's interpretation of the law is consistent with the law - meaning that DYCD-RHY and ACS youth would get access to CityFHEPS vouchers without having to enter DHS shelter, and that they would be awarded the same DSS/HRA administered vouchers that individuals have access to from DHS shelter. Unfortunately, DSS/DHS's interpretation of the laws is different. The resulting interagency disagreement was brought to the City Law Department, which issued guidance that essentially ignores the legislative intent that led to the enactment of the laws. We urge the Council to ensure that DSS upholds Local Laws 170 and 157 of 2022 as the City Council intended and the community supported, and grant youth experiencing homelessness in the DYCD-funded RHY programs as well as youth transitioning out of ACS care, who are otherwise eligible, access to CityFHEPS vouchers without forcing them to enter DHS shelter, which is an unsafe system for many of our RHY clients.

We strongly believe that the City must identify opportunities to improve financial sustainability but must not cut programs and services that are vital to family wellbeing. We believe urgent action must be taken to eliminate the costly 90-day shelter rule for CityFHEPS eligibility. We also urge you to examine potential reforms such as elimination of the shelter stay requirement for CityFHEPS eligibility, elimination of the requirement of a housing court eviction to qualify for

CityFHEPS housing assistance, and expanding CityFHEPS eligibility to undocumented households. These reforms would allow more families to stay housed, relocate to stable housing more quickly, and ultimately save the City hundreds of millions of dollars in shelter-related costs.

Lastly, we are grateful that staffing of City agencies is a priority of the City Council. As Safe Horizon testified at the December 15, 2022 Committee on General Welfare hearing on timeliness of public benefits, delays in processing housing vouchers, food stamps, and other public benefits are hurting our clients. We have heard that these delays may be caused or exacerbated by limited staffing at HRA. We are sympathetic to this, as the human services nonprofit sector is also experiencing staffing shortages. If that is the case, the Administration should prioritize investments in HRA staff, rather than cut positions, and eliminate barriers to hiring, including allowing for remote work and/or hybrid models. The Administration should be eliminating bureaucratic barriers rather than creating new ones that only compound the many crises our clients are facing.

Clients across all of Safe Horizon's programs need safe, affordable, stable housing. So many victims and survivors of all forms of violence call our Hotlines and turn to our programs for housing assistance every day. And the housing options we can offer remain too few in number. Temporary emergency shelter will always serve a purpose for survivors, but the City needs to do everything it can to connect New Yorkers experiencing homelessness to permanent housing. **Safe Horizon's mission is to provide support, prevent violence, and promote justice for victims of crime and abuse, their families, and communities.** When we say "justice for victims" we mean so much more than just criminal justice. Rather, we cannot promote justice for victims and survivors without also demanding housing justice and economic justice. Our clients, which include runaway and homeless youth (RHY), survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence, immigrant and undocumented survivors, trafficking survivors, and so many others, need safe, stable, affordable housing to find justice and healing.

### **Conclusion**

As the City Council and the Administration sets the budget for the next fiscal year, it's imperative that our city expand, perfect, create, and invest in programming that provides healing and support to people who have experienced harm, violence, and trauma. When we invest in the safety, healing, and well-being of individual New Yorkers, we invest in the safety, healing, and well-being of New York City as a whole.

And it is essential that the City invest in the nonprofit human services workforce that we collectively rely on to support our safety net. We urge you and your colleagues to listen to providers and implement the three core asks of the #JustPay campaign.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony. We are available to provide more information and answer any questions you may have.



---

## The Testimony of The Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) for the NYC Council General Welfare Committee Hearing March 13, 2023

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony before the New York City Council's General Welfare Committee. My name is Lauren Velez and I'm the Associate Director for NY at CSH. CSH is a national non-profit that works with communities all over the country to devise and implement supportive housing solutions as a response to homelessness. Supportive housing is an effective, long-term intervention that pairs permanently affordable units with voluntary, individualized wrap-around services, to offer our most vulnerable and behaviorally complex community members an opportunity to stabilize and thrive in safe, affordable housing. Supportive housing has been proven to increase public safety, and create more inclusive, and resource rich communities. It's also far more cost effective than crisis systems such as jail, shelter, and improper emergency department use.

New York City is experiencing a housing and mental health crisis unlike anything we have seen in recent history. With over 70,000 people experiencing homelessness and increased concerns around public safety, it's clear that we need more investment in solutions that we know work. One of those solutions is supportive housing, which directly helps at risk New Yorkers gain access to the right services and supports.

One population especially impacted by lack of access to housing is people with behavioral health needs who are impacted by the criminal legal system. A [report](#) released by CSH in February 2022 estimated that roughly 2500 individuals on Rikers at any given point suffer from mental illness and will be homeless upon release, leaving them to languish in shelter, street homelessness and often cycling back into incarceration. We've been told by judges that they sometimes will hold off on releasing people from jail and prison because the person has no safe place to go. People are falling into the cracks when the solution is right in front of us. **We estimate that the city could save roughly \$1.4 billion dollars over the next eight years JUST by investing in supportive housing, and in bringing people home-** not hemorrhaging money into programs that are not designed to offer permanent solutions.



People with significant behavioral health needs also benefit from supportive housing. When we can alleviate the burden and chaos of navigating homelessness, we can connect people to mental health and substance use treatment services. Having a home gives folks the foundation they need to begin addressing other challenges- often the same challenges that have contributed to experiencing homelessness in the first place.

More and more we are hearing directly from providers, tenants, and advocates that the funding we have allotted for these programs is not enough. Rental subsidies are too low for the competitive rental market, and the service dollars are too low to provide adequate services and pay staff acceptable wages. The impact of the funding gap goes well beyond this, though: impacting city agencies like HPD that are severely understaffed, creating a ripple effect of bottle necks in our systems.

*We respectfully ask that this committee urge city council to invest in the housing needs of the most at-risk New Yorkers by:*

#### **Investing \$103.8 Million in Housing Subsidies and Supports:**

- **Increase funding for Justice Involved Supportive Housing**
  - JISH currently only has 120 out of 500 possible beds in operation. This is directly due to unacceptable rental and service rates
  - We recommend that NYC set service rates at \$25,596 for each unit (matching the service allocation for the 15/15 youth population) and subsidy rates be set at current FMR and with a 2% yearly escalator, to keep up with current market rates.
  - **The total recommended investment for 500 JISH (120 current and 380 future units) units is \$12.8 Million**
- **Investing \$45 Million into NY 15/15** to support rental subsidy increases, higher services rates for the remaining units yet to be brought online
- **Supporting MOCJ Hotels-** MOCJ Emergency Hotels currently house around 480 individuals leaving incarceration. This effort began during the pandemic to reduce the number of people being held in Rikers. These hotels have served as a transitional setting, allowing residents to stabilize and access support before finding permanent housing. This resource has become a critical part of our housing continuum and these contracts are set to run out by June 30, 2023. We request the following continued investment:
  - \$28 million for services, food and security residents of 480 rooms across 4 hotels
    - Services \$4.2 Million annually
    - Food Vendors \$6 Million annually
    - Security Vendors \$18 Million annually
  - \$17.5 Million for the cost of the rooms at \$100/room per night)
  - **Total ask: \$46 Million/year**
    - This works out to be roughly **\$95k per person per year**, which is *less than 1/5 of the current cost of incarceration*

#### **Reallocating Funding to Increase Congregate Units Through 15/15**

- **Reallocate \$162 Million in 15/15 funding to the development of more congregate units and preservation/rehabilitation of existing units.** There is currently funding that is allotted for the development of about 6,000 scattered site units. We know from experience that congregate site

settings are far more preferable and promote better outcomes and more stabilization due to the presence of onsite services and support

#### **Supporting the Fair Chance for Housing Bill**

- **This bill will limit landlords' ability to discriminate against applicants with histories of engagement with the legal system** by eliminating most background checks. Even after people have paid their debt to society, they continue to be shut out of the housing market. There are no current protections in place that support people trying to rebuild their lives. This leads to an increase in crimes of poverty and necessity, stress on our crisis and shelter systems, an increase in street homelessness, and fears around public safety.

#### **Support the Closure of Rikers**

- **Riker's is a dangerous and inhumane place** with far too many avoidable deaths and deplorable conditions for inmates. The lack of structure and support creates unsafe conditions and has led to a lack of adequate discharge planning, lack of access to care, and lack of connection to housing options for people re-entering. As stated above, supportive housing is an effective solution that can help the city get people out of incarceration and into more stable settings- reducing recidivism and alleviating some of the stress on crisis systems (including jail). Continuing to support and invest in Rikers is in direct opposition to supporting the needs of extremely vulnerable New Yorkers, is more expensive, and moves us further away from a healthier, safer NYC.

The case for investing in housing can be made both ethically and financially, and the conclusion is the same: safe, affordable housing with services and connections to community resources is how we will increase public safety, get people connected to the resources they need to achieve stabilization, and help move people beyond often generational cycles of poverty and crisis.

