



New York State Community Action Association
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Good Afternoon/Morning,

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this hearing. My name is Jackie Orr. I'm the CEO of the New York State Community Action Association, the membership association for the 47 Community Action Agencies (CAA) in NY. Of the 47 CAAs, 45 are private non-profit, and two are public. I know, Senator May, you are aware of the two Community Action Agencies in your district, PEACE in Syracuse serving Onondaga County, and CAP Cayuga Seneca, serving Cayuga County. Both of those CAAs have a number of programs and services to help low-income and vulnerable families achieve economic security such as employment supports; Head Start and Early Head Start; Energy and Housing Services; nutritional programs including food pantries; case management services, and others.

Community Action, originating from the War on Poverty, is a nationwide effort to combat poverty by offering direct assistance and fostering community partnerships. Its primary goal is to assist low-income and vulnerable families in achieving stability and acquiring resources to lift themselves out of poverty. We empower disadvantaged families to develop their strengths, nurture relationships, and access resources. Our efforts are dedicated to promoting community and economic development, fostering collaborations and partnerships, and enhancing opportunities for all community members while providing support to those in need. Each CAA is shaped by the communities it serves, regularly conducting needs assessments every three years to identify community needs and available resources while establishing priorities.

Over the years, we have seen the causes of concentrated poverty in upstate cities in NY, such as economic decline due to the loss of manufacturing jobs and population outmigration; racial and economic segregation exacerbating poverty; affordable housing shortages, creating substandard housing conditions, and high eviction rates; educational disparities which can perpetuate the cycle of poverty; and lack of community investment, leading to a lack of infrastructure and economic development.

The effects of concentrated poverty include residents having fewer opportunities for economic mobility, which may result in intergenerational poverty, where children are more likely to grow up in poverty themselves; health disparities, as residents may have limited access to healthcare

facilities and healthy food options; higher crime rates; social isolation, as limited economic resources can make it challenging to engage in social and community activities; and educational challenges where schools often face resource challenges, which can result in lower educational outcomes for students.

Individual and Family Support Policies that will help families who are struggling to make ends meet.

More Impactful Child Tax Credit

Increasing income for families in or near poverty has been shown to be an effective poverty-fighting tool. When the federal government expanded the Child Tax Credit during the pandemic (2021), the child poverty rate fell to a historic low of 5.2%. When that expansion ended, the rate dramatically increased to 12.4%.

While the 2023 -2024 enacted NYS budget included the expansion of the Empire State Child Tax Credit to include babies and toddlers under age four, more can be done:

Recommend removing the current income phase-in from the Empire State Child Credit that limits the credit amount provided to the lowest-income families. Currently, children in families earning the lowest incomes receive only a partial credit because their household is in the phase-in (i.e. they earn too little). These are the children who would benefit most from this credit. A family making \$7,000 shouldn't receive a smaller credit than one making \$70,000. <https://scaany.org/statement-on-child-tax-credit-expansion-in-the-nys-budget/>

We also recommend increasing the **credit amount** from the current maximum of \$330 per year and build to keep up with rising costs.

Food Insecurity:

Without access to adequate, healthy food, people are likely to be hungry, undernourished, and in poor health. Even when families can scrape together enough, a balanced and healthy diet is often beyond their reach. People who are food insecure are disproportionately affected by diet-sensitive chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure, and according to research, food insecurity is also linked to many adverse effects to overall health.

Increase SNAP benefits to \$100 per month as was recently asked of the Governor to include in her budget proposal.

Expand free school meals

Providing universal free school meals is the best way to ensure equitable access for all students without stigma. Establish and fund a permanent, statewide Healthy School Meals for All program that provides school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students in schools participating in the National School Lunch Program. The recent decision by the United States Department of Agriculture lowered the income eligibility threshold, and with the help of state

funding, expanded the number of children who will be able to get free meals. However, there are still children across the state left out of the program. Current data shows that primarily, suburban schools don't qualify even with the threshold lowered. Statewide, it is estimated that 750 schools, totaling around 360,000 students, don't qualify.

Along with supporting these food supports for families, cities and their partners should be considering ways to bring grocery stores to cities that often are considered "food swamps," urban areas where fresh food options may be present, but they are greatly outnumbered by over-processed food sources such as fast food and corner stores. A person who lives in a food swamp may have plenty of food access but struggle with nutrition, contributing to obesity and other health problems. Grocery stores in cities are a necessity, not a luxury.

Childcare and housing can be the two biggest drivers of poverty. Stable, affordable housing and high-quality, affordable child care are essential to families' economic stability, parents' ability to work, and children's healthy development.

Housing:

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, housing is the key to reducing intergenerational poverty and increasing economic mobility. Research shows that increasing access to affordable housing is the most cost-effective strategy for reducing childhood poverty and increasing economic mobility in the United States. Rising rents have been particularly harmful to lower-income families, with more families paying more than half of their very low incomes for housing, sometimes resulting in living in severely substandard housing. Serious housing problems have grown across every demographic, racial, and ethnic group and affect renters living in urban, suburban, and rural areas in all parts of the country.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/addressing-the-affordable-housing-crisis-requires-expanding-rental-assistance-and>

According to a recent [Marist Poll](#) commissioned by the Rural Housing Coalition of New York and conducted last month, 73% of adults residing in New York State express concerns about the cost of housing in their local communities; renters, at 83%, were more inclined than homeowners, at 66%, to view housing affordability as a substantial issue. In terms of addressing this affordability challenge, 39% of respondents believe that the government should place a higher emphasis on increasing funding for rental assistance vouchers to aid those struggling to cover their rent expenses; 33% believed that channeling more funding towards the development of new homes available for purchase should take precedence, and 24% think that allocating additional funds for the construction of new rental housing should be prioritized.

