



## WNY WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

### Testimony for the Joint Fiscal Committees on the SFY 2026-2027 Executive Budget Human Services Budget Hearing

February 5, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the 2026-27 New York State Executive Budget. The WNY Women's Foundation is a 27-year-old nonprofit organization based in Buffalo, NY, dedicated to transforming systems, culture, and policy leading to a vibrant, inclusive Western New York community.

#### Child Care as the Foundation of Economic Growth

Child care is essential economic infrastructure - it enables parents to work and strengthens the future workforce. In NYS, 95% of fathers and 68% of mothers with children under six participate in the labor force and require child care to do so. The lack of reliable, affordable child care has serious consequences for families' economic stability and weakens the state's workforce, economy, and potential for growth. Insufficient child care is estimated to cost NY's families, businesses, and taxpayers \$9.8 billion each year.

- Mothers with older children are more likely to participate in the labor force, in part because the public education system provides consistent, reliable child care during the school day, though Afterschool Care remains essential. In NYS, the labor force participation rate is 68% for mothers with children under six years, compared to 76% for mothers with children ages 6-17 (*NYS Department of Labor*). Nationally, if the labor force participation rate of mothers with young children rose to match that of mothers with school-age children, more than 1 million additional workers would enter the workforce (*Wells Fargo*).
- Mothers are disproportionately affected by child care shortages, as they are more likely than fathers to reduce work hours, move to part-time employment, or exit the workforce entirely when child care is unavailable or unaffordable. Insufficient access widens the gender wage gap and hinders career advancement. NYS data shows that even small increases in child care costs push mothers out of the workforce. **At a time when mothers are leaving the workforce at the highest rate in more than 40 years, lack of adequate child care (workforce compensation) and inadequate CCAP funding will further undermine women's workforce participation, economic growth, and gender equity.**

- Women are far more likely than men to work part-time due to child care challenges. In 2022, 86% of the 91,800 people in NYS working part-time because of child care-related issues were women
- International evidence demonstrated the economic impact of child care investment. After Quebec's (Canada) universal child care program took full effect in 2000, labor force participation among mothers with young children **increased dramatically from 64% in 1997 to 80% in 2018.**
- Research shows that tax contributions in Quebec increased substantially from families receiving this support and participation in other benefit programs declined, and **eight years after the universal child care program was implemented, it generated more revenue through increased taxes and reduced social spending than it cost to operate.**

### Child Care Cost Barriers

The cost of child care has become a significant financial burden for families, especially those with infants, multiple children, and low-wage workers. Average annual child care costs in NYS range from approximately \$16,400 to over \$20,000. In Buffalo, child care costs more than average rent and more than twice the cost of in-state tuition at SUNY Buffalo State. Families with infants, multiple children, or low incomes are hit hardest. By federal affordability standards, only 14.5% of NYS families can afford infant care. A typical NYS family with two children - an infant and a four-year-old - would need to spend nearly 29% of their income on child care.

The escalating cost of child care has created a substantial financial strain on many families. The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) helps parents afford care; without it, many parents - especially mothers and single parents - would be forced to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce entirely. This results in lost income, financial instability, workforce disruptions, and lower tax revenue. While CCAP eligibility and family cost-sharing have improved significantly, current funding levels are insufficient to meet demand.

- Across the eight counties of WNY, between 57% and 78% of children qualify for some form of child care assistance (*The Children's Agenda, 2025*), and approximately 5,500 families rely on this support (*NYS OCFS, 2026*).
  - Despite this level of need, only 3% to 8% of eligible families were enrolled during 2023-2024 due to limited funding, a shortage of child care slots, and administrative barriers (*The Children's Agenda, 2025*).
- The current federal order to freeze child care funding has the potential to trigger a mass workforce resignation. As of January 21, 2026, only two out of the eight WNY counties (Allegany & Chautauqua) were accepting new applications for child care assistance. **Erie, Genesee, Niagara, Orleans and Wyoming counties maintain waiting lists** ranging from one to seven months. Erie County alone has between 150 and 199 families on its waiting list, with an average wait of approximately two months (*NYS OCFS, 2026*).

