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Testimony of the Alliance of NYS YMCAs

Presented to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Committee on Health

February 11, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposals pertaining to Health funding in the FY25-26 Executive Budget proposal.

On behalf of the 35 YMCA Associations and 140 branches across the State, the Alliance of New York State YMCAs advocates on behalf of policies and initiatives that help youth develop into the healthy leaders of tomorrow, prevent and combat chronic disease, and foster holistic health supports in New York State communities.

The Y has a long history of meeting the pressing needs of local communities by delivering a range of programs and services, including: universal pre-kindergarten and early child care to families of all incomes, before/after school care and other out-of-school time offerings, swimming instruction, youth sports opportunities, housing for low-income individuals, programs that promote social connectedness among seniors, and evidence-based health interventions.

For this hearing, we will focus on the integral role YMCAs play in supporting wellbeing through direct chronic disease prevention programming and indirect supports that reduce stress, promote connectedness, and strengthen New York State youth, families, and communities.

Holistic Supports

The Y strengthens communities by empowering people of all ages to achieve their full potential through a collaborative approach that combats social isolation and enhances overall well-being. Our holistic approach to health extends beyond disease prevention to include mental, emotional, and social wellness, ensuring that individuals and families have the support needed for lifelong health. This includes access to child care services (both early



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childhood and school-age), which serve as critical support structures for working families and contribute to the healthy development of children.

In budget negotiations over the next few weeks, we ask for your consideration of the following recommendations and additions to the Executive's proposal, for the role they will play in promoting whole-family health:

- Increase state funding for the child care workforce, alongside the Executive's proposed \$110 million investment in capital project funding for building/renovation of child care sites, to ensure programs are adequately staffed and available.
- In alignment with the NYS Network for Youth Success's request, invest \$180 million to strengthen the Learning and Enrichment After-School Program Supports (LEAPS) grant, to support eligible but unfunded LEAPs applicants (\$155M) and address gaps for middle and high school students (\$25M). With the consolidation of Advantage and Empire programs, afterschool programs across NYS have lost state-funded afterschool contracts, leading to lapses in services and uncertainty for programs and families. 17 YMCAs across the State participate in the Child Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), to provide healthy meals and snacks to eligible children. Investment in the State's afterschool infrastructure also ensures children have access to nutrition needed to grow and develop, opportunities for exercise and play, and social/emotional connectedness.
- **Sustain a \$2 million legislative add-on for the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP), New York's statewide network of SNAP navigators.** This investment, when added to the \$3.624 million proposed in the FY25-26 Executive Budget, will provide a **total of \$5.624 million** to ensure continued access to SNAP navigators in communities across the state. NOEP helps low-income New Yorkers connect with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), our nation's largest anti-hunger program.

The Alliance is grateful for the Executive's focus on the role of the community in promoting health - mental, social, and physical - and is deeply supportive of the proposed \$200 million investments in the Governor's 'Unplug and Play' initiative. YMCAs across the State look



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forward to engaging in these competitive grant opportunities to establish high-impact projects in communities under NY BRICKs and NY PLAYS.

Additionally, YMCAs play a vital role in providing dedicated spaces to learn to swim and engage in recreational swimming activities. While the Governor's \$150 million investment in the Statewide Investment in More Swimming (SWIMS) program last year was not open to nonprofits, YMCAs leveraged robust programming and their reach across the State to partner with municipalities under these grants to maximize their impact. **The Alliance is very grateful that the FY25-26 proposals include an additional \$50 million investment, and funding is open to nonprofits as eligible entities.**

Community Connectors

The Y is uniquely positioned to address health inequities and deepen social impact through purposeful engagement with the participants and stakeholders that are hardest to reach. The Alliance is energized to assist YMCAs in connecting with Social Care Networks across the State under the 1115 Waiver, and to serve as one of the Community-Based Organizations to assist with service navigation and in the delivery of programs for Health-Related Social Needs.

Chronic Disease Prevention

More than 40% of New York adults suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, which account for 23% of all hospitalizations in NYS, according to the Department of Health. YMCAs across the State implement evidence-based chronic disease prevention and health management programs, including the Blood Pressure Self-Monitoring Program, EnhanceFitness for arthritis, LiveSTRONG at the Y for cancer survivors, Healthy Weight and Your Child, and the National Diabetes Prevention Program, of which Ys are the largest in-person provider.

In her 2025 State of the State Address, Governor Hochul called for increasing access to lifesaving obesity drugs. We agree that lowering obesity rates is critical. Obesity is a chronic disease that affects the livelihood of many New Yorkers, linked to 200 medical conditions (including many listed above) and largely preventable illnesses. New obesity treatments and medications have the potential to transform the way obesity is treated and potentially prevent other diseases. Coverage should also include YMCA



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memberships to help the approximately 4.7 million New York residents who live with obesity and ultimately could protect our state from incurring future medical costs treating other chronic health illnesses linked to obesity. The NY adult obesity rate is projected to increase to up to 43% by 2030. We must recognize that addressing obesity is a health equity priority. **The Alliance urges the inclusion of comprehensive obesity treatment coverage to include YMCA memberships by NYS Medicaid.**

Additionally, Falls are the leading cause of injury deaths, hospitalizations, and emergency department visits among adults 65 and older in New York State. The YMCA is excited to support falls prevention efforts by increasing evidence-based falls prevention programs in our facilities and launching a statewide virtual falls prevention program designed to reduce the fear of falling and increase activity levels among older adults. The virtual delivery of this program removes barriers to access for those who need it the most. The YMCA is currently looking for referral partners to support this program.

We appreciate the maintenance of funding for chronic disease prevention programs (obesity, diabetes, and asthma) in the Executive Budget. However, we would like to emphasize the importance of disease prevention through sustained investment in a continuum of health initiatives that foster long-term well-being.

Disease is costly, with some estimates stating that three quarters of the State's healthcare spending goes toward treating disease. Health and well-being must be supported from the earliest stages of development, and the Y offers integrated health and fitness programs alongside child care, youth sports, and day camps, ensuring that individuals of all ages have the resources needed to lead active, vibrant lives. In today's world, youth face heightened exposure to vicarious and collective trauma during critical periods of development. We commend the Governor's commitment to supporting youth mental health via linking practitioners with afterschool programs.

As the largest provider of school-age child care in the State, YMCAs are uniquely positioned to lead meaningful change in youth mental health. In January, YMCAs began a pilot program designed to promote the development and implementation of youth mental health policies and practices within YMCA school-aged child care sites. The pilot includes increased resources for staff training, including Youth Mental Health First Aid



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– a training recently elevated by Governor Hochul – and enhanced Social Emotional Learning programs.

With this robust work underway, and the deep connections YMCAs already have in communities across the State, we request the inclusion of \$5 million for the New York State YMCA Foundation to support YMCAs across the State.

The Y is the leading nonprofit committed to strengthening community by connecting all people to their potential, purpose, and each other. Working locally, we focus on empowering young people, improving holistic health and well-being, and inspiring action across communities.

For additional information, please contact Maggie Collins, Director of Public Policy, Alliance of NYS YMCAs, at mcollins@ymcanys.org.