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NYS Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2022 Executive Budget Proposal: Human Services

Testimony submitted by:

Daniel C. Levler, President, Suffolk County Association of Municipal Employees

Within the Aid to Localities portion of the FY2023 New York State Budget, we are encouraged to find significant and continued funding for Social Services programs across the state and in particular, here in Suffolk County.

The Suffolk County workforce represented by the Suffolk Association of Municipal Employees (Suffolk AME) includes employees working in Family & Children Services programs like Child Protective Services, Temporary Housing Assistance programs, Medicaid services and more. In order to successfully implement programs intended to protect our most vulnerable populations, our members rely on funding from New York State and the support of our elected representatives at the state level.

For the purpose of testimony for the joint public hearing on Human Services, we would like to address the following topics within the Aid to Localities budget and how these proposals will impact the Suffolk County Workforce.

- Child Protective Services
- Child Care Services
- Foster Care
- Police Reform & Reinvention Task Force

Child Protective Services:

Caseworkers in the Suffolk County Department of Social Services play a pivotal role in Suffolk, working day in and day out to protect our most vulnerable population; however, their workload can cause a significant stress on the County, the budget, and the workers themselves. By addressing Child Protective Services with a significant state funding increase in FY23, we believe the State can act to alleviate some of these countywide concerns.

Addressing short staffing and unsafe caseload levels has been an ongoing priority for Suffolk AME. Here at the County level, we continue to address caseload concerns through legislation (Resolution 183-2019) and are grateful to both the County Executive and Legislature to include funding for additional Caseworker positions in the 2022 Operating Budget.

Despite these successes, unsafe caseloads due to understaffing in Suffolk DSS continues to be an issue. In testimony given before the Suffolk County Legislature just last week, the Suffolk County DSS Commissioner acknowledged that several caseworkers are carrying as many as 21 cases at any given time and that for others they can be even higher during peak reporting times—this exceeds best recommended practices by nearly 50% that there shall be no more than 15 cases per caseworker as outlined in a report commissioned by NYS.

Inadequate staffing levels and high caseloads not only puts children at risk, but also results in overtime expenses. Additional funding from the State would allow Counties like Suffolk to more adequately staff their respective Child Protective Services units.

Beyond staffing inadequacies alone, we are also imploring State leaders to consider granting Child Protective Services caseworkers throughout the State with additional authorities, such as the ability to receive access to sealed court documents and/or interjurisdictional reports, and training in order to better serve our residents. Funding in the budget to allow for such training is therefore encouraged.

In order to best serve the children of Suffolk County, Suffolk AME continues to advocate for the hiring and training of new caseworkers, not only to protect the citizens of Suffolk County, but also to reduce expenses created by overtime and employee turnover. This increase to the state budget will help to support these goals and the Suffolk County Department of Social Services' mission: to provide financial assistance and support services to eligible Suffolk County residents in a cost effective and efficient manner, simultaneously protecting the vulnerable while encouraging their independence and self-sufficiency.

Child Care Services:

The Child Care Services unit, in tandem with the NYS Division of Child Care, work to ensure that any eligible county residents have access to free or low cost subsidized child care services. The proposed FY23 budget will help to ensure that these programs continue to operate and support Suffolk residents who are in need of services, including members of our workforce.

Foster Care:

The Suffolk County Office of Family and Children Services administers a robust Foster Care program connecting children and young adults with caregivers and the programs

necessary to sustain an active and supportive livelihood. The increase in reimbursable funding within the 2023 state budget will help Suffolk County meet necessary goals and continue to support the workforce within these programs.

Police Reform and Reinvention through an Investment in Mental Health Services:

Starting with the 2021 New York State Budget and now the 2022 Suffolk County Police Reform and Reinvention Task Force Report, the Suffolk AME workforce plays a pivotal role in providing emergency services to the community. Through our members who work in the Suffolk County Police Department in civilian roles, Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services, and the Department of Social Services, we continue to help support initiatives that serve to deescalate police emergencies and, at times, prevent them from even occurring in the first place.

Within these reform plans, the County continues to focus on community policing, education, staffing within police precincts and for the purpose of the FY23 Joint Legislative Hearing on Human Services, mental health response.

As noted above, our members play a significant role in this process. Starting with our 9-1-1 operators through our Social Services caseworkers, we continue to work alongside various municipalities, departments at the county and state level, and all communities across the island.

Within the County's reform plan, the Mental Health Response is outlined to include a 9-1-1 mental health-specific call diversion program that would link 9-1-1 emergency services to mental health crisis hotlines and outreach services provided by the county. This call diversion program would not only help to alleviate the workload of our police officers and dispatchers, but would also help to assist them in connecting those in need with long-term solutions to any mental health programs that are needed. The program would also provide extensive mental health training to our dispatchers as outlined in recent state legislation, S.7121/A.7366A defining dispatchers as "First responders in communications."

While this expanded role and training for dispatchers is important, we cannot lose sight of the invaluable work our DSS members provide. A significant investment in Social Services will help deescalate emergency situations and prevent such situations from reaching emergency status.

The FY23 budget will help Suffolk County to better implement this plan as well as expand overall Mental Health platforms provided by the municipal workforce.

Suffolk AME would like to thank Governor Hochul, Leader Stewart-Cousins, Speaker Heastie, and all members of the Joint Committee on Human Services for their work on the 2023 budget.

The programs outlined within the budget will continue to provide extensive financial support to the County and the County's municipal workforce, which we are proud to represent.