



Prevent Child Abuse New York™

Testimony at the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing

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Provided by: Tim Hathaway

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today. I am Tim Hathaway, Executive Director of Prevent Child Abuse NY (PCANY).

PCANY is the only private, nonprofit agency serving the entire state whose single mission is to prevent child abuse in all its forms. All of our work is centered in **prevention and strengthening families**. To us, “strengthening families” means decreasing parental stress, increasing the Protective Factors¹ surrounding children, and increasing familial bonds to build resilience. ***Our work is rooted in a belief in families and the knowledge that, given adequate and appropriate resources, all families can thrive.***

PCANY provides three primary services in Albany and statewide. Our **community awareness** efforts increase understanding of how individuals can use the Protective Factors Framework to help prevent child maltreatment. Specific programs include the Parent Helpline and the Pinwheels for Prevention Campaign.

Our **training and technical assistance** efforts provide professionals and communities with the knowledge, skills and resources to contribute to the creation of strong, healthy, and supportive environments for families and children. We provide Healthy Families New York Home Visiting certification and run the New York State Parenting Education Partnership, Enough Abuse Sexual Abuse Prevention, Community-based Strengthening Families and Child Abuse Prevention courses. In addition, we provide direct staff consulting and mini grants to organizations that are implementing prevention strategies. Our Resilience Leadership and Learning Institute, launched last year, provides comprehensive training and consultation for first responders, direct care providers, and administrators across the State.

Finally, our **policy and advocacy** work drives initiatives, at both the state and local levels, to improve systems that impact children and families. We advocate for evidence-based policy solutions that strengthen families, such as maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting; early care and education; family economic stability; and

¹ <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/About-Strengthening-Families.pdf>

supports such as safe and stable housing.

Paramount to the lens through which we view our work is the concept of **prevention**. The risk of child abuse and neglect is decreased by supporting families with an ‘upstream’ approach. Providing concrete support in times of need, equipping parents/caregivers with knowledge about child development, and building parental resilience are Protective Factors that can reduce the instance of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in a child’s life. Furthermore, supporting families from the beginning and during times of need can overall reduce interactions with the social service and child welfare systems – such as entry into foster care and family court.

Multi-generational trauma exists due to a variety of factors, including poverty, violence, and substance use. With the passage of the NYS Child Poverty Reduction Act, NYS is taking bold steps to reduce child poverty by 50%. The State is also working to address substance use with public education and narcan outreach initiatives. This year, the Governor’s proposed investments in, and focus on, our mental health system are necessary measures to support all New Yorkers. **PCANY supports meaningful investments in what is often called primary prevention – interventions designed to prevent negative outcomes at the root cause before they begin, a proactive (opposed to reactive) effort.**

Housing

Safe, stable housing is critical to children and families’ health, safety, and wellbeing. Inadequate or unpredictable housing causes extraordinary stress for families, increasing uncertainty and instability. As a statewide nonprofit dedicated to the wellbeing of New York’s children, we believe that no child should have to worry about having a roof over their head.

Under state law, an unmet need for housing or living in an unsafe environment or neighborhood can be classified child neglect.² It is critical to note that, in reality, housing instability is a result of poverty; and too often, poverty is conflated with neglect. A parent’s inability to provide adequate shelter may be related to other issues a family may require support with.

Research shows that when families get evicted, the likelihood of child abuse and neglect increases. We support adequate housing, and the provisions in the budget for a comprehensive housing plan. Safe and stable housing is a concrete support for children and families, ensuring a certain level of stability.

Statewide Right to Counsel

As a member of the Statewide Right to Counsel Coalition, PCANY uplifts the following

² <https://preventchildabuse.org/what-we-do/child-neglect-prevention/>

budgetary/legislative priorities:

- **\$152 million for New York's civil legal services.** The bulk of this funding would cover a significant expansion of representation both within and outside of NYC, as well as a critical expansion of resources to support affirmative, or tenant-initiated cases, outside of NYC. We have also highlighted, in our proposal, funding that should be dedicated to building out NYS's "attorney pipeline": the strategies and resources needed to hire, train and retain the next generation of New York's civil attorneys. New York critically needs this funding because:
 - There are many places in the state where tenants are still largely unrepresented. For example, in the third quarter of 2022, only about 1.3% of tenants in Albany eviction court had an attorney, compared to 92-94% of landlords.
 - Even in localities where tenants have greater access to representation, we are seeing multiple and overlapping significant issues. Attorney caseloads are so high as to be unmanageable, and are contributing to retention challenges. These caseloads, which could be addressed through greater funding and resources, also mean that providers are not always able to use best practices to represent tenants. We need to fund robust and effective representation, as part of eviction defense, but also beyond formal eviction defense. We know that landlords displace tenants through a variety of legal and extralegal means, and yet, in most places in the state, tenants are completely unable to take their landlords to court, to defend against these tactics.
- **\$14M for community organizing in and outside of NYC, to support Right to Counsel's implementation.** Community organizing is an essential component of ensuring tenants KNOW about their rights, can use their rights effectively to protect against eviction, and are enabled to fight to protect those rights, something that tenants unfortunately must continuously do as they cannot rely on courts or landlords to uphold their rights. We need funding for community organizing because:
 - Right to Counsel has been proven to stop evictions in NYC, but many tenants who are eligible for Right to Counsel don't know about it or are too afraid to use it. When tenants don't know or use their rights, they are more easily harassed in their homes, disenfranchised in the court system, and evicted and displaced. Tenants might decide not to appear in court, decline representation, sign agreements with their landlord's lawyer prior, decide not to ask for repairs in fear of being evicted, or face a variety of other serious consequences.
 - The funding we're asking for in areas outside of NYC will enable the hiring of an estimated 42 organizers and 14 supervisors. This funding would have a transformative effect on areas outside of NYC, which often have little to no tenant organizing. Consider the success of funding for NYC organizers: In 1 year, just 4 tenant organizers who were supported by the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition - 1 in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan:
 - Distributed information about RTC to nearly 8,000 people.

- Conducted outreach to approximately 200 buildings.
- Conducted 75 Know Your Rights Workshops reaching more than 1,100 tenants.
- Formed 26 new tenants associations, in which over 700 tenants are active.
- Stopped harassment in more than 500 households.
- Helped more than 400 households get repairs.
- Helped more than 350 tenants apply for a rent reduction
- Developed approximately 150 tenant leaders
- **\$6.4M for the Office of Civil Representation.** This new state agency, which the Statewide Right to Counsel bill would create, is critically needed to oversee New York’s civil legal services, and implement a Right to Counsel. The agency would collect and publicize data that we don’t currently have but that we need, in order to understand the breadth of the housing crisis and respond effectively—such as representation and eviction rates in Town and Village Courts.

Facing eviction and accessing safe and stable housing is stressful. To ensure families are equipped with the best possible network of supports, we urge full funding and passage of Right to Counsel to mitigate a worsening eviction crisis in the wake of COVID-19.

Closing

PCANY is encouraged by some provisions in the Executive Budget, but there is *always* a need for improved systems and supports. **We know that child abuse and neglect is preventable if we invest in programs that support and strengthen families. We think that’s money well spent.**