Respectfully,

Lauren Velez

Associate Director NY, Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH)

lauren.velez@csh.org

**Testimony Submitted by**  
**Chef Greg Silverman, CEO of West Side Campaign Against Hunger,**  
**Founding Director, The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access**  
**On Behalf of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access**

**For the Preliminary Budget Hearing of the NYC Council Committee on General Welfare**  
**March 13th, 2023**

My name is Chef Greg Silverman, CEO of West Side Campaign Against Hunger and Founding Director of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access. Thank you to Council Member Diana Ayala for holding today's budget hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access is a dedicated network of emergency food providers in New York City collaborating to bring more resources to communities, so none of our neighbors go hungry. We pursue opportunities for collective purchasing and collaborative advocacy work. The Roundtable was founded in 2018 by West Side Campaign Against Hunger with fellow providers New York Common Pantry (NYCP), Project Hospitality (PH), and St. John's Bread & Life (SJBL). One of the principal initiatives pursued was a purchasing pilot that tested new and expanded vendor relationships leading to 20% savings in food purchasing costs across the collective. Following the success of this pilot the group has focused on expanding opportunities for costs savings through collective purchasing and increasing membership, adding Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen (HASK), Met Council, Part of the Solution (POTS), and The Campaign Against Hunger (TCAH).

The Roundtable current activities fall into three categories:

**Strategic Purchasing:** From its inception, the Roundtable has had strategic purchasing as a cornerstone of its work, with the goal of procuring more high-quality, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food at better prices for its member organizations and the people they serve. This work includes ongoing price data gathering and aggregation from all the members to make informed purchasing decisions, save money and time, and improve data transparency. The Roundtable also engages in collective bulk purchasing - aggregating demand for select purchases, such as oats and shelf-stable milk. Initial bulk purchases have achieved successful savings ranging from 29% to 49% compared to standard distributor pricing.

**Advocacy:** The Roundtable is a voice of advocacy for direct-service emergency food organizations in New York City. Because Roundtable organizations are embedded in the communities they serve, they keenly understand the resources and policies those communities need in order to ensure that none of our neighbors go hungry. Roundtable members sat on the Mayors Food Transition Team and are presently involved in the Mayor's Innovative Capacity Building Group, a collaborative effort

between the city and emergency food providers to find new solutions to bring healthy food to the communities that need it most and currently have the least access.

**Mutual Support:** By creating a space for collaboration and communication among peer organizations, the Roundtable helps its members maximize their resources and find new ways of working together. The Roundtable is also exploring options for assistance for smaller pantries and food providers in NYC, sharing the collective insights and best practices utilized by Roundtable members.

Together we envision a City where emergency food providers have greater capacity and autonomy to meet the demand of their communities and offer more nutritious, culturally relevant food. At the same time we want to see NYC reimagine its investments in emergency feeding programs with reduced administrative burden, streamlined reporting and additional flexibility for providers. Finally, we urge the City to invest in and help seed innovative programs, collective action, delivery models, solutions and communication with customers within the emergency feeding system.

To help meet these goals, we respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following recommendations in the FY24 New York City Budget:

- **Increase funding to a total of \$59 Million for the Community Food Connection (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).** The Mayor's preliminary budget proposes baseline funding of \$23.8M plus an additional \$30 million for a total program budget of ~\$52 million. We urge that \$30 million that was allocated for FY23 and FY24 to be baselined as well as a moderate increase for a total of \$59 Million, an increase that is indexed to rising inflation to accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program, rising cost of produce, and continued need, including the continuing influx of asylum seekers and other migrants seeking refuge in New York City. We also call on HRA to allow CFC providers to include an annual increase in funding for providers indexed to rising inflation, including food costs and COLA for Human Service Providers, and to tie annual funding allocations to programming levels/goals annually.

Unfortunately, although the public health emergency of COVID-19 has subsided, we are now seeing higher demand for emergency food than ever before due to sky-rocketing food, fuel and housing prices. During the last quarter of FY22, West Side Campaign Against Hunger experienced a 42% increase in the demand for food as compared to the previous year and the demand is nearly double what it was prior to the pandemic. At the same time, EFPs are experiencing the impact of rising food prices. The Roundtable partnered with food systems consultancy Karen Karp & Partners (KK&P) to conduct research and develop a price tracking system will allow Roundtable members to access regular, bi-monthly analyses reporting on the current, comparative pricing landscape for market basket items across the full range of



food vendors from which group members purchase, including H. Schrier. Based on this price tracking system, we can clearly see price inflation for different dry goods that are commonly purchased by EFPs in NYC.

Item	2021 Avg.	2023 Avg.	% Diff
Canned Tuna (per/5oz can)	\$ 0.90	\$ 1.15	28%
Rice (per/lb)	\$ 0.91	\$ 1.23	35%
Pasta (per/lb)	\$ 0.98	\$ 1.40	43%
Eggs (dozen)	\$ 1.64	\$ 3.96	141%
Dried Beans (per/lb)	\$ 1.25	\$ 1.55	24%
Dry Cereal (price per/oz)	\$ 0.23	\$ 0.27	17%

With these rising food costs and increased demand, the current CFC allotments are simply not sufficient. As of February 2023, many Roundtable members reported being nearly through their CFC allocations for the fiscal year. We urge HRA to increase CFC allocations in FY24. It would also be helpful to secure a public commitment from H. Schrier that they will continue to honor the pricing available through their CFC Product list for organizations purchasing from H. Schrier's Standard list with their own funds. Based on the Roundtable's new price tracking system it appears as if H. Schrier is informally doing this, but an official commitment would ensure the practice continues.

In addition to increased funding, we also request that HRA work with the Administration and Comptroller's Office to speed up payments to CFC providers, ensuring they have money up front to cover the administrative costs of implementing the program and are not required to obtain reimbursement for program services. Awaiting reimbursement is especially burdensome for new and small emergency food providers that may not have a line of credit or enough cash on hand to cover up front costs of implementing the CFC program.

We applaud HRA for continuing the inclusion of a CFC advisory group of CFC practitioners to inform administration of the CFC program, including what foods will be provided through the program. Members of the Roundtable have been informally meeting with the CFC team on a regular basis and we respectfully request that members of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access be officially included in this advisory group given our strong expertise in and experience implementing the CFC program. It is critical that there is accountability to this advisory group and that HRA develops a process to ensure practitioners recommendations are heard, documented, and will be incorporated into CFC operations moving forward. In addition, we are concerned that members of this advisory group are being asked to serve on a volunteer basis without compensation. This creates an equity issue by precluding some

practitioners from participating in the group, especially individuals from frontline communities that have deep knowledge of CFC and food access challenges in their neighborhoods. We call on HRA to allocate funds to compensate practitioners for their time advising the agency on CFC program administration.

We greatly appreciate the regular check-ins conversations with HRA regarding the program transition and our collective experience with the new vendor, H. Schrier, and call on HRA to continue this open line of communication. We call on HRA to organize a separate meeting with the larger community of CFC emergency food providers from across the city six months following the vendor transition to collect feedback and consult on program operations and administration. We also encourage the agency to commit to an annual meeting with a broad set of emergency food providers to ensure successful implementation of the CFC program and ongoing, two-way communication. These steps will help ensure additional transparency and a commitment to publicly share program impacts, outcomes, vendor data, earlier and more info on how funding allocations to EFPs are determined.

HRA should also direct H. Schrier to seek EFP input into what foods are provided through the program and allow providers greater flexibility to select their own foods.

- **Direct the HRA to ensure that any cuts in headcount vacancy do not impact benefits enrollment and frontline positions are not eliminated.** We are very concerned with recent reporting that HRA is processing just [46.3% of applications for SNAP benefits](#) and we know agencies are already understaffed due to job vacancies. We also urge HRA to increase wages to help fill critical vacancies and improve internal systems to be more efficient. At the same time, to ensure pay parity we also call on HRA to allow CFC providers to include an annual increase in funding for providers indexed to rising inflation and COLA for Human Service Providers. Committing to better wages for frontline workers both at HRA and within emergency food providers will ensure workers across the network are paid appropriately.
- **\$250,000 in Council Discretionary Funding to support The Roundtable's innovative collective action and purchasing efforts.** We urge the Council to support the Roundtable's continued and expanded price data gathering and aggregation to inform bulk purchasing efforts, saving money and time for frontline anti-hunger organizations. Collective bulk purchasing efforts conducted by the Roundtable in 2022 saved member organizations over \$50,000 on orders of oats and shelf-stable milk when compared to standard distributor pricing, and even \$18K when compared to prices offered by the Food Bank for NYC. Council Discretionary Funding would also support the Roundtable's efforts to scale and share its learnings to smaller food access organizations through a technical assistance program and enable increased membership outreach and convening to expand reach and deepen engagement across New York City.

- **Ensure NYC food systems policy and funding decision making is more equitable and inclusive.** We applaud the City, and especially the Mayor's Office of Food Policy for coordinating regular, ongoing communication between City offices, agencies and frontline providers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic that helped inform the City's food policies and supported communication at a critical time. We urge the City to continue supporting similar levels of ongoing communication and codify inclusion of representatives from front line, direct service emergency feeding organizations, including The Roundtable members, in key NYC committees and task forces, including The Policy Committee on New York City Hunger Resources, that inform food policy and funding decisions to increase transparency. While not a funding request, directing the City to commit to this level of communication and representation this will help align resources and ensure the necessary coordination is happening to put City dollars to efficient use.

Thank you for your consideration.

For more information, contact Chef Greg Silverman, CEO of West Side Campaign Against Hunger, Founding Director, The Roundtable: [gsilverman@wscah.org](mailto:gsilverman@wscah.org)



## **TESTIMONY: UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK**

### **New York City Council Budget and Oversight Hearings on the Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2024**

#### **New York City Council Committee on General Welfare Honorable Diana Ayala, Chair**

**Submitted by:  
Ariel Savransky, UJA-Federation of New York**

**March 13th, 2023**

Thank you, Chairperson Ayala and members of the Committee on General Welfare, for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Ariel Savransky and I am a Senior Advocacy and Policy Advisor at UJA-Federation of New York.

