



**TESTIMONY OF
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NORTHERN RIVERS FAMILY OF SERVICES**

**PRESENTED TO THE
NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
AND
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS**

**REGARDING THE
NEW YORK STATE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR HUMAN SERVICES
STATE FISCAL YEAR 2022-2023**

FEBRUARY 2, 2022

NORTHERNRIVERS

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience**
 - a. Enact 5.4% COLA**
 - b. Permanent extension of CPI based COLA statute**
 - c. Update eligible programs to include children and adult health homes**
 - d. Clarify and provide retention bonus intent for child welfare and human services heroes**
 - e. Fund scholarship, loan forgiveness and professional development efforts**

- 2. Support Child Welfare Foster Parent Support and Avoid County Cost Shifts**

- 3. Support Innovative and Impactful Community Based Prevention Services**

- 4. Reform Scope of Practice to Meet Workforce Demands for Treatment**

- 5. Support Nonprofit Infrastructure**

Good afternoon. My name is William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services located in the Capital Region.

About Northern Rivers Family of Services

Northern Rivers Family of Services was established in 2012 through affiliation with longstanding family services agencies **Northeast Parent & Child Society** and **Parsons Child & Family Center**. In 2019, we affiliated with **Unlimited Potential**, whose operations began in Saratoga Springs. Together, the 1,400-strong workforce of Northern Rivers and member agencies serve more than 18,000 children and families in 41 upstate counties each year, with \$88 million invested through more than 60 social services and child welfare programs. Northern Rivers builds a strong, successful, and healthy future for our children, families, and communities through quality services, collaboration, and innovative leadership. Our program areas include:

- Residential and community-based child welfare programming including foster care, preventive services, postadoption services, and evidence-based home visiting programs;
- Educational services for 400 students including early learning, pre-K, and Early Head Start, as well as accredited 853 schools (elementary, middle, and high school);
- Community-based child welfare and crisis services programs for children and adults including mobile crisis, school-based services, and licensed clinic programs; and
- Community-based waiver programs for children and adults including Health Home services.

I would like to thank Chairwomen Liz Krueger and Chairwomen Helene E. Weinstein, Human Services Committee Chairs, and members of the Assembly Ways and Means

and Senate Finance Committees for this opportunity to testify on the Governor's Executive Budget for State Fiscal Year 2022–2023. As has been stated many times:

***The budget is not just a collection of numbers,
but an expression of our values and aspirations.***

Governor Hochul has proposed a \$216 billion Executive Budget to deal with our state's needs and priorities. The budget is balanced and make significant investments in our workforce, infrastructure, environment and service safety net. The proposed budget utilizes needed federal resources and proposals, improves the infrastructure, promotes county and education efficiency, and places a spotlight on economic growth and development across the state. We applaud the Governor's reforms, fresh approach and new ideas.

While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor Hochul proposes, **we believe, adjustments to the budget needs to be made to make New York State a great place to live, raise a family, and operate a business. Our testimony recommends changes and suggestions for the final budget. Unless the proposed Executive Budget is adjusted to adequately support the human services sector and the children, adults, and families we serve each day, New York State will not reach its goals. Without support and opportunity for ALL New Yorkers, we will not be truly successful.**

COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected many people's child welfare and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders. In a recent Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) brief, [53%](#) of adults in the United States reported that their child welfare has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. This is significantly higher than the [32%](#) reported in prior months. Many adults are also reporting specific negative impacts on their [child welfare and wellbeing](#), such as difficulty sleeping (36%) or eating (32%), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12%), and worsening chronic conditions (12%), due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. As the pandemic wears on, ongoing and necessary public health measures expose many people to experiencing situations linked to poor child welfare outcomes, such as [isolation](#) and [job loss](#).

Child Welfare providers and their staff did not allow the pandemic to negatively impact the delivery of services.

- Front line staff left their homes each day and provided services on an inpatient and outpatient level
- Providers pivoted and provided remote and tele services to avoid any disruption
- Agencies were forced to deal with the demand for higher salaries, hazard pay, inflation in double digits, and burnout of personnel

We cannot however let the COVID- 19 and fiscal stress undermine the critical child welfare system across NYS. Following are specific recommendations with regard to the proposed budget.

1. Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience

New York’s families have faced many challenges in past years: the down economy, joblessness, homelessness, opiate/substance abuse, and violence in already plagued communities; for these forgotten New Yorkers, times are still hard. When families are in crisis and children are at risk, New York’s network of not-for-profit human services providers are both the first line of defense and the safety net. **The agencies and the women and men in the not-for-profit human services sector are the first responders for at-risk and vulnerable families, children, and individuals.** Throughout the state, not-for-profit human services welfare agencies respond to critical family situations 24/7/365, and our fiscal viability is at risk.

