

RAiSiNG NEW YORK

Supported families. Thriving children.
A stronger New York.

Testimony to Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services

February 12, 2025

Hello and thank you for allowing me to testify before you today. My name is Jenn O'Connor and I co-lead the Raising NY coalition, a diverse statewide coalition of parent, early childhood, education, business, and health organizations dedicated to supporting the learning potential of all children, with a focus on improving long-term outcomes for infants and toddlers who are low-income, children of color, and other under-served groups. I am also the Director of Partnerships and Early Childhood Policy for EdTrust-New York.

EdTrust-New York is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to educational equity. We work to attain educational justice through research, policy, and advocacy that results in all students – especially those who are from low-income backgrounds or students of color – achieving at high levels from early childhood through college completion.

Raising NY supports the policy agendas of several coalitions; you will see those agendas linked [here](#) and many of those partners will testify today. I will focus my remarks on just a few of our highest priority items.

Children live, learn, and grow along a continuum and the programs we support reflect that interconnected journey. Therefore, while this group is charged with making decisions regarding human services programs, we urge you to take a comprehensive, inclusive, and equitable approach when making those decisions. You will also notice that this testimony includes budget requests for programs that sit within different funding streams, acknowledging the proper committee but also the overlap of these programs.

With this in mind, we urge the Legislature to:

Ensure that the State adopts the [recommendations](#) of the Governor’s Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council (CPRAC). We celebrate the work of the CPRAC and its recommendations, aimed at cutting child poverty in half by 2031.

We applaud the Governor for the historic expansion of the Empire State Child Credit and will submit testimony for the Taxes Hearing, but wanted to weigh in here, as well. The Governor’s expansion of this tax credit will triple the amount families will receive for the next three years. Child tax credits are among the most effective policies to reduce child poverty, and we are grateful to the Governor for supporting families living in poverty. By eliminating the “phase-in,” this proposal ensures that the lowest-income families will benefit fully, addressing the greatest needs.

We request that any tax credit be made permanent, be instituted in one year, include children up to age 18, and be indexed to inflation. We urge you to combine and expand the existing tax credits—specifically the Empire State Child Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)—into a Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) that can truly have an impact on family well-being. The WFTC would include eligibility for families with the lowest incomes, ensuring that those with the greatest need benefit from this credit. Additionally, the WFTC would include thousands of immigrant families who already file taxes with Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) but are currently cut out of the EITC.

While this next proposal sits at the education table, it is worth mentioning that we also support the Executive’s proposal around universal school meals, which will ensure that all children are provided the nutrition they need to learn and thrive in an educational setting.

Provide long-term, sustainable investments in the child care sector. While we applaud the Governor for directing the State to find a path to universal child care and support forming a business/labor group to devise revenue-raising strategies, we remain concerned about the State’s child care workforce crisis. We question the decision to invest in new child care facilities when the workforce does not exist to staff existing facilities. These facilities risk becoming short-staffed and ineffective in addressing the fact that more than 60% of New York State is considered a child care desert. Without additional investments in a permanent workforce fund that ensures fair compensation for child care educators, the State will not resolve this issue. We recommend the State provide an immediate, substantial, non-taxable wage supplement of \$12,500 per member of the workforce (excluding NYC certified teachers who are already on par), structured to minimize benefits cliffs for those who currently receive public assistance, with a promise of continued supplements of at least that amount going forward. Ultimately, New York should invest \$1.2B in a permanent workforce fund that would ensure all child care educators receive a family-sustaining wage. We look forward to continuing to work closely with the Governor’s team—and with the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS)--to explore revenue opportunities that will create an equitable path forward.

Members of Raising NY are also exploring longer term workforce solutions, such as a career lattice and a salary scale that takes into account both education and experience. We would argue that “early childhood educator” is one of the “high demand” and critically important jobs that our State should invest in via the proposed SUNY/CUNY free tuition proposal and have attached our [letter](#) to that effect.