Established more than 100 years ago, UJA-Federation of New York is one of the nation's largest local philanthropies. Central to UJA's mission is to care for those in need—identifying and meeting the needs of New Yorkers of all backgrounds and Jews everywhere. UJA has more than 50 thousand engaged donors in the New York area, supports an expansive network of nearly 100 nonprofit organizations serving those that are most vulnerable and in need of programs and services, and allocates over \$150 million each year to strengthen Jewish life, combat poverty and food insecurity, nurture mental health and well-being, and respond to crises here and across the globe.

### **NONPROFIT HUMAN SERVICES PROVIDERS**

#### **Invest in a Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA)**

UJA is a member of the #JustPay campaign, which is dedicated to increasing wages for human services workers. UJA is grateful for the \$60 million investment in the human services workforce the Council included in the FY23 enacted budget. Unfortunately, nonprofits waited six months or longer for guidance on how to appropriately deliver this money to their employees. The \$60 million investment also fell short of the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) the Council included in their budget response.

UJA is requesting the Council to include a more substantial investment in the human services workforce in the form of a 6.5% COLA, specifically naming this as a cost-of-living adjustment in the budget. An investment labeled as a COLA in budget documents with a designated percentage will allow nonprofit providers to implement wage changes while waiting for funding

from the City--something they were unable to do with the \$60 million investment in FY23. The 6.5% COLA will cost an estimated \$200 million and will assist workers trying to manage rising inflation costs.

In every nonprofit in UJA's network, finding and retaining qualified staff is consistently indicated as one of the main challenges facing organizations. Low salaries make it difficult to attract and retain qualified employees. Nonprofit employees often leave to work in similar positions in government or private industry due to the higher salaries that are offered. The 6.5% COLA would help nonprofits increase wages to be comparable to what individuals receive in government and private sector positions. Nonprofits cannot continue to have a positive impact on their communities without staff to lead these efforts. **An investment of \$200 million to implement a 6.5% COLA in FY24 must be made to maintain vital human services throughout New York City.**

## **OLDER ADULTS**

### **Elie Wiesel Holocaust Survivor Initiative**

UJA urges the Council to maintain its investment in the Elie Wiesel Holocaust Survivors Initiative at \$4.25 million in FY24.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, social workers funded through the Survivor Initiative, have continued to provide the specialized care that survivors require due to the trauma they experienced during the Holocaust. There are many unique struggles survivors face today: isolation during the pandemic and the return of memories of hiding; the rising cost of food and memories of rationing; being away from family, as well as sickness and death. Because of this important Initiative, survivors are not alone.

**An investment of \$4.25 million will support case management services that provide access to:**

- **Benefits and support** through Case Managers who are specially trained in the psychological impact of the Holocaust.
- **Mental Health Services** including home visits to help survivors work through the traumas that now manifest in sleep disturbance, anxiety, depression and the inability to trust
- **Trauma Informed Care** provided by professionals who recognize and avoid possible triggers, thereby reducing the potential for re-traumatization
- **Crisis Prevention** to help stave off eviction and hunger
- **Legal Services and entitlement counseling**
- **Emergency Financial Assistance** for food, housing, prescriptions, medical and dental care
- **Socialization Programs** to reduce isolation
- **Training & Support** for Caregivers and home health aides working with survivors
- **End of Life Care** including hospice and ethical wills

New York City must continue its commitment to Holocaust survivors. It is crucial to provide specialized care and support programs for survivors to enhance their quality of life and allow

them to live out their remaining years with dignity. **UJA requests an investment of \$4.25 million to support Holocaust survivors living in poverty.**

### **Older Adult Hunger**

Just as everyday New Yorkers are struggling with inflation and the extreme rise in raw food costs, so too are providers of Home Delivered Meals (HDM) and Congregate Meals.

To improve the sustainability and broaden the reach of older adult meal programs in FY2024 and beyond, UJA supports an additional \$64.8 Million for the NYC Aging budget to specifically address hunger among older New Yorkers. This includes:

- **\$14 million** for inflation costs (covering raw food, gas, and other items) for home-delivered meals;
- **\$46.3 million** for inflation, raw food cost, and other items for congregate meals;
- **\$567,000** to address DFTA's home-delivered meal waitlist;
- **\$4 million** to support weekend and holiday home-delivered meals not provided by current contracts.

## **FOOD SUPPORTS**

### **Addressing Food Insecurity**

New York City has not fully recovered from the economic, social or public health impacts of the pandemic. Many families are still struggling to make ends meet and UJA's partners are seeing an unprecedented demand for emergency food assistance. Since May of 2020, the unemployment rate in New York City has hovered around twice the national average at around 5.6%. The most recent United States Department of Labor data shows that inflation rose to a record 9.1% in June 2022, the largest gain in nearly four decades, reflecting increased food, shelter, and fuel costs nationwide. In that same time period, 64% of respondents had difficulty paying for usual household expenses. With a national economic recession looming, UJA is concerned that the poverty rates, inequality and need for food assistance across the city will worsen.

Access to healthy, culturally appropriate food is a continuous issue that New Yorkers face; however, the Mayor is proposing flat funding across the board for critical food assistance programs, which will place an increased demand for food on pantries, farmers and supermarkets. Visits to New York City food pantries and soup kitchens were up 69% in 2022 compared to 2019 and up 14% since January of 2022 due to increasing food prices. Nearly 1.5 million New Yorkers are experiencing food insecurity, a 36% since the beginning of the pandemic. This includes one in four children – a 46% increase over pre-pandemic figures.

Although UJA's nonprofit partners quickly shifted their operations to better support New York's emergency food efforts by expanding their food pantry operations; helping clients gain access to SNAP and other benefits and raising private dollars to deliver meals to homebound older adults, there is still tremendous unmet need.

UJA-Federation submits the following recommendations to ensure that the local food system and supply chain remains intact, that all families are able to access the food and support they need,

and that front line community-based organizations (CBOs) can continue to respond effectively to this crisis:

- 1) **Increase funding to a total of \$59 million for the Community Food Connection program (CFC), formerly the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)**
  - a. The Mayor's preliminary budget proposes baseline funding of \$23.8M plus an additional \$30 million for a total program budget of ~\$52 million. We urge that \$30 million that was allocated for FY23 and FY24 to be baselined as well as a moderate increase for a total of \$59 Million to accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program, rising cost of produce, and continued need, including the continuing influx of asylum seekers and other migrants seeking refuge in New York City.
- 2) **Allocate additional funds within the Human Resource Administration towards nutrition benefit program enrollment and outreach.**
  - a. At the height of the pandemic, when rates of food insecurity had nearly doubled in NYC, only 50 percent of New Yorkers who were facing severe food hardship were enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Funding cuts to HRA and other agencies across the board will only worsen this situation and UJA urges the Administration to reconsider its proposed cuts to HRA and to more seriously address the vacancy rate at the agency, which is greatly contributing to the slow processing of SNAP applications. UJA urges the City to increase funding for the agency and CBOs engaged in benefits outreach to meet ongoing demand and improve the administration of critical food benefit programs. Additionally, UJA urges HRA to allocate additional funds within the budget towards promoting and enrolling New Yorkers in social safety net programs, re-opening field offices closed during the pandemic, adding additional One Stop Shop locations, adding additional staff to the hotline to enroll people in programs and investing additional funding into promoting the Health Bucks and Get the Good Stuff Program at DOHMH.
- 3) **Fund pilot projects to enable the state government to work collaboratively with New York City to make it easier for eligible New Yorkers to apply for multiple food benefits online, as a first step toward doing so for all anti-poverty benefits.** Currently, New Yorkers eligible for multiple benefits must fill out individual applications for each benefit for which they are eligible to apply. According to the MyCity plan laid out by the Mayor, the goal of the Administration is to create one online portal with a universal application and verification process so that New Yorkers can qualify for multiple benefits simultaneously. In addition, the Mayor proposes combining all City agencies' data onto one universal platform so that any agency can assist any New Yorker with any benefit. UJA urges the Council and the Administration to work together to ensure this portal is developed and rolled out. As a first step in this process, UJA encourages the City and the State to work together to create a joint application for the SNAP program (run by NYC HRA) and the WIC program (run by NYS DOH).
- 4) **Evaluate the newly relaunched Grocery to Go Program.** This program emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as food assistance for homebound New Yorkers and has since been redesigned to provide food insecure New Yorkers who also have hypertension

and/or diabetes with monthly credit to purchase groceries through an online marketplace of local grocery stores. Most participants that were originally participating in the Get Food program will not meet the new requirements for the Groceries to Go Program due to their physical health status.

- a. Given the short timeframe in which the allocated funds will need to be spent (by June 2023) and the highly specific eligibility requirements, UJA is concerned that the DOHMH may not be able to fully enroll 5,000 New Yorkers in time to spend down all of the available funds. To make the program more impactful and ensure unspent credits do not go to waste, UJA strongly recommends: 1) increasing the monthly credits allotted to each participating household to ensure that funds are reaching the individuals that the program is intended to serve, 2) expand the list for diet related conditions to widen the scale of the program, and 3) allow for the participation of young adults who meet the other eligibility criteria.

