



Children's Aid
Prepared for Submission to the Joint Legislative Public Hearing
on the 2021 Executive Budget Proposal
Health/Medicaid
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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the 2021-22 Executive Budget Proposal on pertinent issues related to the health and wellness of the children and families that we serve. For nearly 168 years, Children's Aid has been committed to ensuring that there are no boundaries to the aspirations of young people, and no limits to their potential. We are leading a comprehensive counterattack on the obstacles that threaten kids' achievements in school and in life. We have also constructed a continuum of services, positioned every step of the way throughout childhood that builds well-being and prepares young people to succeed at every level of education and every milestone of life. Today over 2,000 full and part time staff members empower nearly 50,000 children, youth and their families through our network of 40 locations including early childhood education centers, public schools, community centers and community health clinics in four New York City neighborhoods – Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and the north shore of Staten Island.

As a multi-service agency, we employ a holistic strategy that serves children and their families at every stage of development—from cradle through college and career—and in every key setting—home, school, and community. This cross-sector approach is more vital than ever, as the COVID-19 pandemic destabilizes the communities that we serve and exacerbates existing racial and socioeconomic inequity. In this critical period, young people and their families need a trusted partner like Children's Aid to provide a network of resources that they can turn to when experiencing the relentless challenges that have permeated this crisis—from food insecurity to remote learning challenges to the grief that comes with losing a loved one. Our staff has the expertise and tools to help clients overcome these struggles, keeping them on track to realizing their promise.

In light of the health, economic, and academic challenges around COVID-19, Children's Aid offered an array of timely and holistic interventions in response to the pandemic beginning in March 2020. Adjusting rapidly to continue serving our clients while observing social distancing guidelines, we provided ongoing health and behavioral health services throughout the pandemic. Our community health clinics in Harlem and the South Bronx have remained open throughout the pandemic. Additionally, our school-based health center at Mirabal Sisters Campus in Washington Heights remained open as the campus served as a Regional Enrichment Center providing childcare to essential workers. These clinics have provided COVID-19 testing to symptomatic youth, while also delivering the essential health care we offer year-round. In addition to in-person services, our staff continuously provided remote mental health, counseling, teletherapy, and social emotional support

sessions for both students and parents. Our mental health support has been crucial; many of our students and families are facing real loss, fear, anxiety about the future, and depression. As we work to overcome the deleterious effects of this health and socio-economic crisis, we rely on our government partners to deliver the critical services and resources our communities deserve.

As an agency with a strong state advocacy agenda, we are members of and support the platforms of the New York School-Based Health Alliance and the Coalition for Behavioral Health. Together, we are on a mission to connect children with what they need to learn, grow, and lead successful, independent lives.

Support School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs)

Children's Aid believes that one of the best and most effective ways to keep kids healthy is by making high-quality physical, mental, and dental health care as accessible as possible. For many children, that means building health care services into their schools because it is the place where they spend the most time. School-Based Health centers (SBHCs) ensure that kids miss as little class time as possible. They also reduce the burden on working parents, who know their kids can get high-quality professional care without having to take time off from work. Children's Aid operates six SBHCs that provide an array of medical, dental and behavioral health services. Our School-Based Health Centers are all located in low-income neighborhoods where access to health care can be an ever-present roadblock for families. In the 2019-2020 school year, our SBHCs served 3,681 students and saw a total number of 18,107 visits, including nearly 6,656 medical visits, 4,151 behavioral health visits and nearly 1,626 dental visits, as well as 5,674 first aid care visits. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic our School-Based Health Centers have played a pivotal role, with some remaining operational in limited capacities. Many of our students engaged in counseling at the onset of the pandemic and were able to continue to receive uninterrupted mental health support through the school year and beyond as needed thanks to our swift embrace of tele-mental health services. As schools reopened in the fall, our School Based Health Centers shifted to provide COVID-19 testing for symptomatic students, telehealth services and behavioral health referrals for students and families. They remained open for scheduled clinical appointments when schools were closed, except in instances where the schools were closed due to a COVID-19 outbreak. As we continue to weather the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting health care services in community-based settings is critical to ensuring our communities remain healthy and connected to primary and preventive health care services.

As a member of the New York School-Based Health Alliance (NYSBHA), Children's Aid strongly urges the adoption of following priorities:

- 1. Maintain the \$20,921,000 in funds provided in the 2021-2022 proposed State Executive Budget for School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs).**
- 2. Support \$5 million in new funds in the final 2021-22 State Budget to fully restore cuts to SBHC sponsors whose non-Medicaid State grants funds were**

disproportionately reduced in 2017 due to the combination of: 1) a 20% across the board cut in the final 2017-18 State budget; and 2) an administrative action by the Department of Health to impose additional cuts on some SBHCs ranging from 25% to 70% of total grants funds.

