



NORTHERNRIVERS

Life changing care

**TESTIMONY OF
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**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 2023–2024**

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Summary of Recommendations

- 1. Build and Fund a Comprehensive Workforce Strategy across Human Services**
 - a. Expanding and improving the human services cost of living adjustment (COLA): Increasing the Human Services COLA, consistent with the Consumer Price Index, this year at 8.5%, and ensuring that it is equitably invested across the human services workforce, to include prevention workers and health home care managers.
 - b. Create a coherent cross-agency workforce strategy that includes fair compensation, loan forgiveness, scholarship program, and related linkages to schools and universities across New York State.
- 2. Fund a Continuum of Family Supportive Child Welfare Services**
- 3. Fund the Bold Mental Health Strategy and Build a Workforce to Implement**
- 4. Implement the Child Poverty Act that centers upon children, families, and communities**

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 programing 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 \$227 billion Executive Budget to deal with our state's needs and priorities. The budget is balanced and makes significant investments in mental health, education, infrastructure, environment and safety. 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.**

One lesson from the past years is that the needs of children and families don't fit neatly into budget codes, state agency silos, or generic diagnoses. Our Human Services sector provides mental health, child welfare prevention, and residential, educational and another vital services based on the needs of the child, family, and complicated trauma faculties.

Our budget for the coming year must provide cross-discipline solutions. Undeniably, child welfare professionals provide mental health services, outpatient mental health professionals provide family stability and positive functioning, and residential care agencies provide specialized education.

1. Build and Fund a Comprehensive Workforce Strategy across Human Services

New bold ideas and innovation require the skills and expertise of a strong workforce. The recommendations in the proposed budget require recruitment and retention of thousands of individuals across every county, borough, and neighborhood. We need nurses, direct-care staff, medical professionals, cooks, drivers, case managers, peers, teachers, aides, and many more. The state budget must act in the short term and fund an adequate cost-of-living increase at 8.5% to allow the current and emerging workforce to stay in the field. Furthermore, this increase needs to apply throughout the sector, or we run the very real risk of professionals leaving one position for another; in essence damaging one service to bolster another.

At the same time, New York State needs a coherent workforce recruitment and retention strategy. The proposed budget contains many solid ideas, yet they are scattered in various agency budgets. We need to compile these ideas to build a human services plan. To be clear, we support the OMH proposal for a credentialing system as well as loan forgiveness options. We support the efforts of OPWDD to issue a marketing campaign for their workforce. These ideas and others need to be replicated **across** the human services sector if we are to realize gains in employment and services.

Workforce Support Is a Social Justice Issue

Women comprise 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.

Nonprofit Organizations Are an Economic Engine

New York's not-for-profit workforce is not only hard-working, but is also an economic engine. Across New York State, 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 taxes. Beyond the direct economic impact, the not-for-profit workforce allows all New Yorkers to stay employed, avert costly medical costs, and educate our youth. A strong nonprofit sector, with a viable direct-care staff, creates additional economic growth and allows New York State to attract new business investments and companies.

Nonprofit Sector Operates as an Efficient Business

Our sector understands the need to maximize use 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 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. Staff who we expect to do such vital work face staffing cutbacks, frozen salaries, reduced health benefits, and little or no contributions to their pensions. Nonprofit agencies have always been forced to raise funds from private donors to supplement government resources—simply to continue to be able to do the work we are asked to do.

The Executive Budget includes a one-time 2.5% COLA for 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.

Again, the cost of living as expressed by the CPI justifies an 8.5% increase. Again, our sector, and by extension the New Yorkers we serve, will once again be left behind.

2. Fund a Continuum of Family Supportive Child Welfare Services

Every day staff work tirelessly alongside children and families in New York's child welfare programs to connect families to supports when there is a need for housing, food, clothing, mental health and medical services, and to assist them in getting the

resources needed to keep their families safe, healthy, and together. Staff support children and youth in foster care, their families of origin, and foster parents working to achieve children's permanency goals.

In her executive budget proposal, Gov. Kathy Hochul recognizes the human services sector, including foster care staff and programs, with a 2.5% cost-of-living adjustment. While we appreciate the governor's recognition of the sector, this number is simply inadequate given the collective ask from the sector for an 8.5% increase in line with this year's Consumer Price Index. Programs, including all human services programs such as foster care, prevention programs, and health home care programs serving children, need to see the full 8.5% investment in order to keep up with ever-increasing costs and to achieve meaningful staff salary increases.

The turnover rate for front line staff in New York's foster care programs is 49%; turnover for caseworkers in New York's family foster care, prevention, and residential foster care programs is 24%. The state must invest in this workforce to turn the tide from families' current reality of beginning therapeutic work again and again, too often, each time a new caseworker starts with them. Each budget year that New York does not invest in creating career pathways for child welfare professionals and in raising their salaries to retain them in the field is another year that New York wastes the opportunity to make a real difference in achieving positive outcomes for children—promoting family stability, reducing lengths of stay in foster care, and achieving lasting permanency for children.

Today, New York's foster care programs are the glue and safety net for local districts as they assess needs, risk, allegations of abuse, and other trauma. Voluntary nonprofit

agencies are the providers of a variety of services ranging from short-term prevention intervention, residential care, aftercare, and adoption services. Unfortunately, the agencies that step up each day and provide services are operating on faith as to the level of reimbursement they receive.

