



Human Services Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

2021-2022 Executive Budget Proposal

February 9, 2021

Testimony by Wayne Spence

Good afternoon Chairs Krueger, Weinstein, Brisport and Hevesi and other committee members. My name is Wayne Spence and I am the President of the Public Employees Federation (PEF). I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of our 52,000 members about the potential impact of the Executive Budget if adopted without modification.

Our union is made up of professional, scientific and technical experts who provide critical services to the residents and taxpayers of New York State. Serving as the state's frontline essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, my members have risked their lives and those of their families to maintain the continuity and quality of services to New York's most vulnerable citizens. Our members care for the elderly, the sick and the infirm; they work to ensure the state's roads and bridges are safe and secure; they help to rehabilitate those who have violated the law and to counsel and provide safety net services for at-risk youth. Our members take a great deal of pride in their work because they are professionals and they care.

## **PUBLIC EMPLOYEES HAVE BEEN THE BACKBONE OF THE STATE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE**

I would be remiss if I did not begin this discussion by highlighting the fact that PEF members have been at the forefront of the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite chronic shortages of personal protective equipment, inaccurate guidance on appropriate safety protocols, a lack of off-site housing, and the imposition of mandatory overtime and forced redeployments, PEF members have filled the breach to keep New Yorkers as safe as possible during this crisis. It should be noted that our members who worked in congregate settings and directly with COVID patients have borne a disproportionate burden in serving the state's neediest citizens.

Unlike many of the essential employees in private industry, my members have received no recognition or remuneration for their selfless and dedicated service. In fact, this proposed budget seeks to privatize the critical public services they provide, relocate their jobs to other regions of the state and cut the health insurance benefits that they have earned as faithful and dedicated public servants.

New Yorkers learned the importance of government and the need for enhanced government capacity during this crisis. How many of the state's private service contractors were performing their contractual responsibilities or servicing taxpayers at the height of this pandemic? We need to learn a lesson from this experience. New York needs to develop greater capacity to deliver needed services and to address the current and future disasters in a timely, efficient and cost-effective manner—that cannot be achieved with private contractors performing public services.

Today I want to discuss two important Executive Budget proposals that would negatively impact families throughout the state. The first is the consolidation and closure of four OCFS Community Multi-Services Offices (CMSOs) and the second is the closure of four facilities for at-risk youth.

### **Consolidation/Closure of OCFS Community Multi-Services Offices (CMSO):**

In order to achieve \$1.8 million in savings, the governor proposes the consolidation of four CMSOs. These regional facilities provide community supervision and family engagement and support services for troubled youth in residential placement and after their return to the community. Under the proposal, the executive would close the CMSO offices in Binghamton and Watertown and consolidate all of the New York City offices to deliver services from a single facility in Brooklyn.

In order to address the delivery of these needed services, the Executive Budget proposes that youth currently receiving services in Binghamton travel 90 minutes to the CMSO in Syracuse and those who are receiving services in Watertown travel 90 minutes to the CMSO in Utica.

These programs are tailored to address the needs of troubled youth who are often confronted with the most challenging personal and familial situations. Many of these children do not have support to meet their most basic needs, let alone transportation to and from a social service facility 90 minutes away.

As the state rightfully attempts to move away from incarceration as a means to rehabilitate troubled youth, it is counter-intuitive to cut locally-based programs designed to support these individuals as they build a path to reintegration back into their families and communities. Early investments to address the issues of at-risk youth are important to controlling long-term costs for incarceration and other needed services. To be successful in the laudable goal of rehabilitating troubled youth and other citizens, the state of New York must invest in them.

We urge the Legislature to reject the closure of the CMSO facilities and to recommit to investing in these and other programs to deliver services regionally across the state.

### **Closure of State-Operated Facilities For At-Risk Youth (S.2506/A.3006: Education, Labor and Family Assistance Budget – Part H):**

In order to achieve \$21.9 million in operational savings and a projected \$14 million in capital costs from 2021-2022, the executive proposes to close four facilities for at-risk youth facilities – the Goshen Secure Center, Red Hook Non-Secure Residential Center, Brentwood Non-Secure Center, and Columbia Secure Center. The executive proposes closure because crime is down and only 50 of the 142 beds available are currently being utilized. The Article VII legislation submitted with the budget also removes the one-year notice requirement to allow these facilities to close in the fall of 2021.

The challenge with this argument is that the data on crime is looking back, not forward. In fact, law enforcement officials around the country are sounding an alarm about the rise in juvenile offenses stemming mainly from the impact of the COVID-19 shutdowns and remote learning.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Police Concerned About Juvenile Crime Spike Amid Pandemic” AP News, Dave Collins, December 12, 2020; <https://apnews.com/2a1c3a83df1bcd2dd3c4fd43bad640bd>

The executive also fails to detail why these facilities are underutilized and fails to indicate that they are not successful in meeting their missions. Similar to the utilization rates cited in support of the closure of other state facilities, it is important to note why utilization rates may be down. These programs are cost-intensive because of the unique populations that they serve. These programs provide treatment, rehabilitation and training for unique populations of at-risk youth with serious challenges so that they will be successful when reintegrating back into their families and/or communities.

For example, the Goshen Secure Facility houses boys who committed certain violent felonies, mainly sex offenses, who have been convicted and sentenced in adult criminal court and juvenile delinquents who have committed violent acts. The staff at this facility provides an array of specialized and individualized services to help these youth build a path forward for reintegration back into their households and communities. Red Hook Non-Secure focuses on trauma-informed care for boys 12-18, many of whom are LGBTQIA and have been placed in OCFS custody by family court.

Brentwood Non-Secure and Columbia Secure Center are girls programs and there are serious concerns that these programs may be consolidated into programs that are currently all male. These programs provide a full array of counseling, education, vocational training, health care, mental health and other services to ensure that these most at-risk youth have the support necessary to lead productive lives. We have serious concerns about the successful integration of these different, unique populations and the risks associated with mixing these populations. We have additional concerns regarding the continuity and quality of operating these specialized programs in different facilities.

We urge the Legislature to reject the closure of these youth facilities and to recommit to investing in these and other programs that deliver needed services which will help these troubled youth stay out of the criminal justice system and lead productive lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony today.