Workforce Support Is a Social Justice Issue

Women make up an astonishing 81% of the human services and direct care workforce in New York. This equates to 268,900+ skilled, well-educated workers who are paid significantly less than women in New York’s private sector, leading to increased staff turnover and jeopardizing the quality-of-service delivery,

Non-Profit Organizations are an Economic Engine

New York’s not-for-profit workforce is not only hard working but also an economic engine. Across New York state, 1 in 7 (1 in 6?) workers are employed by a not-for-

profit organization. These workers contribute billions to the state's economic health; including the payment of income, sales, and property tax. Beyond the direct economic impact, the not-for-profit workforce, allow all New Yorkers to stay employed, avert costly medical costs, and educate our young persons. A strong non-profit sector, with a viable direct care staff, creates additional economic growth and allows NYS to attract new business investments and companies.

Non-Profit Sector Operates as an Efficient Business

Our sector understands the need to maximize utilization of our resources and to provide value to our funders. We have worked in partnership with government on countless initiatives to reduce costs, focus on outcomes, use of evidence-based practices, and improve quality services. These efforts come in a climate where the rates and contracts our agencies receive are frozen or lowered. These staff, who we expect to do such vital work, are facing staffing cutbacks, frozen salaries, reduced health benefits, and little or no contributions to their pensions. Not-for-profit agencies have always raised funds from private donors to supplement government resources.

The Executive Budget includes a one-time 5.4 percent COLA to human services providers in FY 2023 for eligible programs and services. The COLA applies to voluntary operated providers of services for OPWDD, OMH, OASAS, OCFS, OTDA, and SOFA. The Budget requires local government units to account for their use of funds and would authorize agency commissioners to recoup funding not utilized consistent with statute or appropriation. **We applaud the inclusion of the 5.4% COLA in the executive budget!** These funds will flow to front line staff and allow them to make gains after years of underfunding.

As part of the proposal permanent authority for the COLA expires. We recommend permanent extension of the COLA with annual CPI based and eligibility adjustments to reflect the demands and importance of safety net programs.

Specifically, we recommend that the COLA be provided to the children and adult health home programs that have been started over the past decade. The health home program served tens of thousands children and adults with care coordination and support. The impact is substantial-lower hospital admissions, lower inpatient mental health hospitalizations, and improved long term health outcomes and savings.

Additionally, the proposed budget includes onetime retention payments to front line staff in the OPWDD and OMH programs/agencies. We support these payments but they must be extended to child welfare and human services staff. We urge that Healthcare and Human Services Workforce salary and pipeline enhancements, professional and educational development, and recruitment and retention incentive opportunities proposed in the Executive Budget proposal be provided across the full human services workforce, including our child welfare workforce.

Front line staff regardless of titles or funding stream must be supported and shown financial respect in our budget to avoid higher turnover, program closures and lower levels of service. Extension of the retention bonus will stabilize the child welfare, foster care and preventive services system.

As part of a comprehensive workforce support and development investment, the issues of training, professional develop, and student loan debt must be addressed.

We support the inclusion of funding for the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program in the Executive Budget proposal. We recommend the Enacted Budget increase funding to \$1 million each for a total state investment of \$2 million expansion of the workforce scholarships programs administered by Higher Education and recommend funding at the \$1 million level. Also, we need to address student debt. We recommend funding to allow staff employed in the child welfare system to be eligible for student debt payments.

Our agencies are the safety net for New Yorkers in greatest need. While our agencies' missions prevent us from turning away people in need, many of our agencies are now fiscally unstable and in danger of closing due to inadequate funding.

The importance of our organizations cannot be overstated. **Individuals** rely on us to fulfill their dreams of independence. **Families** rely on us to provide their loved ones with the quality care they need to keep them safe and thriving. **Communities** rely on us as economic engines and employers. **Taxpayers** rely on us to support New Yorkers in their home communities, off the streets, and out of expensive institutional settings and emergency rooms. Every New Yorker is being impacted by this ongoing crisis—even those who don't yet realize it.

This investment is a cost-effective win for all New Yorkers. In addition:

- Not-for-profit human services organizations support is a social justice issue;
- Not-for-profit human services organizations are an economic engine; and
- Not-for-profit human services sector operates as an efficient business.

We urge the members of Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee to continue your leadership in the human services sector through your support of the workforce.