Finally, UJA encourages the program to allow enrollees to have the freedom to use the credits on food items of their choosing that reflect need, cultural preference, dietary or medical requirements and personal taste. UJA strongly encourages the DOHMH not to apply additional limitations to eligible foods and to maintain that Grocery to Go credits can purchase SNAP approved items.

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES**

### **DoVE Initiative**

The DoVE Initiative supports a range of services for individuals impacted by domestic violence that include case management, crisis intervention, referrals, counseling, empowerment workshops, and legal advocacy. The DoVE initiative provides vital supports to individuals living in violent situations. During the pandemic it was literally a lifesaver for New Yorkers in every neighborhood and community. The DoVE Initiative directs funds to many of UJA's nonprofit partners who understand the unique needs of their communities. **UJA strongly urges the City Council to invest \$12 million in the DoVE Initiative in FY 24.**

### **Conclusion**

UJA-Federation of New York respectfully urges your consideration and support of these vital programs that assist New York City's most vulnerable and the organizations that serve them. Thank you for your time and if you have any questions, please contact me at [savranskya@ujafedny.org](mailto:savranskya@ujafedny.org).





Community Immigration  
Legal Services & Education

**Testimony submitted to the Committee on General Welfare, New York City Council  
Monday, March 13, 2023, 10:00am**

Good afternoon. My name is Terry Lawson and I am the Executive Director of [UnLocal](#), and we provide community education, outreach, and legal representation to New York City's undocumented immigrant communities. I am also the co-founder and steering committee member of the Bronx Immigration Partnership and co-founder of the Pro Se Plus Project. Thank you for convening this important hearing.

In collaboration with our partners at Central American Legal Assistance, Catholic Migration Services, Masa, Venezuelans and Immigrants Aid (VIA), NYLAG, African Communities Together, and the Robin Hood Foundation and New York Community Trust, we launched the Pro Se Plus Project in January to help recently arrived migrants access pro se legal assistance, advocate for themselves, and understand their rights and obligations. The Pro Se Plus Project helps to fill gaps while we and our partners across the city advocate for and secure increased funding to provide full representation to every asylum seeker. With its innovative approach, PSPP teaches asylum seekers how to represent themselves and helps to ensure that important deadlines are not missed. By helping asylum seekers file their applications *pro se* and

45 W 29TH STREET, SUITE 203, NEW YORK, NY 10001

main 646-216-8210 | fax 212-602-0071 | [INFO@UNLOCAL.ORG](mailto:INFO@UNLOCAL.ORG) | [UNLOCAL.ORG](http://UNLOCAL.ORG)

[f /UnLocalInc](#) | [@UnLocalInc](#) | [@UnLocal](#)



Community Immigration  
Legal Services & Education

with the assistance of community supporters, PSPP makes it possible for more people to access lawful employment authorization, which ensures a more robust workforce in New York City and allows people to exit the shelter system more quickly. We are conducting legal screenings and consultations, delivering educational presentations to migrants and community supporters, providing advice and counsel, and organizing *pro se* assistance clinics to help recent arrivals meet requirements in a complicated and ever-changing immigration legal landscape. We are seeking City Council support in FY24 to expand our reach and continue to innovate to meet emergent needs.

UnLocal provides free high-quality legal services for New York's most vulnerable immigrants, handling 1200 matters last year for immigrant New Yorkers seeking asylum, DACA, SIJS, lawful permanent residency, relief from removal, work authorization and much more. Our [Queer Immigrant Justice Project](#), which receives support from the City Council LGBT Caucus, works with LGBTQIA+ immigrants eligible for asylum and our QIJP Ambassador Program provides current and former clients with opportunities to develop leadership skills and to connect with other queer-identified immigrants. In addition, UnLocal specializes in providing community education for immigrants, conducting 77 presentations across New York City. We are seeking

45 W 29TH STREET, SUITE 203, NEW YORK, NY 10001

main 646-216-8210 | fax 212-602-0071 | [info@unlocal.org](mailto:info@unlocal.org) | [unlocal.org](http://unlocal.org)

[f /UnLocalInc](#) | [@UnLocalInc](#) | [@UnLocal](#)



Community Immigration  
Legal Services & Education

continued support from the Council to continue this critical work. We are also seeking funding to become a provider under the City Council's Domestic Violence Empowerment (DoVE) program given how many survivors and victims of gender-based violence that we represent every day.

We look forward to an opportunity to meet further with the Council to discuss the programs discussed here and to work together to work better for immigrant New Yorkers. Thank you.

Terry Lawson  
Executive Director, UnLocal  
[terry@unlocal.org](mailto:terry@unlocal.org)

45 W 29TH STREET, SUITE 203, NEW YORK, NY 10001

main 646-216-8210 | fax 212-602-0071 | [INFO@UNLOCAL.ORG](mailto:INFO@UNLOCAL.ORG) | [UNLOCAL.ORG](http://UNLOCAL.ORG)

[f /UnLocalInc](#) | [@UnLocalInc](#) | [@UnLocal](#)

**Testimony of Urban Resource Institute  
Before the Committee on General Welfare  
Preliminary Budget Hearing  
*March 13, 2023***

Good morning, Chair Ayala and Members of the Committee on General Welfare. My name is Wil Lopez, and I am the Director of Government Affairs for the Urban Resource Institute. URI has been in operation for close to 40 years and is now the largest provider of shelter services in the country. URI currently provides temporary housing and services to more than 2,200 people who have been impacted by domestic violence and intimate partner violence and families experiencing homelessness and will increase capacity in the near future. URI is committed to developing and delivering innovative client-centered and trauma-informed services to individuals affected by domestic and gender-based violence and intimate partner violence. I am here today to discuss the city's preliminary budget for the upcoming fiscal year and the impact it will have on New Yorkers who rely on the crucial programs and services URI provides.

Today's testimony will focus on four specific areas of the fiscal year 2024 preliminary budget. First, I will discuss the cuts to the New York City Departments of Social Services (DSS) and Department of Homeless Services (DHS) budgets. Next, I will discuss the cuts in headcount to the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV). Moreover, I will discuss the need to fully fund the ENDGBV microgrants program. Lastly, I will discuss the need to increase funding for the Domestic Violence and Empowerment Initiative (DoVE Funding).

**Cuts to DSS and DHS Budgets**

First and foremost, I want to express our disappointment with the proposed cuts to DSS and DHS. The total cuts amount to \$755 million, with \$650 million to DSS and \$105 million to DHS. These cuts will undoubtedly have a devastating impact on the most vulnerable members of our community.

First, let's consider the proposed cuts to DHS. The \$105 million cut to DHS includes reductions to several critical services, including security and cleaning. These cuts are particularly alarming, given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Homeless shelters are high-risk areas for COVID-19 transmission, and proper cleaning and sanitization are essential to prevent outbreaks. Without adequate cleaning measures, shelters become breeding grounds for illness, increasing the risk of COVID-19 transmission for both shelter residents and staff. As a result, the cuts to DHS could have a devastating impact on the health and safety of the homeless

population and shelter workers. Further, without proper security, shelter staff and residents are exposed to an unnecessary risk of harm. It is imperative that we invest in these critical services to ensure the health and safety of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and the staff who provide services to them.

Moreover, the proposed cuts to DHS also include reductions in the budget for outreach and supportive services. Outreach teams are responsible for connecting individuals experiencing street homelessness with shelter, medical care, and other essential services. These teams play a critical role in reducing homelessness and improving the health outcomes of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. By reducing funding for outreach teams, the city risks losing ground in our work to reduce homelessness.

Similarly, the cuts to DSS are alarming. The preliminary budget includes a \$277 million cut to the city's Family Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (FHEPS) program. FHEPS provides rental assistance to families who are at risk of becoming homeless or who are currently homeless. It is a lifeline for many families who would otherwise be forced to live on the streets or in overcrowded and unsafe conditions. Cutting this program will only exacerbate the city's homelessness crisis and push more families into instability and poverty.

Research has shown that rental assistance programs like FHEPS are effective at reducing homelessness and housing instability. A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that rental assistance programs reduced homelessness rates by 25% and improved housing stability for families. Additionally, a study by the Urban Institute found that rental assistance programs were associated with improved educational outcomes for children, reduced healthcare costs, and increased economic mobility for families.

URI respectfully requests that the New York City Council restores funding for DSS and DHS.

### **Headcount Cuts to ENDGBV**

The preliminary budget proposes to cut 84 full-time Domestic Violence and Gender Based Violence (DV/GBV) liaison positions from ENDGBV's headcount. This cut amounts to a mere \$5.2 million in savings.

The purpose of ENDGBV's DV/GBV Liaisons is to provide support and resources to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in their communities. DV/GBV Liaisons are individuals who are trained to provide information and support to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, as well as to raise awareness about the issue and work with community partners to develop effective solutions.

DV/GBV Liaisons partner with various organizations, such as schools, hospitals, and community centers, to ensure that survivors receive the services they need,

including counseling, legal assistance, and medical care. They also work to improve the response to domestic and gender-based violence by training professionals in various fields, such as law enforcement, healthcare, and social services, on how to recognize and respond to the issue.

Cutting all the DV/GBV Liaison positions from ENDGBV will have a negative impact on the ability of the city to effectively respond to domestic and gender-based violence. Without DV/GBV Liaisons, survivors of domestic and gender-based violence would have reduced access to information, resources, and support. Without this support, survivors may struggle to access the help they need and may be at greater risk of further harm.