### Child Care Small Business Growth = Compensated Staff = Accessibility

The Executive Budget allocates no funding for the child care workforce. If no funding is added before the budget is finalized, this will be the second consecutive year since the pandemic with no investment in the child care workforce. Notably, this workforce includes many pre-K teachers who teach pre-K in community-based settings.

In 2023, one-time retention bonuses were awarded to child care educators: \$3,000 for full time educators and \$2,300 for afterschool staff. In 2024, bonuses decreased to \$2,250 for full time educators and \$1,725 for afterschool staff.

We cannot achieve universal child care or pre-K without recruiting and retaining significantly more professionals in the field. The average annual wage for the child care workforce (94% women and more than 53% people of color) is approximately \$38,000, with family-based providers earning even less. By comparison, the median annual salary for full-time New York workers is approximately \$67,000.

The data is clear: states and cities that invest in early childhood education and universal pre-K experience higher employment among mothers of young children, stronger labor force growth, and increased business creation. Early childhood education delivers a return on investment of \$4 to \$9 for every dollar spent. **Voters overwhelmingly support these investments: 93% believe access to quality child care is important for working parents, and 74% say increasing funding for child care and early education is a top priority and a good use of tax dollars.**

If New York State seeks sustained economic growth, it must invest in the care that makes work possible.

We ask for your support of the following:

- **Adopt the Executive Budget's \$1.7 billion proposal** to significantly expand pre-K and 3-K, fund the Child Care Assistance Program, and launch universal child care pilots, including 2-Care in New York City and community care models for children ages zero to three in three communities outside of New York City. With additional funding to ensure adequate and equitable workforce compensation, these investments would be transformative and move NY decisively toward statewide universal pre-K, child care, and afterschool.
- **Provide ongoing and reliable compensation supplements** for all members of the child care workforce until statewide universal child care is achieved with rates to support a thriving wage (a permanent state fund and invest \$1.2 billion). New York cannot achieve universal child care without recruiting and retaining far more professionals in the field, which is not possible without a significant, sustained, compensation hike. (Child Care Workforce Pay Equity Fund S.5533 (Brisport)/A.492 (Hevesi)). A multi-year plan should also establish a minimum pay scale and career ladder to guide future compensation.
- **Adopt the Governor's proposal to invest \$66 million** to support Community Care models in three communities, with additional funding as needed to ensure these models are truly

universal and are a bridge, not one-time pilots, to statewide universal child care. Further, it is essential that all modalities of child care—including center and homebased child care providers—are able to fully participate in the Community Care models.

- **Adopt the Executive Budget's proposed \$116,060,000 for the Learning and Enrichment Afterschool Program (LEAPS)**, including the \$6,320,000 increase from last year's Enacted Budget to address minimum wage increases, and add an additional \$180 million to expand and strengthen the LEAPS statewide.
- **Add funding for universal afterschool** as a part of the universal child care pilots being implemented in Broome, Dutchess, and Monroe counties. For families with multiple children, free pre-K and child care for their young children alone are insufficient without afterschool care. School days end at 3 p.m., long before most workdays conclude.

### About Us

The WNY Women's Foundation is a founding member and participates in the leadership of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, a campaign that advocates for universal child care in NYS. WNY Women's Foundation also participates in the Bridge Coalition, a WNY-lead coalition to raise awareness of and drive solutions for the Benefit Cliff. Sheri Scavone, CEO was a Governor's appointee to the NYS Child Care Availability Task Force (2 terms); led the proposal to the Governor for an innovative Task Force to identify a sustainable funding stream for child care; Co-Chairs Senator Gillibrand's Child Care Innovation Committee and is a Steering Committee member of LiftOff WNY, a funder's collaborative for Early Childhood.

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