- 3. Hold SBHCs harmless from any Medicaid Cuts in the 2021-22 State Budget.**
- 4. Support Legislation S.2127/A.1587 to protect the choice of each SBHC to operate either carved-out from Medicaid managed care or participating in Medicaid managed care.**

School-Based Health Centers are in financial crisis. Non-Medicaid grant funding for the State's 262 SBHCs for the delivery of core primary, preventive, mental and dental health care services to over 250,000 children has been reduced by over 25%, (\$5.8 million), since 2013. These cuts represent the largest reductions in the 43-year history of the program. They are the result of a 5% across the board reduction in the State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2013-14 budget; 20% across the board reduction in SFY 2017-18; and permanent elimination of the Cost-of-Living Adjustment in SFY 2018-19.

In addition, effective, January 1, 2020, most Medicaid providers, including SBHCs, received a permanent 1% decrease in their Medicaid rates. Further Medicaid cuts to SBHCs are unsustainable and we ask you to hold SBHCs harmless from any Medicaid cuts in the 2021-22 State Budget.

The combined impact of these cuts has been a reduction in access to services for underserved youth. Many of the children and adolescents that we serve are emotionally and physically fragile. They live in communities with a high incidence of drug and alcohol abuse, violence, adolescent pregnancy, and sexually transmitted disease; all of these issues are being compounded by the current Covid-19 pandemic. The non-Medicaid State grant funds are used by centers to help cover the deficits incurred by the SBHC commitment to serve all children, including those who are immigrants and uninsured. With the partial reopening of schools in the fall of 2020 and the continued expansion of days in the school building, our SBHCs remain important hubs for health care access for our youth. SBHCs are needed now more than ever as our youth have experienced - and continue to experience- grief, isolation and anxiety about the future, and as many services, including well-child visits, dental care and other preventive health care services took a back seat during the pandemic.

Suspension of Dental Services within SBHCs

Additionally, we want to bring to your attention an issue that has precluded School-Based Health Centers from providing dental services since April 2020. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, dental services were put on pause throughout the state. On April 2, 2020 Department of Health Interim Guidance for School-Based Health Centers Regarding COVID-19 stated that non-essential or elective dental care should be postponed until further notice. Since that guidance was released in April, dental clinics across the State have been encouraged to reopen to provide dental services to patients regardless of age.

On June 1, 2020 dental offices were approved to open for regular care and on June 26, 2020 the NYSDOH published Interim Guidance for Dentistry During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency. School-Based Health Center dental programs are currently not allowed to resume operation, based on the April 2 Interim Guidance. Yet, all School-Based Health Center dental programs operate under Article 28 guidelines and strictly follow NYSDOH guidelines. Compliance is monitored through NYSDOH IPRO audits, and New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene staff conduct regular unannounced site visits.

We provide dental services at 3 School Based Health Centers and in FY20 provided 1,630 dental visits. Since the April 2 Interim Guidance was released we have been unable to provide dental services and our dental staff remain on furlough. School Based Health Centers are a critical source of dental care for children of color and those living in low income and rural communities. These children are most at risk of early and persistent tooth decay. Without early intervention that provides preventive treatments like cleanings, sealants, exams, minor restorative procedures, the oral health of school children in underserved communities will deteriorate, causing increased lost school time, child suffering, and avoidable costs for the Medicaid delivery system. In many cases School-Based Health Centers are the only point of health care access for children, and as such must be allowed to provide services to families that might otherwise forgo care.

We think it is important to allow School Based Health Centers the flexibility to provide the same services other dental providers are currently providing. **We urge you to work with the Governor's office to direct NYSDOH to update the guidance to clarify that dental programs may reenter schools for nonurgent services.**

Increased Investment in Children's Behavioral Health

Children's Aid's commitment to strong families and communities spans the health and wellness continuum. We provide behavioral health services in school-based and community health centers to help children cope with emotional problems so they can thrive in school and in life. When behavioral health care is available, children and adolescents can build a solid foundation to realize their potential.

When students and families across New York began to shelter at home due to COVID-19, our behavioral health staff knew they needed to transform the way they provided services. Our staff stepped up in remarkable ways, calling clients and their parents constantly to check in and adapting services to any modality that was accessible to the family.

Our staff treating youth with impulse control, complex trauma, or parent child conflict saw those issues heightened when the pandemic hit. Children experienced the consequences of the pandemic first hand when family members fell ill or parents continued to go into work as essential workers. They also struggled with social isolation, as they were required to stop seeing their friends. Between April and June 2020, Children's Aid clinicians provided over 5,500 behavioral

health sessions, a 40% increase in the number of visits compared to the same period last year. We have met a growing need for these supports as the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. The need for behavioral health services and support will continue to increase as we inch our way to recovery.

Children's Aid focuses the bulk of its services on four New York City neighborhoods: Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and northern Staten Island. In these communities, where between 52% and 95% of residents are Black or Latinx, systemic racism—and the barriers it creates in access to quality housing, health care, employment, and education—has led to high levels of intergenerational poverty and an array of associated outcomes, including high rates of school failure, childhood trauma, and family instability. Any cuts to services for children, especially within our black and brown communities already experiencing health inequities, could have disastrous long-term effects on those we serve, including poorer health and economic outcomes into adulthood.