Additionally, DV/GBV Liaisons play an important role in raising awareness about domestic and gender-based violence and working with community partners to develop effective solutions to prevent and respond to this issue.

Cutting all the DV/GBV Liaison positions from ENDGBV will also have a broader impact on the community. Domestic and gender-based violence doesn't just affect survivors, its impacts are felt by survivors' families, friends, and communities. Without effective support and resources, the impact of domestic and gender-based violence may be felt more widely, and the community may suffer as a result.

URI respectfully requests that the New York City Council restore the funding to these critical positions.

### **Fully Fund the ENDGBV Microgrants Program**

Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a pilot for a new emergency financial relief program for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence (DV/GBV) on May 21, 2020, to provide funding for immediate safety, economic, and housing needs exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The program, delivered through a contract with Sanctuary for Families, provided need-based, low-barrier microgrants to survivors through existing city service providers. The program exceeded its initial goal of serving 312 families and disbursed a total of \$468,750.00 to 377 distinct clients, with an average disbursement of \$1,243.37 per client. The microgrant program had positive impacts on survivors' mental health and overall well-being, contributed to their children's feelings of safety and well-being, and helped to cover rent or maintain stable housing.

Following the success of this pilot program, Council Member Tiffany Cabán, introduced and passed legislation directing ENDGBV and DSS to establish a fund and dispense modest grants to qualifying individuals and families who have stayed in domestic violence shelters or sought services through the city's Family Justice Centers. The mayor's proposed budget allocates \$1.2 million for this program, an amount that is far below what the projected needs are for this program.

An astonishing 98% of survivors of domestic and gender-based violence report experiencing economic abuse and the majority of survivors cite it as one of the top reasons that they stay in or return to an abusive situation. The purpose of the microgrants is to provide emergency financial assistance to survivors of domestic violence in New York City, primarily for covering the cost of housing and other immediate needs. The grants aim to address the immediate rental assistance and rehousing needs of survivors of domestic violence, who often end up in the broader DHS system after being discharged from domestic violence shelters. The grants are intended to help survivors maintain stable housing, considering that domestic violence is one of the primary drivers of homelessness in New York City.

URI respectfully requests that the New York City Council allocate \$6 million to fully fund this vital program, but not less than \$3 million to ensure it can support survivors and their families.

### **Increase funding for the Domestic Violence and Empowerment Initiative (DoVE Funding)**

The New York City Council's Domestic Violence and Empowerment Initiative (DoVE Funding) is a critical program designed to support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in the city. The initiative aims to provide funding to domestic violence service providers to help them provide comprehensive services to survivors, including emergency shelter, counseling, legal assistance, and job training. The DoVE Funding also supports initiatives that work towards preventing domestic violence by educating the public and raising awareness about the issue. This funding is crucial for domestic violence service providers to continue to provide support to survivors, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a surge in domestic violence cases. The DoVE Funding initiative serves as an important step in the fight against domestic violence in New York City, and it is essential for the safety and well-being of survivors in the city.

As the Council negotiates this year's budget, URI and other domestic violence services providers urge the Council to increase the amounts available for this initiative as it provides Council Members the ability to directly impact survivors in their respective districts.

In conclusion, we urge the City Council to prioritize funding for DSS and DHS in the upcoming budget, reverse the cuts in headcount at ENDGBV, fully fund the ENDGBV Microgrants program, and increase DoVE funding. The services and programs provided by these agencies are vital to the health and safety of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable populations. We cannot afford to make cuts that will have such a devastating impact on our communities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.





**Testimony Submission**  
**Committee of General Welfare, New York City Council, March 14th, 2023**

VOCAL-NY is a grassroots organization fighting to end the war on drugs and overdose crisis, mass incarceration, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the homelessness crisis. **VOCAL-NY's Homelessness Union** is dedicated to ending homelessness and we build power with our members and leaders who are actively experiencing homelessness or formerly homeless towards winning holistic solutions to the crisis, focusing on access to services, eviction prevention, and rapid rehousing as well as long-term housing construction and conversion.

We are here today submitting testimony that will highlight the homelessness crisis as one that needs to be met with robust budgetary investments and restoration of key agencies and services. Having a budget that reflects housing as an apparatus for public health and safety, people-centered solutions and community care is mission critical for the tens of thousands of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness every day. VOCAL-NY has worked closely in coalition with several allied organizations such as Homes Cant Wait, Communities United for Police Reform (CPR) and The People's Plan (TPP) to call on massive reforms in the CityFHEPS program, reducing the scope of policing and increase access to housing, and ensuring critical funding and resources are invested in communities for optimal success and stability.

In April of 2022, surveyors of the **NYC Speaks** survey prioritized **affordable housing and the need to address constituents experiencing homelessness as their top priority to addressing public safety**. The New York community made clear that in order to strengthen our public safety infrastructure, safety would need to be attained by ensuring communities have basic needs and resources, such as housing. As a result, we are calling on the City Council to make it mission critical that the FY24 budget is **intentional about not only restoring and securing but increasing investments in deeply affordable housing, tenant protections and trauma-informed community care and resources**.

VOCAL-NY and our allies are seeking intentional budgetary investments in the following areas to address the critical needs of homeless New Yorkers:

**Housing as a Human Right**

**Rental Assistance** - According to a pre-pandemic study led by The Furman Center in 2018, nearly 40% of the city's renters were rent-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on rent. Given the economic downturn, inflation, loss of employment, record breaking evictions and homelessness, and predatory rent increases, dependency upon rental assistance like the CityFHEPS program is needed more than ever. The city must do all that it can to ensure people can remain housed and also become permanently housed. Investing in key measures like expanding the voucher to communities that have been historically left out, staffing up service providing agencies like DSS, upgrading payments processes, access in community etc. will make that possible.



**SOI Discrimination/Code Enforcement** - Source of Income Discrimination experienced by voucher holders is becoming a pressing barrier. There need to be accountability to ensure constituents are provided equitable access to not just affordable but safe, secure housing as well.

**Supportive Housing** - The expansion of adequate Supportive Housing that provides quality, humane services to community members, dependent on varying degrees of support is critical to the public healthcare system. Too many constituents are left to languish in streets or shelter facilities that are not inept to provide the comprehensive care and services necessary. This increases the unfortunate potential for negative interaction with law enforcement and service systems to occur. Too often, these systems choose to criminalize humanity and disrespect the disability of human beings due to their structural incompetence, further putting the onus on the individual versus the system task with care.

**Safe Havens/Respite** - Access to housing first has been empirically proven to be successful to those experiencing street homelessness, in particular those with severe mental illness (SMI). In 2020, 26 studies in the United States and Canada compared treatment first vs housing first models. It found that housing first programs decreased homelessness by 88% and improved housing stability by 41%. And for those with immunocompromised health, it reduced homelessness by 37%, viral load by 22%, depression by 13%, emergency departments use by 41%, hospitalization by 36%, and mortality by 37%. Coercive mental health treatment is a form of carceral institutionalization that further exacerbates the health and trauma of those on the street. Access to dignity, safety and privacy is primary treatment while in community resources like respite services are preventative. Given the social determinants of health and history of disinvestments in communities of color this is extremely necessary.

### **Policing Homelessness is Not Public Safety**

**Stopping the criminalization of homelessness.** It is deeply concerning to learn that the DHS is planning on spending over \$30 million dollars in FY24 on their own police force to police homeless New Yorkers. Policing should have no role in addressing homelessness and DHS should not be developing their own police force to further criminalize homeless New Yorkers. DHS should disband the police force and these millions of dollars should be redirected to fill the serious gaps in services that are leaving so many homeless New Yorkers without the support they need and without access to permanent housing.

**Refocus housing as public safety.** The NYPD Homeless Outreach Unit was disbanded in FY21, responding to CPR's #NYCBudgetJustice coalition demands, as an acknowledgement that homelessness was a public health issue requiring a public health response. We know and have seen how the NYPD is often violent and abusive to homeless New Yorkers. It is deeply concerning that DHS is putting homeless New Yorkers at risk by increasing NYPD involvement in homelessness. DHS should not abandon failed strategies to increase policing of homeless New Yorkers and focus on ending homelessness.

While it is promising that the Council continues to take legislative measures it has taken steps to introduce legislation that mirrors the demands that VOCAL-NY and our allies have been calling for. However we understand the role of a budget to be synonymous to that of a moral document that has the power to dictate and demonstrate how governance values a human life and where on the justice scale of humanity homeless New Yorkers are placed.

We wholeheartedly believe that the priority recommendations and concerns laid out in this testimony, calling for efficiency, budget justice and investing in life-saving services is mission critical. This is an opportunity to turn from dog-and-pony approaches that far too often fall short of real success, bottleneck progress and sabotage the chance to end the homelessness crisis. This budget needs to lean into the actionable measures that are proven to work, keep people safe, heal and make communities whole. Nothing else accomplishes vision besides housing; as so many of us have grown to understand the focal point of “the American dream” vision has always been associated with the home. We look forward to the action the Council will take in the coming weeks in pushing for a budget that puts marginalized communities about profit.

Thank you for hearing our testimony today.

**For More Information Contact:**

Celina Trowell, LMSW  
Homelessness Union Organizer  
[celina@vocal-ny.org](mailto:celina@vocal-ny.org)

NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL GENERAL WELFARE TESTIMONY  
JOSEPH TOLES, YOU GOTTA BELIEVE SENIOR DIRECTOR OF FAMILY PERMANENCY  
SERVICES - MARCH 13, 2023

Good afternoon, Chair Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Joseph Toles and I'm the Senior Director of Family Permanency Services at You Gotta Believe (YGB), a foster care and adoption agency which focuses on permanency.