2. Support Child Welfare Foster Parent Support and Avoid County Cost Shifts

The Executive budget proposes an overdue increase for foster parents who provide in home care to thousands of children across NYS. Foster parents are the core foundation of the child welfare system and policy efforts to reduce out of home care and promote permanency. The monthly increase is deserved and will support the recruitment of new homes and parents.

The financial increase is a cost for local counties. It makes no sense to increase foster parent payments and then require local government to absorb the cost. It is a cost shift and an example of state action that impact local taxpayers.

The consequences of cost shift is simple. Local government must reduce other programs to pay for the mandated foster parent increase. The options for reductions are few. Cuts will occur in preventive services programs, detention reduction projects and other youth focused services.

We recommend the full funding of the foster parent increase through an increase in the level of appropriation for the foster care block grant.

3. Support Innovative and Impactful Community Based Prevention Services

Over the past decade the number of children placed in foster care has been reduced dramatically. In addition, for children requiring placement, the length of stay has been reduced. Children and families are better supported, disruptions reduced and long-term trauma reduced. Child Welfare Preventive Services are Impactful and have met the objectives of the landmark legislation.

Prevention workers work alongside families to understand supports and services they require, and they also keep a strong focus on any ongoing safety risks in the home. Staff regularly meet with families and make home visits to assess safety and to check in with families. They may provide referrals to treatment programs, including mental health or substance use disorder treatment, domestic violence services, or parenting classes. These services have been especially important throughout the pandemic, when more families have needed support with securing food, intimate partner violence, mental health crises, and substance use disorders. This opened child welfare funding stream also supports county funding for protective services, adoption administration, and independent living.

Govern Hochul recommends extension of the child welfare preventive funding statute for five (5) years. We strongly recommend the extension!

The extension however fails to correct prior temporary cuts in reimbursement for local preventive services. Due to prior period state deficits preventive services

reimbursement was changed from 65% to 62%. This action occurred annually as part of the budget process.

It is clear that the temporary fiscal crisis is over and the need for the lower reimbursement is not needed. We recommend the preventive services funding be returned to the statutorily required 65% level effective April 1, 2022.

Restoration will allow continued local innovation that will further promote reduced admissions and better safety and stability outcomes for families, children and communities.

4. Reform Scope of Practice to Meet Workforce Demands for Treatment

In addition, there are critical workforce shortages in the Human Services professions across New York State. The shortages contribute to higher costs to voluntary nonprofit agencies and impede access to care. For decades, the dramatic shortage of licensed child welfare practitioners has been “masked” by an exemption to the scope of practice for certain practitioners licensed under Art 163 of the Education Law. That exemption is due to sunset permanently in June 2022

The Legislature must act immediately to address a crisis that will ensue in June when the exemption permanently sunsets. The solution is a modernization to the scope of practice and standardization of the Master level educational, clinical training and licensing standards for licensed child welfare counselors, licensed marriage and family therapists and licensed psychoanalyst. We supports inclusion of A6008-B by Assemblyman Bronson and S5301-A by Senator Brouk in the Enacted Budget. This bill would standardize the

requirements for licensure as a mental health practitioner and modernize the scope of practice for article 163 (Education Law) professionals to include diagnosis. There are currently over 10,000 of these capable, trained and licensed practitioners working up to their full scope of training in New York State. We cannot weaken the valuable impact of these well trained professionals during a period when there are more needs, gaps in services and calls for resources in schools.

Failure to address the scope of practice issue will yield increased wait lists for services, added turnover and a permanent reduction to the safety net for all families and individuals regardless of income or location.

5. Support Nonprofit Infrastructure

We support the new grant funding opportunities under the Nonprofit Infrastructure Capital Investment Program proposed in the Executive Budget. The legislature has previously been a huge advocate for these funds, and we ask for your continued support in making sure the \$50 million proposed in the Executive Budget for the Nonprofit Infrastructure Capital Investment Program is included in the enacted budget.

Conclusion

In closing, we urge the Legislature to negotiate a budget with the Governor that ensures that the State remains committed to the programs that produce positive outcomes for children, individuals, and families; one that ultimately **saves the State money on more expensive interventions such as foster care, unnecessary medical care, homeless shelters, and the juvenile justice system.** We strongly

encourage the Legislature to support the need of the not-for-profit human services sector. Failure to fund an increase for not-for-profit human services agencies will have a significant negative impact on the ability of individuals and families to receive services and ultimately on the physical, mental, and financial health of New York State as a whole.

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profit human services organizations and communities that yield positive outcomes for all New Yorkers. We must make New York State a great place to live, a great place to raise a family, and a great place to operate a business. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.