Telehealth Services

Our behavioral health's staff ability to quickly pivot to meet the needs of youth and families underscores a key tenet that has spanned all innovation throughout the pandemic: the need for flexibility and support from government partners. Telehealth has become a very important part of health care for children, teens, and families during this time. We appreciate the state and federal government's relaxation of regulatory requirements in the provision of telehealth services through the pandemic and are enthusiastic and supportive of the SFY21-22 Executive proposals to maximize the movement to telehealth, including the telephonic delivery of care and allowing individuals to receive care where they are located.

However, we stand with the Coalition of Behavioral Health and advocates in urging the state legislature to adopt two key provisions needed to strengthen the provision of telehealth services:

- 1. Rate parity: telehealth must be covered at the same rate as in-person rates.**
- 2. Peers: all peers who are eligible to be reimbursed for in-person services must be eligible for telehealth reimbursement. Peers are a proven part of treatment and recovery and should not be treated differently from other professionals.**

The majority of health providers are interested in keeping telehealth beyond the pandemic, but it must be as a first, not second, class service. Children's Aid medical staff urge the state to also consider the following recommendations: **telehealth platforms must be available and accessible for use by all patients and providers; Universal Broadband access and availability is essential in New York state and to acknowledge that telehealth is critical to maintain any level of capacity for children's mental health care.**

Child and Family Treatment Support Services (CFTSS)

Children's Aid successfully launched our Children and Family Treatment and Support Services (CFTSS) program in July of 2019. The program has enabled access for hard to reach families by providing clinical services in the home and community. Under CFTSS we provide children and youth therapy services and rehabilitation services, which have been critical lifelines throughout the pandemic. We have continued to provide in person services for families through the CFTSS program and have served 190 families during the pandemic and continue to do so.

We urge the state to avoid cuts to CFTSS rates and stand with the New York State Coalition of Behavioral Health calling for the Extension of Child and Family Treatment Support Services (CFTSS) to the Child Health Plus program (S2539/A303 and S2538/A343). Children are experiencing a range of mental health and substance use challenges as a result of the pandemic. Over 4,200 children in NYS have lost a parent to COVID-19. Children are experiencing parental unemployment, social isolation and virtual school, destabilizing their lives. Extending CFTSS to the Child Health Plus program will ensure more children have access to this valuable service.

Health Home Care Management

We thank you for supporting a moratorium on cuts or reductions for children's behavioral health services in last year's State Budget. After nearly a year of anxiety, isolation, disconnection from school, food insecurity, and families' economic insecurity, New York's children need your support once again.

At Children's Aid, we urge the continuation of a moratorium on cuts or reductions to children's behavioral health programs, rates, or capacity. In particular we want to make sure that any rates scheduled for adjustment during the upcoming state fiscal year remain the same to meet the ever-increasing number of children who are becoming eligible for Medicaid each day as the pandemic continues to have a negative impact on families' economic stability.

As part of the New York State Coalition of Behavioral Health, we specifically ask that you **extend the current rate structure for adult and children Health Home Care Management beyond the current date of expiration (7/1/2021) through June 30, 2023.** Any potential destabilization of rates gravely jeopardizes the move toward increased specialization of care and in particular the proposed improvements to serving individuals with the most serious and acute mental health needs.

Family Planning

Children's Aid offers comprehensive, age-appropriate, sexuality education and reproductive health care services, as well as helping young people build the tools they need to make healthy and informed choices. Our programs help young people prevent unplanned pregnancy and HIV and STDs so they can focus on school, make safe, healthy decisions, and prepare for their future. We applaud the State's commitment to maintaining and preserving access to high quality reproductive

health services for low-income individuals across New York State. We thank the State for the extension of family planning services contracts for the period of January 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021 in lieu of the loss of Title X funds in 2019. We ask that the legislature maintain level funding of \$40.6 million in base funding included in the proposed Executive budget and restore the nearly \$1 million provided by the legislature last year for family planning services to continue contracts beyond July 2021. We urge the state to maintain the \$8.5M in level funding included in the SFY21-22 Executive budget proposal for adolescent pregnancy prevention programming including CAPP, PREP, and SRAE funds.

Closing Remarks

Children's Aid sincerely thanks the NYS Legislature for their vigorous support of the neediest families and communities in New York. The issues outlined above are of extreme importance to Children's Aid and our children and families and we will do all that we can to advocate, protect and increase funding. It is the right and moral thing to do to ensure that our children and families in communities with limited resources have the best opportunity available to realize their full potential.

If you have any questions about this submitted testimony please contact Michelle Avila, Assistant Director of Public Policy at mavila@childrensaidnyc.org or (718) 877-3668.