YGB has received support from the City Council since FY15 to support our Nobody Ages Out Program and our efforts to provide wrap-around services for transitional-aged foster youth. We've submitted a request for continued support of those programs, as well as for mental health services for LGBTQ youth and the families that serve our youth.

For 27 years, YGB has focused on finding loving, unconditionally committed permanent families for kids in foster care who would otherwise age out alone. Everyone on our team is a credible messenger - I myself spent every day of the first 21 years of my life in the New York State foster care system and others on our team are either parents of older youth from foster care or are also survivors of the foster care system. In addition, I have adopted 8 young men from the foster care system, the youngest being 13 years old and the oldest being 20 years old at the time of adoption. This gives us a unique advantage to provide the highly specialized support our youth and families need. We've recently launched a mental health program that allows us to provide adoption-competent and trauma informed therapy for our families free of charge for as long as they need it.

YGB primarily serves black and brown youth between the ages of 10-24. We also focus on serving LGBTQ youth because like our black and brown children, they are overrepresented in the system. 25% of our youth and 15% of our parents identify as LGBTQ.

People don't stop needing family support at 21. Youth who age out alone face homelessness, continued welfare dependence, and often join the pipeline to incarceration. These negative outcomes are avoidable for the youth who we connect with permanent families. Preliminary survey data indicate that:

- Youth who age out of the NYC foster care system without a family are more than twice as likely to be incarcerated than youth we place with permanent families.
- On the national level, youth who age out alone are more than 10 times as likely to be incarcerated than youth placed with permanent families.

YGB needs the support of the City Council because our staff is at capacity and we're relying on you to help us scale up so we can reach more foster youth with our proven model. We need your help to increase our impact and prevent more kids from aging out of foster care without a permanent, loving family.



JUSTICE FROM COURTROOM TO COMMUNITY

**New York City Council**

**Committee on General Welfare**

**Preliminary Budget Hearing**

**Written Comments of Michael Pope, Executive Director at Youth Represent**

**March 13, 2023**

Youth Represent is dedicated to improving the lives and futures of young people affected by the criminal legal system. When the justice system creates barriers to success for youth, **we use the law to help youth leave the stigma of a criminal record behind.** We provide criminal and civil reentry legal services to over 1,200 young people annually, ages 26 and under, including 16- and 17-year-olds charged as "adolescent offenders" under Raise the Age and youth aged 18 and older who were left out of RTA legislation, who were previously or are currently incarcerated at Rikers Island. We are deliberate in serving Black, Latiné, and youth of color who otherwise would not have access to legal services during and after their criminal legal system involvement. We employ a multidisciplinary approach to meet the complex legal needs of recently released young people by providing wrap-around services that are rooted in youth development principles. Through our Community Lawyering Model, we partner with workforce development, job training, and other social service agencies in under-resourced neighborhoods where our clients live and work. By representing clients in venues like housing courts, school suspension hearings, and Family Courts, our lawyers remove barriers to employment, homes, education, and family. We also engage in policy advocacy and youth leadership development through our City Dreamers Advocacy Camp.

Thank you to Chair Ayala, Committee members, and staff for the opportunity to provide testimony on the 2023 budget.

**An Approach to Safety Rooted in Racial & Economic Justice,  
Public Health, & Youth Development**

As elected leaders and members of the Committee on General Welfare, you know that our City is at a crossroads. The last fifteen years have been among the safest in our city's history, with record low levels of gun violence and other violent crime. However, in June of 2020 that trend reversed. According to a report by Vital City<sup>1</sup> collecting multiple NYC governmental data sources, major crime is up 32% from 2019. While shooting incidents and murders in 2022 are on a downward trend (down 17% and 10% respectively compared to 2021), the total incidents of these crimes is still notably higher than 2019.

Opponents of long overdue reforms to our criminal legal system, including New York's Raise the Age law and bail reforms, have tried to blame this sustained increase on those reforms. But the data—and common sense—tell a different story. My focus in this testimony is on Raise the Age

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/vital-signs-march-2023>

and youth justice. **For the first eighteen months after Raise the Age went into effect in New York, shootings in New York City remained the lowest they have been in decades, simultaneously arrests and incarceration of 16- and 17-year-olds declined.**<sup>2</sup> Only after months of Covid-19 infections, deaths, and lockdowns, did gun violence increase in New York City, as it did in many cities around the country where criminal justice reforms had not been enacted. We are now seeing a trend downwards of crime rates in 2022 as communities are once again able to engage in social and work life outside of lockdown,

For young people, the effects of Covid-19 extend beyond the initial lockdowns, hospitalizations, and community loss of life. Since the onset of the pandemic, young adults (aged 18-24) are experiencing anxiety and depression at higher rates than any other age group.<sup>3</sup> One in four young adults was found to have seriously considered suicide – an increase from one in 10 young adults pre-pandemic. Emerging evidence shows that the pandemic has negatively affected academic growth, widening pre-existing disparities for students at every level, including post-secondary students.<sup>4</sup> A study published in *Pediatrics* found that nearly 1 in every 500 children in the U.S. has lost a caregiver, and children of color have been disproportionately affected, with the highest loss of primary caregivers in California, Texas and New York.<sup>5</sup> In the midst of all of this, many of the services that young people rely on for support have been disrupted.

**The combined health, mental health, academic, economic, and emotional tolls of the pandemic have created deep uncertainty for many young New Yorkers, leading some to question whether they can rely on the very institutions responsible for their health, safety, and development.** Young people are looking to elected leaders to lead us out of the pandemic and into a just recovery. They are looking for lasting, community-based solutions to gun violence—not policies that blame, criminalize, and incarcerate young people.

Youth Represent was one of the lead organizations in the campaign to Raise the Age of adult criminal prosecution in New York, helping to secure passage of legislation in 2017 that finally ended New York’s shameful designation as one of the last two states in the country to automatically try *and incarcerate* all 16- and 17-year-olds as adults. Because of the extreme violence experienced by teenagers at Rikers Island, a key provision of Raise the Age mandated the transfer of all 16- and 17- year-olds off of Rikers in October 2018, a year before the rest of the law was fully in effect for 17-year-olds.

---

<sup>2</sup> See the New York State Raise the Age Implementation Task Force Final Report, p. 9 (<https://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/crimnet/ojsa/FINAL%20Report-Raise%20the%20Age%20Task%20Force%2012-22-20.pdf>) and NYPD Historic New York City Crime Data (<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/crime-statistics/historical.page>).

<sup>3</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation Issue Brief (Feb. 2021). The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use. <https://www.kff.org/report-section/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use-issue-brief/>

<sup>4</sup> “Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America’s Students.” US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, June 2021.

<sup>5</sup> National Institutes of Health News Release (October 7, 2021): *More than 140,000 U.S. children lost a primary or secondary caregiver due to the COVID-19 pandemic.* <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/more-140000-us-children-lost-primary-or-secondary-caregiver-due-covid-19-pandemic>

Raise the Age was a critical step forward, but it did not extend any protections to youth and emerging adults past the age of 18. Each year, tens of thousands of young people 18-25 are arrested and prosecuted in adult court and exposed to lifelong criminal records. **As of this week, there were nearly 1,300 young people age 18-25 incarcerated in New York City jails, nearly all of them Black and Latinx. Of those, over 500 are age 21 and under.** The annualized cost to incarcerate one person in DOC custody is over \$556,539<sup>6</sup> -- many times the cost of even the most expensive college.

**There are so many better ways to spend this money.** The city must divest from systems that surveil, police, arrest, and incarcerate young people. Instead, we must make sustained investments in the things that are the foundation of genuine safety: housing, education, green spaces, healthcare, and living wage employment opportunities.

We must **expand programs** that take a public health approach to gun violence, including violence intervention programs. While New York State has led the nation by investing in these programs, the resources they receive remain a tiny fraction of those received by traditional law enforcement. Violence intervention programs must be funded to expand catchment areas, hire more staff, and create robust intake systems to serve more participants city and statewide.

We must also invest in health, mental health, and well-being for youth and families and in education and economic mobility. These investments are detailed in the [Raise the Age campaign's 2022 Youth Justice Platform for NY](#).<sup>7</sup> Within this ecosystem of services and supports, legal services play a key role – helping young people overcome barriers to employment and education and maintain stable housing and family connections.

### **Youth Represent: Critical Services for Youth**

**With support from the New York City Council through the Innovative Criminal Justice Programs Initiative**, Youth Represent provides reentry legal services for young people in their own communities.

Our clients come from across New York City:

- **25%** are from the Bronx
- **22%** are from Brooklyn
- **22%** are from Manhattan
- **13%** are from Queens
- **8%** are from Staten Island, Westchester, and New Jersey

Nearly all the young people we serve are youth of color:

- **45%** are Black
- **34%** are Latiné

---

<sup>6</sup> For FY2021, from NYC Comptroller, December 2021. FY2022 and FY2023 data is not yet available

<sup>7</sup> <https://raisetheagency.org/22-youth-justice-ny-platform/>

- **6%** are of Asian & Pacific Islander descent
- **4%** are White
- **11%** are Other or Unknown

Almost all of our young people are below the poverty line:

- **97%** are below the NYC.gov near-poverty line
- **3%** are above the NYC.gov near-poverty line

The average age of our clients is 23 years old. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, with your support, we were able to deliver **80 legal workshops to 1,205 participants** and provided full legal services to **471 young people** last year.