Finally, we strongly support school-aged care and the NYS Network for Youth Success's request for an additional \$180 million to strengthen the Learning and Enrichment After-School Program Supports (LEAPS) grant, and \$5 million for school-age child care and afterschool quality support led by the NYS Network for Youth Success. The additional funding for LEAPS would enable support for eligible but unfunded LEAPS applicants (\$155M) and address afterschool gaps for middle and high school students through a division of expanded learning (\$25M).

Ensure that all families have access to comprehensive maternal and child health programs, services, and supports. Our testimony to your colleagues on the Health Committee reflects our positive thoughts on the Governor's proposals to expand access to resources such as WIC, and our disappointment that Early Intervention is completely ignored even as children wait for services and providers leave the field due to stagnant reimbursement rates that have remain unchanged for decades. We look forward to hearing more about the social services kiosks the Governor proposes; our aforementioned report found that families want more actual people available to answer their questions and assist with applying for benefits—in their home languages—not automated systems. But placed in the right locations, these kiosks could be helpful.

We must do more to support pregnant and parenting people, since the first 1,000 days of a child's life is the period of the most brain growth and sets the foundation for both attachment and learning in the future. A few proposals applying to new parents fall into human services:

- We wholeheartedly support the establishment of the Birth Allowance for Beginning Year (BABY) benefit, the nation's first baby allowance program. This initiative will provide \$100/month during pregnancy and an additional \$1,200 at birth to give babies the best start possible. This is an encouraging step forward, and we will continue working with partners to legislate an increase in the allowance and extend it for 18 months postpartum.
- We are pleased to see the Baby2Baby initiative included in the Executive Budget. Our [2024 report](#) on barriers to services found that diapers were the number one reason families initially accessed programs like Help Me Grow, so making them readily accessible is wonderful. The charge to the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to provide new parent kits to families is an effort that has been underway for years and piloted by the Council on Children and Families (CCF), so we are hopeful that there will be alignment with existing efforts.
- This leads me to our disappointment that there is a small increase in the Healthy Families NY program but no increase in funding for ParentChild+ and no move toward a universal, voluntary program. The resources that the Executive proposes are welcome. However, in order for these proposals to be successful, one-on-one human interaction in the form of research-based home visits are necessary. Home visiting is proven to decrease child abuse and neglect, improve health outcomes, and increase school readiness. The State should pair the proposed initiatives with strategic investments in Healthy Families NY, ParentChild+ (\$300,000), and, at the health table, Nurse-Family Partnership (from \$3M to \$4.5M). Home visitors can not only get resources into the hands of parents, but can help them best use those resources and maximize their impact.

- We are also requesting a total investment of \$2M in the Help Me Grow program so that families will continue to have access to comprehensive, family-centered, primary prevention services. As noted in our report mentioned previously, Help Me Grow is the first line of contact for many families seeking diapers; from that initial contact, the program refers families to other services.

Increase early literacy. Last year, New York invested \$500,000 in competitive grants through the State Library to support local affiliates of Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, a program that provides free books every month to all registered children up to age five. This year, the Executive has included \$6.5 million in the OCFS budget, in a proposal that moves our State close to statewide adoption. Again, we know that 90% of brain development, which sets the foundation for all future learning—including literacy—occurs before age five. Therefore, we applaud the Executive and look forward to continuing our work with the Legislature to bring this program to fruition and help increase school readiness, caregiver attachment, and reading proficiency.

To provide books to all families, we support providing them via different modalities. To that end, we request that you add \$3M to the budget for Reach Out and Read to serve 95 waitlisted clinics across our State. Reach Out and Read integrates books into pediatric care. It currently serves over 300,000 children annually across 340 clinics in New York. Unfortunately, there is not yet enough funding available to serve all of the families who wish to participate.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on behalf of Raising NY. I look forward to working with you to appropriately invest in programs that will strengthen and support families.