



Testimony of JMACforFamilies
to
The New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Human Services
February 13, 2023
Hearing Room B
Legislative Office Building

JMACforFamilies is a grassroots organization that provides programming to community members that have been impacted by the child welfare system as child and/or parents. The child welfare system is a generational issue; and the New York City neighborhoods that experience the most investigations also have the highest saturation of child poverty rates, as well as Black and Latine populations.¹

The majority of so-called “preventive services” administered by child welfare agencies are not created by and with communities that have been impacted by the child welfare system. They do not meet the needs of families in the system, who most commonly need material support such as housing, food, childcare, healthcare, etc. Additionally, due to the generational impacts of child welfare and services run through the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), many families do not trust these services due to their staffing of mandated reporters.

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund, proposed as part of the Child and Family Reinvestment Act, would support families and communities that have been historically disenfranchised through economic policies and targeted for government intervention through the child protective services (CPS). The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund is an innovative, first-of-its-kind, anti-racist approach to resourcing communities to support healthy children and families.

Currently, “child welfare” services focus heavily on rectifying supposed deficiencies in parents and parent behaviors, rather than understanding “child welfare” to include wellbeing on micro, meso, and macro levels. The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund will support the welfare of children on a neighborhood level, strengthening the formal and informal social structures and networks that constitute the fabric of a community and keep families together and safe.

Recent research has documented the incredible effects of **neighborhoods** on children:

¹ Data Brief: Child Welfare Investigations and New York City Neighborhoods;
<http://www.centrernyc.org/data-brief-child-welfare-investigations>

- Health impacts
- Cognitive impacts
- Social mobility and lifelong earnings

Studies have also found that specific neighborhood enhancements can make a big difference:

- Safe playspaces and greenery
- Density of nonprofits and civic events
- Convenient access to critical family resources, like food and childcare
- Vibrant social fabric

In short, everyday surroundings offer significant **advantages** to children *even if their own family is struggling*. Yet decades of redlining and racist disinvestment have resulted in vastly inequitable neighborhood conditions. We saw that indelibly in the pandemic. The Child and Family Well-Being Fund is a chance to **make a corrective shift** to ensure that all New York children live within neighborhoods that are set up to support their well-being.

Description of the Child & Family Wellbeing Fund

- Supports the density of local nonprofits by investing in small groups that are usually locked out of government funding. *Only groups with budgets under \$2 million that are recommended by community members.*
- Resources trusted organizations. *This fund is only open to groups without ties to the CPS system.*
- Centers community expertise in resource decisions. *Advisory boards include child welfare system-impacted parents and youth.*
- Intentionally invests in the social fabric. *It uses the Asset-Based Community Development model to build social capital and collective action.*
- Builds long-term community capacity. *Technical assistance to support growth is written in.*
- Reduces the likelihood of family involvement in the child protective system. *It invests in projects and resources known to reduce family stress and vulnerability to child welfare involvement.*
- Brings joy. *It supports family activities, community gatherings and neighborly care.*

Redefining Child Welfare: Promoting Child & Family Wellbeing

New York State’s “**family policy guidelines**” prioritize government support for families that promote “**safe, nurturing environments which support the healthy growth of all family members.**” However, the current framework of CPS/child welfare intervention investigates and prosecutes families for “neglect” - allegations related to parental inability to provide basic necessities. The majority of reports to the state child abuse hotline are made not for abuse, but for symptoms of poverty (i.e., homelessness, lack of transportation to school, inability to obtain medical care, lack of food and other basic needs, etc.). Parents earning low incomes are

disproportionately reported to CPS for experiencing domestic violence or struggling with substance use, despite these situations impacting families regardless of socioeconomic status. Many families who live in communities that have been disenfranchised and targeted by CPS are in survival mode, with limited trusted options for support. In fact, many state-funded resources available in communities are staffed by mandated reporters whose presence makes many families uncomfortable due to the implicit threat of child welfare involvement.

Moreover, the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund will save money long term. Investing in neighborhoods can reduce health disparities, improve educational outcomes and directly address over-policing of youth and families.

The Fund's Structure:

- **Community-driven Investment:** The vision is to use the new Child and Family Wellbeing Fund to direct state dollars to groups that are deeply embedded in communities and responsive to community needs. Grantees are determined by a local advisory committee who have been identified by the community, composed of individuals with lived experience and individuals with professional experience in relevant public system policy and community engagement.
- **Operational Accountability:** Since the vision is to prioritize small, local groups and organizations that may not have capacity to seek out and apply for state grants, the Fund will operate through a “backbone” organization, which will provide technical assistance and support for communities to determine which kinds of community investments they want, support local advisory committees in soliciting and evaluating grant proposals, and distributing funding according to local advisory committee decisions.
- **Reporting and Evaluation:** The backbone organization would be responsible for documenting the grants, collecting information for evaluation and producing public reports to the legislature and the public that demonstrate the process, impact, and effects of the Fund's community-led grant-making process and state-funded investments.

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund redefines what “child welfare” means in New York by investing state dollars in local community-based organizations that provide families with basic necessities, and supporting formal and informal social structures that serve as enmeshed family and community protective factors, including material supports and mutual aid, doulas/maternal health, activities for children, and peer support groups.

