

Testimony of Michael Weisberg to the
New York State Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the
2021 Executive Budget Proposal: Human Services

February 9, 2021

Thank you, Chairpersons Krueger and Weinstein, for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for ensuring that members of the public have the privilege of participating in our state's budgeting process this year despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic. My name is Michael Weisberg, and together with my husband, I am the foster-adoptive parent of two teenaged boys, biological brothers, one of whom was placed last year in the Raise-the-Age program at the Children's Home of Poughkeepsie.

The current Executive Budget proposal would undermine the kind of services and care that our son benefitted from by cutting state support for juvenile justice and child welfare services in all counties by 5%, and changing the support for voluntary agencies like the Children's Home from a guaranteed rate to a utilization rate. This shift will decrease the funding that agencies like the Children's Home rely upon to keep high quality staff employed and programs strong for children like our son. It is a critical part of the success of Raise-the-Age.

I sought out an opportunity to testify today because the Raise-the-Age program is the only resource that was effective at helping our son interrupt his disordered thinking and learn new behaviors so he can grow into an adult who lives in the community and not in prison.

Like many difficult teenagers, our son had a rough childhood. We adopted him just one week before his ninth birthday. By this time, he had been in and out of foster care for seven years. He had experienced domestic violence, extreme poverty, medical and emotional neglect, and two rounds of homelessness. After a childhood full of chaos while adults failed to protect him, our older son learned that he'd never be safe until he was in charge.

My husband and I could predict that our son would have a horrific ride through his teenage years, but we never could have predicted how bad things would get. As we sought out every resource we could find, we encountered therapists, psychiatrists, special education, school disciplinary bodies, Bridges to Health, Child Protective Services, the Mobile Crisis Unit, PINS Diversion, and the police. None of these entities was up to the task of healing a teenager who'd experienced so much trauma.

Psychiatric emergency rooms sent our son home with us. Child Protective Services told us, "the adults in this house aren't safe." A police officer told me, "you have a real problem." My husband and I were living with an aggressive and sometimes violent teenager who was six feet tall and over 200 pounds, and nobody was helping us stay safe. The effect on his younger brother was devastating, as he felt it was his job to protect us from the big brother he loved.

Sadly, we were relieved when our son finally got arrested. In jail, he was safe, and so were the rest of us. Our son also got to see what his future would be if he didn't turn things around. Still, we couldn't leave him there. Neither could we bring him home. His final acts before his arrest had put our entire street on guard against him.

Mental health evaluations followed. Because we were already working on a SPOA application, we obtained evaluations by both a psychologist and a psychiatrist. These professionals told us that we'd done everything parents could do, but our son needed a level of structure no family could provide. He needed a program where staff knew his whereabouts at all times, and where he could earn his way to increased privileges and independence. He also needed a plan to prepare him to return to the community, with steps to get him there.

At the Children's Home of Poughkeepsie, our son was assigned a therapist experienced with therapeutic foster care. He built relationships with staff who served as positive role models. Over time, he developed a greater ability to self-regulate his emotions and replaced harmful behavior patterns with more positive ones. My husband and I traveled to Poughkeepsie twice a month for family therapy, sometimes taking our younger son with us. With our older son out of our house, we could focus our energy on supporting him in his personal growth and preparation for adulthood.

The Raise-the-Age law has enabled numerous teenagers throughout New York to stay out of the adult criminal justice system and receive services in a setting more appropriate to their needs. Many of these teens are able to stay in their homes and communities. Others, like our son, needed to heal in a more structured therapeutic environment. The Children's Home of Poughkeepsie and the other agencies providing these structured residential programs are providing an invaluable service to children who in the past would have been treated as throwaways. These children must be supported. For our family, despite all of our contacts with numerous services, the Raise-the-Age program was the only program capable of meeting our needs.

As the Legislature faces the challenging task of budgeting for the next year of the pandemic, I urge you to ensure that this valuable program is protected. We must reject cuts to child welfare and juvenile justice funding state-wide, and preserve the current funding model for voluntary agencies like the Children's Home.

Thank you.

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