Only in the child welfare community are contracted services delivered without the providers knowing the reimbursement. Private sector businesses are able to set prices and expect payments. Nonprofits providing child welfare services are not in that position due to state policy. Specifically, foster care agencies do not know what their rates will be as of April 1, 2023, due to the state's actions in setting aside a long-established rate-setting system this past year. While we appreciate clarifying language that was added to allow additional increases outside of the COLA, we do not have information on any increases that may be provided and what the rates will be. We continue to advocate for full funding of the foster care rates through June 30, 2023, as well as a return to the rate-setting system so that these programs have predictable funding as they continue to do the vital work of caring for children and youth in foster care.

We note that the budget includes reference to new federal requirements related to the federal IMD Exclusion. In order to ensure access to care for children and youth in residential foster care settings, we recommend the budget contains state-only Medicaid funding until a federal solution exists providing federal matching funds for services provided to this population.

We remain hopeful that Gov. Hochul and the legislature will work together to ensure that New York's final budget this year invests in children and families by:

- Investing in foster care workforce salaries in response to inflation and the rising minimum wage to ensure the sector has the workforce needed to care for our most vulnerable children and youth.
- Fully funding current foster care rates through June 30, 2023.
- Increasing funding for the Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Programs by increasing the funding for these programs to \$1 million each thereby creating meaningful career paths in child welfare services.
- Expanding and Improving the human services COLA, consistent with the Consumer Price Index, this year at 8.5%, and ensuring that it is equitably invested across the human services workforce, including prevention workers and health home care managers.
- Increasing prevention funding to support families safely remaining together: Northern Rivers urges the state to increase reimbursement to counties for uncapped prevention investment, to 75%, as proposed in bill [A-10242](#) (sponsored by Assembly Member Andrew Hevesi) of 2022.

3. Fund the Bold Mental Health Strategy and Build a Workforce to Implement

In her second State of the State address, Gov. Hochul proposed significant investments in mental health with the goal of “fixing the entire continuum of care that is necessary to keep people safe and happy.” Her proposals range from expanding insurance coverage

for mental health services to increased capacity for inpatient psychiatric beds. The plan also includes an expansion of outpatient services, payment parity for telehealth, more wrap around services for people transitioning from one setting to another, and expanded school-based mental health services.

This holistic approach is commendable especially in light of the growing need for mental health services in recent years. A recent survey of psychologists reported increases in patients seeking treatment for anxiety, depression, and substance-related disorders compared with 2020. Caregivers reported an inability to meet the increased demand and that their patients were facing longer waitlists.

In addition to the bricks and mortar that create places for people to receive services, a key factor to the success of many of these initiatives will be **the staff** to provide those services. These types of professionals can include psychiatrists and clinical social workers. The Health Services Research Agency has documented the current workforce challenges that contribute to barriers in access to care.

Newer strategies to address staffing shortages are emerging. Not only is telehealth being used more widely since the pandemic but on the same day that the governor proposed these changes, the Kaiser Family Foundation, a Washington, DC-based health policy think tank, released a report that examines strategies implemented through state Medicaid programs to address behavioral health workforce shortages.

The report outlines strategies that fall into four key areas: increasing reimbursement rates, reducing administrative burden, extending the workforce, and incentivizing

participation:

- Increasing the reimbursement rates offered by the state incentivizes more provider participation thereby expanding access.
- Reducing administrative burdens helps lessen the time and effort it takes to process documentation by centralizing or standardizing credentialing and allowing practitioners more time to focus on care delivery.
- Extending the workforce allows more flexibility in the provision of services and scope of practice so that additional providers can give care without the same requirements for supervisory oversight.
- Incentivizing participation to attract providers can include prompt pay for services or student loan repayment, for example.

Utilizing more of the strategies in New York could ensure that the plan to “fix the entire continuum of care” is successful.

Again, we applaud the bold mental health strategy but must ensure the workforce is available to meet the delivery demand.

4. Implement the Child Poverty Act that centers upon children, families, and communities

As New York implements the Child Poverty Reduction Act’s commitment to halving child poverty in a decade and turns the corner to pandemic recovery, we urge the Legislature

and the Governor to pass a 2023-24 budget that centers children and families; prioritizes communities hit hardest by the pandemic; and uses this moment of rebuilding as an opportunity to build back the systems on which children and families and all New Yorkers rely to be aligned, coordinated, well-resourced, and anti-racist.

In the 2023-24 budget, we urge New York to strengthen and expand its refundable tax credits in much the same way as the federal child tax credit was enhanced during the pandemic to have the greatest impact on child poverty by:

- Including a robust State child credit for children under age four, a group currently excluded from New York’s Empire State Child Credit (ESCC);
- Restructuring the ESCC and NYS Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) so the highest credit goes to the lowest-income families, by ending regressive minimum income requirements and phase-ins;
- Increasing the credit amount of the ESCC and EITC to provide families meaningful support;
- Making the EITC available to as many immigrant families as possible; the ESCC already includes children in immigrant families.

Conclusion

In closing, we urge the Legislature to negotiate a budget with the Governor that ensures New York 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 nonprofit human services sector. Failure to fund an increase for nonprofit 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 nonprofit 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.