Funding the Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP), which would create a state-funded voucher that would operate much like the federal Section 8 program. A commitment of \$250 million toward HAVP would have a transformative impact, aiding over 13,000 households in exiting or preventing homelessness. Research affirms the value of vouchers as a tool for

providing more housing stability for households with low or highly variable incomes; lowering rent burdens; and reducing overcrowding. In addition, vouchers have been linked to improvements in health and neighborhood satisfaction for participating households.

We also recommend increasing the Public Assistance (PA) housing allowance to a level that stabilizes housing for more families. Currently at a statewide average of \$347 for a household of four, the PA housing allowance was last adjusted twenty years ago, in 2003.

Manufactured homes remain a viable, affordable housing option and should be featured in discussions, policies, and plans to address the current housing crisis. The preservation of affordable housing options is absolutely critical in the fight against poverty.

The New York State-funded Mobile and Manufactured Home Replacement (MMHR) Program was developed to assist low- and moderate-income homeowners to replace dilapidated mobile or manufactured homes that are sited on land owned by the homeowner with a new manufactured, modular, or site-built home.

A recent report by the Rural Housing Coalition calls for an increase in funding for the Mobile and Manufactured Home Replacement Program administered by HCR from the current \$5 million to \$10 million, and an increase in the amount allocated per home from \$100,000 to \$200,000.

Child Care

Since COVID, childcare has gotten more difficult to secure and more expensive. Childcare consumes a particularly large part of the budgets of poor families. For families in households with incomes less than the federal poverty level who pay for childcare, child care costs average 30 percent of their income. Parents without access to affordable childcare may have to use less safe, lower-quality care in order to put food on the table or tighten their budget somewhere else to pay for expensive care. In some cases, they may have to choose between work and their children's care. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/child-care-and-housing-big-expenses-with-too-little-help-available>

The FY 2024 budget provided some relief to parents by further expanding eligibility for the Child Care Assistance Program, potentially assisting over 100,000 additional New York families, and offering workforce retention funding.

Increase capacity for non-traditional childcare by requiring an enhanced reimbursement rate of 15% statewide.

There are childcare deserts in the state, and for those who work **non-traditional hours**, finding reliable childcare can be a daunting task. There are few non-traditional care opportunities within the regulated childcare system, leaving families to reach out exclusively to informal care settings such as family, friends, and neighbors.

In 2019, the Council on Children and Families produced a comprehensive Preschool Development Grant Birth—Five Needs Assessment and found that only 9.1% of regulated

childcare programs in New York State (excluding NYC childcare centers) offered non-traditional hours. Additionally, a report, *The Child Care Landscape in Onondaga County*, concluded that not only are there not enough child care slots for the number of children needing care, but there is also a lack of availability of nontraditional hours for child care.

Other investments in childcare include **increasing child worker pay** to be more on par with counterparts in the public school system for the childcare workforce who work in licensed regulated programs.

Family Stability

Invest in Fatherhood

As noted in the case studies in *The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty in America* report, a key demographic change that has influenced levels of neighborhood poverty has been the increase in single-parent families. From 1970 to 2000, the proportion of U.S. births occurring among unmarried mothers tripled, from 11 percent to 33 percent. The report further states: "In every one of the case study communities, single-parent families represent a greater share of households than in their wider metropolitan or rural areas. While multiple factors underlie this long-term demographic trend, the high proportion of single-earner households with children contributes to the concentration of poverty in these communities."

Research has shown that children raised in a father-absent home, have a 4x greater risk of poverty, are more likely to have behavioral problems, more likely to go to prison, 7x more likely to become pregnant as a teen, more likely to use alcohol and drugs. Children with involved fathers have a strong foundation in child well-being, and the children are at a lower risk of poor childhood outcomes.

Ten CAAs were recently involved in a Fatherhood Coordination project, supported by the NYS Council on Children and Families, with B5 funds that ended last year. Dedicated state funds are necessary to recognize and support the role of dads in the family, which evidence has shown stabilizes families and helps to reduce generational poverty.

Like Ohio, NY should establish a state-wide commission to improve the outcomes of New York's children and strengthen families by providing opportunities for fathers to become better parents, partners, and providers.

General Considerations:

Employment Opportunities

Residents in cities with concentrated poverty tend to have lower education levels, so skill training services provided or subsidized by city or county agencies can help improve workforce prospects in neighborhoods and provide partners for businesses interested in locating or expanding in these neighborhoods.

Efforts should focus on municipalities partnering with local community colleges and employers, including nonprofits, to provide relevant job training and apprenticeships around the communities' key growth industries.

For example, PEACE in Syracuse was one of six cities across the country involved in an initiative, BOOSTING Family Economic Success, supported by the Kresge Foundation to support partnerships between community colleges and human services to connect people with low incomes to critical human services and educational pathways and career opportunities that will help them climb the social and economic ladder.

Transportation

We think of transportation as being an issue in rural areas, which it is, but transport poverty can also be found in cities. Limited public transportation options can become a barrier to employment opportunities—especially for shift workers and part-time workers. Cities and businesses can partner to offer better transportation opportunities.

Building Strong Neighborhood Networks/Citizen Participation/Leadership Development

Resident participation, leadership, and involvement are critical to any proposed initiatives, and/or policy changes. Residents should play a pivotal role in exploring and determining the needs and solutions to the problems the neighborhood is experiencing. There are examples of successful resident involvement, such as Promise Neighborhoods, currently in three schools in Buffalo that focus on family economic security with student academic achievement.

The primary emphasis of these endeavors lies in residents collaborating with community partners to recognize and address issues within their local area. Through the inclusion of residents in decision-making, the encouragement of cooperation among stakeholders, and the promotion of active participation, community engagement guarantees the consideration of residents' needs and desires.