The young people we serve have been some of the **hardest hit by the pandemic**. Some are navigating pregnancy and parenting young children. Many have faced pressure to continue working in unsafe conditions. Others face employment and other forms of discrimination based on system-involvement. Throughout the pandemic, the needs for our services have increasingly grown and Youth Represent has continued to provide critical, client-centered support to young people facing legal issues.

- Protecting Employment Opportunities

- More than 80% of employers run criminal background checks, but we've found that nearly half of the young people we work with don't know what will show up on their record. We obtain RAP sheets, review them with our clients, and counsel young people on how to speak to employers about their criminal history accurately and effectively. We also correct mistakes on RAP sheets and ensure that records that should be sealed are. Finally, we make sure that young jobseekers understand their rights when applying for jobs and represent them if they face unlawful discrimination or have their privacy wrongfully violated by companies conducting criminal background reports.
  - *Vanessa's Story: "Vanessa" had her vocational license suspended because she was facing a misdemeanor charge. By researching the collateral consequences of the prosecution's proposed plea and obtaining support letters for Vanessa, we were able to negotiate a better plea with a non-criminal disposition and obtain an immediate seal. Vanessa was able to obtain a certification of disposition from the court and get her job reinstated immediately.*

- Supporting Young Jobseekers

- Being able to find and keep a job often requires addressing other legal issues. We fight for needed repairs in apartments and defend families at risk of eviction from public housing that can stem from arrests or convictions. We represent young people in criminal and summons matters, using both legal and youth development principles to get the best possible outcomes for our clients. We also represent young parents with custody, visitation and child support issues and assist LGBTQ youth with name and gender marker changes.

- *Cee's Story: "Cee" is a non-binary young person who lives with their mother and two young siblings in a NYCHA apartment in the Bronx. Cee reached out because their home had become uninhabitable: the stove had not worked in more than a year, there was a mouse infestation, their kitchen pipes leaked, and paint was chipping off the walls. The family was forced to go to a friend's apartment just to bathe. We filed a petition demanding that NYCHA make needed repairs right away, providing extensive documentation of their failure to remedy the issues. The judge admonished NYCHA for their inexcusable delays and ordered them to remedy the conditions immediately.*
- Covid Response
  - With the onset of the pandemic, Youth Represent used technology to continue to provide robust services while working remotely. We launched a **chatbot** to allow young people to start the intake process seamlessly just by visiting our website; started a citywide **legal hotline** in collaboration with Community Service Society; and have relied on word of mouth and social media to spread the word about our services to young people who are disconnected from traditional service providers. We also shifted resources to respond to immediate client needs and launched an emergency fund that has covered expenses ranging from groceries to cleaning supplies to cab rides so a pregnant client could travel safely to prenatal appointments.
- Providing Mental Health Counseling and Mitigation Services
  - Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for our services has increasingly grown as many of our clients were experiencing compounding barriers to their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. To better serve our clients, our legal services team hired its first social worker to comprehensively address the issues connected to system involvement for our young clients that go beyond representation in the courtroom. They provide direct counseling for our clients and advocate on behalf of youth who are struggling to navigate complex systems such as the public benefits system, name changes, child welfare agencies, or drug programs. Where necessary, they research and develop relationships with social service organizations across the city so that we can connect young people who need longer-term care with high-quality providers. In addition to their client work, the social worker provides regular training to Youth Represent staff on identifying mental health issues, motivational interviewing, and working with clients who have mental health problems.

### **Youth Represent: City Council Criminal Justice Programs Initiative Support**

City Council funding, through the Innovative Criminal Justice Programs Initiative, has allowed us to provide critical legal services for youth. This year we have requested an additional \$25,000 – for a total request of \$100,000 – which would allow us to increase our support for young people under the funding by 25% and respond to the already overwhelming demand we are seeing for our legal services in neighborhoods with the highest rates of gun violence.



We hope that you will renew and expand funding for Youth Represent and that you will do so in the context of a just budget – investing in the full range of services and supports that young people and families rely on.

### **Conclusion**

The Covid-19 crisis has amplified the injustices that Youth Represent fights daily. It has also heightened and clarified the need to divest from incarceration and invest in critical services and access to safe and healthy conditions for living and working for all youth and families.

We **thank the Council** for your support and for championing young people across the city impacted by the legal system.



**New York Lawyers for the Public Interest**  
151 West 30th Street, 11th Floor  
New York, NY 10001-4017

**Testimony of McGregor Smyth, Executive Director of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest to the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare  
March 13, 2023, regarding the New York City FY24 Budget**

My name is McGregor Smyth, and I am the Executive Director of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). We appreciate the City Council's leadership in expanding access to critical legal services. NYLPI is privileged to be a part of the City Council's Immigrant Health Initiative, and we thank you for that support.

In this budget process, we call on the Council to continue defending vital city services and investments from budget cuts and flatlining. With the Council's forecast of FY23 and FY24 revenue totaling \$5.2 billion more than Office of Management and Budget predictions, and Independent Budget Office's announcement of a \$4.9 billion surplus this year, now is not the time to retreat from our City's sustainability and equity goals.

Today, I am here to ask the Council to continue their support by restoring and enhancing funding for the Immigrant Health Initiative, which has saved lives and improved health across the city. The recent migrant crisis has only increased the need for initiatives that champion immigrant rights and facilitate access to services, including healthcare and legal assistance. The funding provided by the Immigrant Health Initiative (IHI) supported NYLPI's programs aimed at improving the health and well-being of immigrant New Yorkers and their families through direct services, health education, and outreach. Through holistic immigration and wraparound services, NYLPI improves health outcomes, increases access to healthcare, and educates the community, healthcare providers, and legal service advocates.

We also stand in partnership with the legal services community in full support of funding fairness and reasonable funding increases each year to cover salary adjustments, inflation, and new technology costs. We call on the City to establish new contract protocols that allow automatic payments without arduous vouchering procedures and faster contract registration once the City budget is approved.

**Improving Access to Healthcare for NYC Residents Through the Immigrant Health Initiative**

Over 400,000 New Yorkers are undocumented and uninsured. Access to healthcare is scarce, and the most marginalized and sick often go without medical care altogether. Your support has led to increased enrollment by eligible immigrants in state-funded comprehensive health insurance via Medicaid and the Essential Plan. This access to health insurance has had life-changing and often

life-saving effects on the lives of our clients, and often results in cost savings for the City, the State, and our safety net health care system when people are able to resume work and productive lives. In 2022, we were able to provide immigration and health screenings to 134 seriously ill people in the community and in detention. With that, we obtained state-funded healthcare for more than 21 previously uninsured immigrants. IHI funding also allowed NYLPI to advocate on behalf of 18 clients who, even following support in becoming eligible for state-funded healthcare, required further advocacy with healthcare administration entities to complete their enrollment.

For example, Christina, a 37-year-old undocumented Latinx woman living in New York City, needed urgent medical care: her kidneys were failing, and she needed a transplant. Despite being a recipient of state Medicaid, she was informed by a local hospital that because she did not have a social security number, she was ineligible to be listed. She turned to NYLPI for help, and we explained to the hospital that Christina was “permanently residing under color of law,” or PRUCOL, a category used for public benefits eligibility, and she would continue to have access to state funded health insurance despite not having a social security number. Our advocacy provided the hospital with the necessary information to successfully have her listed for a transplant, and she has now received a life-saving kidney transplant.

Informed by our client experiences, NYLPI has been working to advance Transplant Justice since 2015 for immigrant New Yorkers. Based on misinformation, healthcare inaccessibility, and mistreatment of immigrant patients, many people in need of surgeries such as kidney transplants are denied necessary, lifesaving, healthcare – furthering racial/ethnic disparities in healthcare. With the support of IHI funding, NYLPI has been advancing this work through direct representation, advocacy, legislative efforts, training for health providers and the public, and research. In 2021, we launched a pilot Transplant Pipeline with the kidney transplant program SUNY Downstate Medical Center. In 2022, this program trained hundreds of health care and legal services providers, including health providers at Montefiore Medical Center, the Bronx Health Collective, Bellevue, and Kings County Dialysis Centers, and caseworkers at the AIDS Center of Queens County and Hispanic AIDS Forum. NYLPI referred five people to kidney transplant centers and advocated on behalf of one client who was wrongfully denied a transplant evaluation at a local private transplant center because she lacked a social security number.

NYLPI staff also created a new resource in the form of an FAQ for healthcare providers. The “Health Insurance and Immigration Status in New York FAQ” was created in response to noncitizen and immigrant New Yorkers facing barriers to medical care they need, including those with health insurance.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, even after obtaining health insurance, many noncitizen and immigrant New Yorkers are still denied medical care based on misinformation and misunderstanding about immigration status and insurance eligibility. NYLPI’s clients have faced unnecessary barriers to care based on their immigration status alone. We have supported clients in navigating these complicated systems and advocated for them to receive the life-saving care to which they are entitled. This resource has provided guidance around insurance eligibility and the right to access care. With increased funding, NYLPI can further our commitment to advancing immigrant justice and access to health coverage for all New Yorkers.

