



**Testimony at the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services
February 9, 2021
Provided by: Jenn O'Connor, Director of Policy and Advocacy**

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I am Jenn O'Connor, Director of Policy and Advocacy at Prevent Child Abuse New York (PCANY).

PCANY is a nonprofit organization that believes child abuse and neglect prevention occurs in communities--by strengthening families. We provide three primary services at the state and local level: **community awareness, training and technical assistance, and policy and advocacy.**

Our **community awareness and education** efforts increase knowledge about the Five Protective Factors. It is our belief that individuals can use the Five Protective Factors to help prevent child maltreatment. Specific programs include the Parent Helpline and the Pinwheels for Prevention Campaign. The Helpline is multilingual and provides free and confidential support for parents and caregivers. The Pinwheels for Prevention Campaign raises awareness about helping children thrive. These examples embody the Protective Factors framework by providing concrete support in times of need and educational opportunities. Collective community understanding about how to foster resilient New York families is a proven form of prevention.

Our **trainings and technical assistance** provide professionals and communities with the knowledge, tools and resources to make great environments for families and children. We provide Healthy Families New York (HFNY) Home Visiting Certification and run the New York State Parenting Education Partnership (NYSPEP), a program that provides support and resources for parents. The Enough Abuse Sexual Abuse Prevention, Community-based Strengthening Families, and Child Abuse Prevention courses offer multi-faceted educational opportunities. In addition, we provide direct staff consulting and mini grants to organizations that are implementing prevention strategies.

Finally, our **policy and advocacy** efforts drive initiatives at the state and local level to change systems that impact child maltreatment issues. We advocate for evidence-based policy solutions that target root causes of child maltreatment, such as increases for early childhood home visiting, early care and education system development, reduction of unplanned pregnancies, and family stability/economic issues.

These advocacy efforts touch many facets of the early childhood realm, facilitating partnerships with several organizations that are devoted to helping the children and families of New York State (NYS).

All of our work centers around the belief that child abuse occurs because families are under stress and not supported. Multi-generational trauma exists due to poverty, violence, and institutional racism (among other factors). PCANY focuses great attention on decreasing and addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) while increasing Protective Factors and Resilience. All of our budget asks would serve to strengthen families and the communities they live in. During this time of isolation, economic hardship, and racial tension, families need proven services and supports more than ever. We urge you to restore funding, maintain funding, and even invest in the following areas.

BUDGET REQUESTS

Early Care and Education

Child Care

Organizing care for one's child is a daunting task. Parents are strapped to find an affordable and conveniently located program that offers hours in alignment with their schedule. High-quality and developmentally-appropriate care is another factor to consider. When families find the ideal program, the cost is often too expensive to sustain for a household budget. High-quality child care costs an average of \$15,000 annually per child. This sum is prohibitively expensive for nearly all low- and middle-income families. Fewer than 20% of low-income families eligible for child care subsidies are receiving them. **The Executive Budget investment of \$40 million to reduce the burden of child care co-pays for families currently receiving subsidy is a step in the right direction to address child care availability and affordability in NYS. However, these are re-purposed subsidy dollars--not new funding.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened circumstances for parents and providers by decreasing program enrollment and impacting job security and financial stability. While many businesses closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, child care providers remained open as an essential service to families. While deemed essential, there are many child care deserts (or areas where there are no programs) throughout the State. **PCANY supports the \$6 million investment in start-up grants to address NYS child care deserts.** Expanding access to care and early childhood supports will help to decrease stress for some families.

NYS received new funding in the form of \$163.6 million in federal CARES Act funds last spring. NYS's allocation of those federal funds has provided some relief to providers and families. **However, PCANY supports more sustainable investment of these funds in the future.** We expect to receive \$450 million from the next round of federal child care funding. NYS's plan to spend these funds is due February 25th. We hope that

it will take into account the recommendations of the Child Care Availability Task Force, a report made possible through statute and supported by members of both houses of the Legislature. **We also support utilization of the funds in alignment with the Empire State Campaign for Child Care (ESCCC), Winning Beginning New York (WBNY), and Raising New York recommendations (attached).**

Afterschool

High-quality afterschool programs not only provide safe child care for school-age children; they strengthen the Protective Factors (such as relationships with caring adults) that are important for healthy development, especially for those with the highest need. **PCANY supports the Executive Budget maintenance of funding for Empire State Afterschool and Summer Youth Employment.**

Advantage After School Programs improve social, emotional, and academic competencies of children by providing a safe environment for children to learn after school hours. In addition to receiving quality social interaction, the burden of finding short-term child care in the few hours between the school and work day ends is alleviated for parents. We urge you—as you do every year—to **restore the \$5 million decrease in funding for Advantage After School Programs** to prevent 2,500 - 5,000 students from losing after school care. These funds provide grants for after school programs at a rate of \$2,000 per student.

We have attached the NYS Network for Youth Success’s budget request to our testimony.

Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting

Voluntary home visiting programs decrease abuse, improve health outcomes, and increase school readiness. Home visitors are a concrete source of support and a reliable resource to educate parents about child development and community services. These programs have had an impact on the opioid crisis by providing support to addicted mothers and babies.

However, prior to the pandemic, NYS was only serving 3% of all children aged 0-3 and 6% of babies in low-income families.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced programs to pivot, providing virtual visits as well as concrete supports such as food and diapers to families. According to an April 2020 survey by Raising New York, more than one-third of parents with infants and toddlers in NYS have skipped or cut back on meals and more than half feel uneasy about personal finances. These stressors contribute to a heightened state of chronic stress for the families of NYS. Coupled with a lack of parental buffering, the young children in these families are at an increased risk of experiencing ACEs and toxic stress. Investment in targeted support for children to offset these effects can contribute to healthier, more resilient New York families.

Home visiting is a proven prevention strategy. Yet the Executive Budget includes a 20 percent cut to Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), from \$3 million to \$2.4 million. In addition, the elimination of Public Private Partnership grants to ParentChild+ and Parents as Teachers (PAT) programs, and 20 percent withholds on state funding to all programs, including Healthy Families New York (HFNY), have placed a significant financial strain on home visiting programs. As a result, many programs have been forced to lay off staff, reduce capacity, and in some instances, close their doors.

The populations hit hardest by these cuts are the same populations hit hardest by the pandemic and centuries of racial injustice—low-income women and families of color. **Now is not the time to decrease these essential services. PCANY urges you to:**

- **Maintain funding of \$26.2 million for HFNY to support sustainability at existing sites**
- **Appropriate \$1 million to restore funding cut in the Executive Budget to NFP**
- **Invest \$2 million in ParentChild+ to support sustainability at existing sites**
- **Invest \$1.3 million in PAT to support sustainability and restore services to two sites in Rochester**

PCANY also asks that you continue to support the First 1,000 Days on Medicaid Initiative, specifically the pilot project sights in Albany, Chemung, and Monroe counties, and in Brooklyn. These projects help move NYS closer to PCANY’s 2020 recommendation of universally-offered home visiting, with every new parent receiving the benefits that so few are offered now.

Early Intervention (EI)

NYS EI payment rates are currently lower than they were in the mid-1990s. The percentage of children receiving timely EI services fell from 74% in 2015 to 66% in 2019.

Since then, the pandemic has disrupted service delivery and the programs have struggled even more. Existing disparities have widened. More children are waiting for services. Provider capacity has shrunk. In June 2020 the number of EI providers was down 15% compared to 2019 and it is very likely to have fallen more since then. The number of children enrolled in EI is at its lowest point since 2013, and the number of EI claims has dropped 29%.

We urge NYS to secure additional revenue that will be needed to build back EI and Preschool Special Education systems in order to provide timely services to all eligible children and to eliminate long-standing disparities due to race, poverty or geography. The State must increase the rates for EI providers and preschool special education programs by at least 10%. We also recommend:

- As a step towards an increase of 10% in both EI and Preschool Special Education reimbursement rates, the State should conduct a comprehensive assessment of the methodology used to determine payment for all early intervention evaluations, services and service coordination, and should develop a new tuition rate-setting methodology for Preschool Special Education so that rates better reflect the costs of delivering services.
- The State should guarantee parity in annual funding increases between public schools and preschool special education programs.
- Passage of the health care workforce bill to establish regular collection and release of health workforce data, including EI providers, to inform and approve health planning and access and emergency preparedness.
- Launch an outreach campaign and develop a comprehensive plan for developmental screenings to identify young children with developmental delays and disabilities and connect them to services.
- Provide adequate technology and training to families and providers.
- Engage in targeted outreach to families to identify and address barriers to participation, including issues related to telehealth access and equity.
- Provide make-up services to compensate for services missed during the pandemic and prepare for a potential surge in children needing EI and Preschool Special Education evaluations and services.

REQUESTS FOR CONTINUED SUPPORT

Primary Prevention

Understanding that the State is in a fiscal crisis, PCANY is not requesting additional dollars for any primary prevention initiatives. However, we must point out that now is not the time to cut prevention services for families, and in fact is the time to think about shoring up prevention programs so that we are better positioned to handle hardship in the future. Therefore, we want to call your attention to some initiatives that we hope to see strengthened.

Family Resource Centers (FRCs)

FRCs are community-based sources of support for parents and caregivers. FRCs embody the Protective Factors framework because they are a dependable resource for education and because they facilitate social connections for parents. **In neighborhoods where FRCs are in place, the rate of child maltreatment decreases.** Flexible and family focused, FRCs provide a culturally-sensitive environment that is especially important in the context of the dual pandemics facing our country today - COVID-19 and racial injustice.

FRCs are a potential place to launch a public education campaign and to provide resources about the COVID-19 vaccine. Communities that have experienced

inequities and discrimination in healthcare approach the vaccine with mistrust and tension. FRCs can help deliver the message that the vaccine is safe and effective.

Help Me Grow (HMG)

Many important programs that positively influence and enrich children's lives exist in NYS. Frameworks that strengthen the operating capacity/connections between these programs, such as HMG, are valuable for increasing accessibility and service delivery to families. HMG is a system that coordinates community services such as health care, early learning services, nutrition information and parent support. HMG builds upon existing community resources to better connect services to families. Nurturing child development and strengthening families is a theme of the system model. Currently, the Help Me Grow model is being implemented in two locations in NYS - Onondaga County and Long Island. **An expansion of HMG could create a central hub that would provide coordinated intake and referrals to home visiting programs.**

Abusive Partner Intervention Programs

One out of four parents with young children in NYS worry about substance abuse and domestic violence in the family (Raising New York, 2020). Children and youth who live with domestic violence are affected by the experience. Children can display a variety of behaviors due to witnessing domestic violence and those behaviors can affect their ability to be successful in school and other social settings. Additionally, 30% to 60% of perpetrators of domestic violence abuse children in the household.

Abusive partner intervention programs in New York currently operate with no licensure or oversight. **PCANY echoes the NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV) request for oversight of abusive partner intervention programs.** This change will improve the response to accountability for those who harm and ensure that programs are appropriately monitored. Communities and the court system will then be able to confidently utilize this resource as a component of their response to domestic violence. A streamlined system for domestic violence intervention and response, overseen by OPDV, can contribute to building a more unified, trauma-informed system in NYS.

Strong Starts Court Initiative

The Center for Court Innovation operates this Initiative, which currently operates in The Bronx, Queens, Staten Island and Brooklyn serving court involved families with infants and toddlers. PCANY recommends funding this program, thereby intervening with families when their children's brains are the most plastic and prevention is the most impactful. An entire generation experiencing ACEs could be helped by broader implementation of this Initiative. The program:

- Ensures that infants and parents receive comprehensive screening and assessment at entry into the child welfare system, and periodically thereafter, to

- generate appropriate and targeted service plans.
- Creates a network of community-based service, including child development services, adult development services, and services required for family stability.
- Shifts from an adversarial to a collaborative approach in addressing the needs of families.
- Conducts monthly clinical and court conferences to ensure appropriate oversight of cases and to ensure that children's and families' needs are met.

Trauma-Informed Initiatives

A trauma-informed approach is the basis for all of PCANY's work. We end this testimony with that foundation and ask that you build policy and support legislation on that foundation.

A trauma-informed approach is relevant and necessary in both policy and practice. Policies and procedures crafted to prevent re-traumatization and to address underlying emotional/social trauma is one strategy to address health and social issues impacting the State today-- such as substance and alcohol abuse, incarceration, and domestic violence. Knowledge about ACEs and how to prevent/mitigate ACEs is important for law enforcement, healthcare, social services, educational institutions, and government agencies.

PCANY has met with more than 150 members of the Legislature (and their staff) in an effort to create a Trauma-Informed Legislature. We have worked with legislative champions to mandate trauma-informed training for domestic violence shelter workers and child care providers. With this work, PCANY aims to:

- Prevent ACEs in future generations
- Identify and mitigate the effects of childhood trauma
- Teach resiliency with strengths-based approaches (such as the Protective Factors Framework)

In addition to the 10 original ACEs identified by the CDC, the legacy of racism and discrimination toward Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities has fragmented the experience of many families living in NYS. Poverty and violence also negatively impact entire populations. And as the pandemic continues, we have seen a generation of children traumatized by fear and isolation. **PCANY requests that our work to craft trauma-informed training for all child-serving professions be supported at the State level.**

Closing

The country is facing a tumultuous era of uncertainty and unrest. Mounting tension surrounding public health and social issues have enveloped NYS. Governor Cuomo articulated in his State of the State address that New York is tough and that New Yorkers are resilient. However, these statements are in reference to the current

generation.

As we look toward the future, combatting the virus, stabilizing the State, and rebuilding in the wake of uncertainty, “Do we move forward or backward? *The future is in our hands.*” The *future* Governor Cuomo made reference to is the children of NYS. Resilience is fostered at an early age, when Protective Factors and prevention measures can best be ingrained at the community level. In pursuit of this vision, PCANY requests that you consider our budget requests to strengthen families and serve New York’s children.

In closing, we support the agendas of coalition partners working on: kinship care, foster care, mental health, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ issues.