

Social Service Employees Union Local 371

AFSCME, AFL-CIO



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Anthony Wells, President SSEU Local 371 Human Services Committee Testimony February 6, 2018

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My name is Anthony Wells and I am the President of the Social Service Employees Union Local 371, DC37, AFSCME. We represent over 18,000 social service professionals in every Mayoral agency, the Health and Hospital Corporation, the New York City Housing Authority, the District Attorney's offices and the Borough President's offices.

I want to thank the Chairs Weinstein, Lupardo, Jaffee, Hevesi, and Den Dekker for the opportunity to testify today.

With the increase in homelessness, recently passed criminal justice reforms, and more, not less, New Yorkers needing the help that a decent state would give them, it's just not the time to cut funds for our families, our children, our neighbors, and our friends. The proposed budget cut of \$129 million to the Agency for Children's Services protective and preventive programs would be detrimental to the future of New York City's youth and their families.

Recently, a coalition of elected officials, union leaders, community advocates, clergy, non-profits, and thousands of volunteers fought hard to pass the *Raise the Age* legislation, which raised the age of criminal responsibility from 16 and 17 to 18. This new budget would completely end funding for the *Close to Home*

program, a juvenile justice reform initiative designed to keep youth close to their families and community. This would reduce the budget by 40 percent.

We simply cannot afford to slash *Close to Home's* budget when the number of youth in the program is expected to double once *Raise the Age* is implemented. Keeping youth close to their families gives them the ability to participate in the youth's rehabilitation program, which increases the likelihood of success once they are released. Keeping youth closer to their families, a core principle of New York State's juvenile justice program according to the state website, would become nearly impossible with twice the population and only half of the budget from the previous year.

Our members are proud professionals, primarily women of color with advanced degrees, who use their professional skills everyday to keep families together, our youth out of trouble and out of the criminal justice system, and children safe. New York City has introduced measures to strengthen its child welfare system, including reducing the caseloads of overburdened frontline child protection workers, and has already begun to see historic progress in improving outcomes for children. We risk reversing this progress with the proposed budget cuts.

With a higher homeless population, children at risk need more social service workers, not less. Protecting our children and families in communities of color requires more social service workers, not less. Keeping children out of foster care, which is now at a historic low, requires more social service workers, not less. The proposed budget cuts will make their work more difficult in a time when we want to close jails and move youth out of Rikers. It would make the implementation of

Raise the Age impossible. It would make protecting our children and keeping families together impossible.

We need social service workers who work with our youth; who make sure they build lives that would make jails a thing of the past. Let's show New Yorkers we are committed to our youth and keeping families together by fully funding New York City's child welfare programs. Thank you.