---

<sup>1</sup> New York Lawyers for the Public Interest. “FAQ: Health Insurance and Immigration Status,” NYLPI, <https://www.nylpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FAQ-Health-Insurance-and-Immigration-Status-in-New-York.pdf>

## **Services for TGNCI New Yorkers**

In October 2020, with the support of IHI Funding, we expanded our reach and launched the UndocuCare TGNCI+ program. This program provides direct legal services to transgender, gender-nonconforming, intersex (TGNCI) immigrants and undocumented people living with HIV by filing for viable immigration relief.

In 2022, IHI Funding was integral to the development of the UndocuCare TGNCI+ program's initiatives. Informed by client experiences in the TGNCI+ program, NYLPI supported the launch of a new resource "Healthcare is for You!" in both Spanish and English. In a joint effort with the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), who generously provided funding to this initiative, NYLPI employees created a foldout poster and digital guide about access to healthcare for immigrant and/or transgender gender-nonconforming, or non-binary (TGNC/NB) New Yorkers.<sup>2</sup> The resource breaks down the complex intersection of public benefits and immigration for individuals who are engaging with health insurance enrollment and the adjudication of other benefits. It includes a roadmap on how to advocate for one's rights in a system that is so often fraught with wrongful denials, discrimination, and other barriers that divert eligible community members away from the healthcare and benefits they need to survive.

City Council funding made it possible for the TGNCI+ program to continue providing direct services via immigration representation, consults, referrals, and benefits advocacy throughout 2022. In the last year, the TGNCI+ project served 22 trans, gender non-conforming, intersex, or HIV-positive immigrant New Yorkers in their defensive asylum proceedings to help prevent their deportation. Furthermore, NYLPI staff represented several more people in their affirmative immigration cases with the goal of sustaining access to vital healthcare. We're thrilled to share some of the highlights from 2022: four transgender women were granted a pathway to permanent security and access to gender affirming healthcare in the U.S. through immigration legal advocacy; two community members represented by the TGNCI+ program were granted green cards; and two of our clients won their asylum cases. Additionally, the TGNCI+ program supported four immigrant New Yorkers in becoming "permanently residing under color of law" (PRUCOL), and thus eligible for state Medicaid and housing through the HIV/AIDS Services administration (HASA). TGNCI+ continues to work with community-based orgs such as the Queer Detainee Empowerment Project, and transitional housing programs such as the AIDS Center Queens County (ACQC) to conduct immigration screenings and PRUCOL advocacy with city benefits agencies.

## **NYLPI's Medical-Legal-Community Partnership in Detention**

The IHI funding has also supported NYLPI's work seeking to improve access to healthcare in immigration detention facilities. Despite the dire health risks posed by the spread of COVID-19, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials continue to arrest and confine people in immigration detention facilities and jails. For NYC residents held in detention, NYLPI provides crucial and urgent advocacy to improve health care and advocate for release. Every day, people in the U.S. immigration detention system experience health and human rights violations,

---

<sup>2</sup> Center for Urban Pedagogy. "Healthcare is for You." Center for Urban Pedagogy, <https://welcometocup.org/projects/healthcare-is-for-you>.

including inadequate medical care. The facilities currently used to detain immigrants in New York state include Orange County Correctional Facility, Clinton Correctional Facility, Rensselaer County Correctional Facility, and Chautauqua County Jail, in addition to the Buffalo Federal Detention Center. NYLPI has published two reports documenting the serious, often life-threatening deficiencies in the medical care provided to New Yorkers in immigration detention facilities. NYLPI has released complaints against the Department for Homeland Security (DHS) Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL), further documenting persistent human rights abuses at Orange County Correctional Facility (OCCF) in Goshen, New York.

Through the funding provided by the Immigrant Health Initiative, we have built and continue to expand a robust, all-volunteer Medical Providers Network (MPN), now with over 260 medical professionals, available to support advocacy efforts for people in detention. Through our work, we have connected the majority of requests received to a medical provider with experience relevant to their needs. Furthermore, we work with City Council-funded New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP) attorneys, through medical advocacy, to help secure the release of their clients from immigration detention. In 2022, the MPN has been able to support and will continue to support 76% of all case referrals sent to us. With that, we connected more than 70 people in detention to volunteer doctors, and our Network was instrumental in securing the release of three individuals from IC custody.

City council funding also supported the re-issue of our popular Health Care Rights Calendar in English and Spanish for people in immigration detention.<sup>3</sup> Since its launch last year, this resource has proven to be a valuable tool that helps detained individuals and advocates understand legal rights and document health care needs and rights violations. NYLPI, in partnership with Justice for Migrant Families and other NY-based organizations, distributed the calendar to people in detention, helping them keep track of their healthcare needs, medications, and requests for medical care. The calendar provides information about people's healthcare rights while detained, as well as contact information for support services. We hope this resource will continue to advance our work to combat the human rights crisis in immigration detention.

## Conclusion

Thank you, Chairperson Ayala and the Committee, for giving us the opportunity to present testimony today and for this tremendous assistance, and we ask that the Immigrant Health Initiative funding is restored and enhanced in FY 2024 for both NYLPI and our partners. We look forward to continuing our work to improve immigrant New Yorkers' access to healthcare for new arrivals and long-time New Yorkers alike. **Health is a human right.**

**McGregor Smyth**  
**New York Lawyers for the Public Interest**  
**151 West 30th Street, 11th floor**  
**New York, NY 10001**  
[msmyth@nylpi.org](mailto:msmyth@nylpi.org)

---

<sup>3</sup> New York Lawyers for the Public Interest. "2023 Medical and Healthcare Rights Calendar for People Detained in Immigration Detention Centers and Jails in NY." NYLPI, <https://www.nylpi.org/2023-medical-and-healthcare-rights-calendar-for-people-detained-in-immigration-detention-centers-and-jails-in-ny/>.

*NYLPI has fought for more than 40 years to protect civil rights and achieve lived equality for communities in need. Led by community priorities, we pursue health, immigrant, disability, and environmental justice. NYLPI combines the power of law, organizing, and the private bar to make lasting change where it's needed most.*

*NYLPI's Health Justice Program brings a racial equity and immigrant justice focus to health care advocacy, including ongoing work addressing the human rights crisis in immigration detention and advocating for healthcare for all New Yorkers.*



**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: CYNTHIA STUART

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: SUPPORTIVE HOUSING NETWORK

Address: 247 W. 37th St

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Adriene Holder

Address: 199 Water Street, NYC 10038

I represent: The Legal Aid Society

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

legal service

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3-13-2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: MARY FOX

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Legal Services For The Working Poor Coalition

Address: 777 10th Ave NYC

THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

legal  
services

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3-13-2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: RAUN RASMUSSEN

Address: 40 WORM ST NYC

I represent: Legal Services NYC

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

foster  
care

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3-13-2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Alan Yu

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: New Yorkers For Children

Address: 450 7th Ave #1707 NYC

THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Domestic  
Violence

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3-13-2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Quentin Walcott

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Connect, Inc.

Address: 127 W. 127th St. NYC



**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Katherine Wurmford

Address: Brooklyn, NY 11218

I represent: Center for Justice Innovation

Address: 520 Eighth Ave

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jimmy Meagher (pronounced Mar)

Address: 2 Lafayette St, 3rd Fl NY NY 10007

I represent: Safe Horizon

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Nicole Howard

Address: Brooklyn, NY

I represent: Food Bank for New York City

Address: 39 Broadway, NY

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jill Berry, First Deputy  
Address: Commissioner DSS  
I represent: DSS/HRA  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ROSINE A. FERDINAND  
Address: Exec. Deputy Commissioner  
I represent: DSS/Finance  
Address: 4WTC

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LISA TITZPATRICK  
Address: 4WTC Administrator HRA  
I represent: DSS/HRA/DHS  
Address: 4WTC



**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Molly Park, Commissioner

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Joslyn Carter, Administrator

Address: 33 Beaver Street NYC 10004

I represent: Dept Homeless SVC

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Abby Biberman

Address: 100 Pearl Street 19th Fl NY NY 10004

I represent: New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)

Address: (Same)

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. T2023 2995 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Gig Silverman

Address: 253 W. 86th

I represent: West Side Co-op Assoc / Housing / Rental Assn

Address: 253 W. 86th NY NY 10023

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☒ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3.13.23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dama Dennis

Address: 150 Broadway NY NY

I represent: Riders Alliance (transit riders)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: WILFREDO LOPEZ

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: URBAN RESOURCE INSTITUTE

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms



**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

3-13-23

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jerome Natunatel

Address: 150 52nd St, Brooklyn, NY

I represent: City Harvest

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Nora McCarthy

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: NYC Family Policy Project

Address: 40 Rector St, NY NY

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: DR. Sophie Charles

Address: 254 W. 31 ST NYC.

I represent: Council of Family & child caring.

Address: SAME Agencies

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Appearance Card**

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: McGregor Smyth

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

Address: 151 W. 30<sup>TH</sup> ST, 11<sup>TH</sup> FL, NY, NY 1002

▶ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◀

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Appearance Card**

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: March 13, 2007

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Jess Pannhauser

Address: Commissioner

I represent: Administrator for Children's

Address: Services.

▶ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◀

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Appearance Card**

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/2023

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Margaret Plentnikoff

Address: Deputy Commissioner

I represent: Administrator for Children's

Address: Services

**Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms**

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Appearance Card**

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/13/2023

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Wimette Saunders

Address: First Deputy Commissioner

I represent: Administrator for Children's Services

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms**