

# Poverty and Concentrated Poverty in Small and Medium Cities

December 12, 2023

**Senator Rachel May, Chair**  
Cities 2 Committee



## **Cities 2 Committee Members**

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Senator **Robert G. Rolison**,  
Ranking Member

Senator **Samra G. Brouk**

Senator **Timothy M. Kennedy**

Senator **Shelley B. Mayer**

Senator **Mark Walczyk**

Senator **Lea Webb**

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## Introduction

The Senate Standing Committee on Cities 2 convened a hearing on December 12, 2023 to hear testimony on the persistent issue of poverty and concentrated poverty in small and medium cities across the State. The Committee aimed to explore the causes and effects of concentrated poverty, and discuss potential legislative policies to alleviate these challenges.

The Cities 2 Committee received oral and written testimony from representatives of various agencies and non-governmental organizations across the State, each providing valuable insights into different facets of the problem and suggesting potential policy solutions. This report aims to summarize points made in testimony and question-and-answer periods, but by no means is it exhaustive. The hearing is available to view online here: <https://youtu.be/nIGbZ6RU6bw?si=L5gQRRbOWajVxMJJ>.

## Background

Alarming, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo nationally rank among the top ten cities in childhood poverty, in cities where the population exceeds 100,000. This issue is not confined to larger cities; smaller cities like Binghamton and Utica also struggle with significant poverty rates, at 32% and 28% respectively. As a result, the disparities between children in cities and in surrounding counties is startling. Within each city, poverty tends to concentrate in specific neighborhoods, impacting economic development, educational outcomes, and overall quality of life. Historical factors such as redlining, economic decline from deindustrialization, over-policing, patterns of disinvestment on the part of State and federal governments, and exclusionary zoning contribute to the perpetuation of concentrated poverty.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation defines concentrated poverty as neighborhoods where the poverty rate is 30% or higher. Such neighborhoods are home to nearly 12% of all children in the United States, and 28% of African-American and Native American children. These statistics are important because concentrated poverty takes an especially high toll on the health, well-being, and life prospects of children and families. This is a summary of the problem from the Foundation's 2019 report on concentrated poverty:

*Children in high-poverty neighborhoods tend to lack access to healthy food and quality medical care, and they often face greater exposure to environmental hazards such as poor air quality and toxins such as lead. Financial hardships and fear of violence can cause chronic stress linked to diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. And when these children grow up, they are more likely to have lower incomes than children who have relocated away from communities of concentrated poverty.*

# New Yorkers in Poverty	2.7 million
New York children in poverty	736,000
New Yorkers facing hunger	1 in 9
Children facing hunger	1 in 6
School districts with 30% poverty or more	14
% of New Yorkers who are rent-burdened (paying over 30% of income for rent)	46

(Source: December 2022 report from Comptroller DiNapoli, data from the Census Bureau, brought to the Committee by The Children's Agenda)

City	Poverty Rate	Child Poverty Rate	County	Total Poverty Rate	Child Poverty Rate without City
<b>Buffalo</b>	28.8%	39%	<b>Erie</b>	13.2%	8%
<b>Rochester</b>	25.3%	42%	<b>Monroe</b>	13.9%	9%
<b>Syracuse</b>	31.3%	45%	<b>Onondaga</b>	12.8%	10%

(Source: Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019)

<b>Table 3: Top 10 US Cities with Highest Child Poverty Rate by Percentage (2022)</b>	
Cleveland, Ohio	45.9%
<b>Syracuse, New York</b>	45.8%
Detroit, Michigan	44.4%
Birmingham, Alabama	41.8%
<b>Rochester, New York</b>	41.7%
Dayton, Ohio	41.6%
<b>Buffalo, New York</b>	39.8%
Jackson, Mississippi	39.4%
Macon-Bibb County, Georgia	39.1%
Memphis, Tennessee	37.0%

(Source - Census Bureau)

In 2023, the ranking of U.S. cities with the highest child poverty rates included three in upstate New York: Syracuse at #2, Rochester at #5, and Buffalo at #7.

A 2018 report from the UCLA Civil Rights Project found that New York State was “the most segregated state in the nation for Black students,” and second only to California for Latino students. Janie Boschma and Ronald Brownstein, writing in *The Atlantic* in 2016, described the problem of high-poverty, segregated schools as “systemic economic and racial isolation.” Such schools tend to have lower graduation rates, fewer resources for enrichment, less parental involvement, higher teacher turnover rates, and a host of other factors that contribute to achievement gaps and help perpetuate generational cycles of poverty.

In 2022, Rochester City School District had a poverty rate of 40.1% among its students. The rates in Syracuse, Binghamton, Buffalo, and Utica were all well above 30%. Not coincidentally, these cities also have high minority concentrations; African-Americans make up 52% of Rochester students, while only 9% are White.

<b>Table 4: Racial Distribution of Students in Selected Cities</b>						
	<b>African-American</b>	<b>Latino</b>	<b>AAPI</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>American Indian</b>	<b>Multiracial</b>
<b>Buffalo</b>	43%	21%	13%	18%	1%	5%
<b>Rochester</b>	52%	34%	3%	9%	0%	2%
<b>Yonkers</b>	16%	62%	5%	14%	0%	2%
<b>Syracuse</b>	48%	15%	7%	22%	1%	8%
<b>Albany</b>	44%	20%	9%	18%	0%	7%
<b>Utica</b>	25%	21%	20%	26%	0%	6%
<b>Binghamton</b>	28%	15%	3%	40%	0%	12%

(Source - Data from the NY State Department of Education [data.nysed.gov])

## **Findings from the Hearing**

*“Poverty is a political choice.” - Dr. Jamila Michener*

According to Dr. Jamila Michener, Associate Professor and Co-Director at the Cornell Center for Health Equity, “Research indicates that 59% of Americans will spend at least one year below the official poverty line between the ages of 20 and 75. This number rises to 76% if we include people who come close to the arbitrary (and low) threshold we set for poverty in the United States, even if they do not technically fall below it.” Dr. Michener provided an overview of typical myths about poverty and reality. It is not just a big city problem. It is not the result of “bad choices” or failing to play by the rules. “Instead, poverty is a systemic problem: housing, healthcare, labor market, criminal, legal, and other systems play a key role in producing and exacerbating poverty.” Above all, she stressed, “poverty is a political choice,” brought about by decisions about whether or not a society will support those who find themselves in need.

Despite the State’s high per capita income and GDP, approximately one in five children in the State were living at or below the poverty line in 2022. Allison Lake, Executive Director of the Westchester Children’s Association, testified that even some areas perceived as affluent, like Westchester County, have startling rates of child poverty, specifically along racial lines.



**Allison Lake, Executive Director of the Westchester Children's Association, testifies before the Committee.**

*Access to employment.* Access to employment itself can be a significant determinant in whether or not individuals and families will face poverty. 5.2% of employed individuals across the State experience poverty; the same is true for 26.6% of unemployed individuals. Aqua Porter, Executive Director of the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative, testified that "employment discrimination, and lack of adequate access to education and training programs are contributors to unemployment." Even when additional jobs are brought to an area, they can further perpetuate the divide between cities and their surroundings, as has been the case in Rochester and Monroe County. "[While] Monroe County has added higher income jobs in recent decades, it continues to lose lower and middle income jobs – further increasing employment disparities and making it more difficult for people in poverty to get into the workforce and access advancement opportunities."

*Lack of basic resources.* Community organizations are stretched beyond their capacity, as mentioned by Janet Fry of the Community Resource Center of Larchmont and Mamaroneck, and many community members are unable to have their needs met by existing resources. This can happen for a variety of reasons: legal status, issues with transportation, or lack of awareness being just a few. Rev. Myra Brown additionally pointed to the impact of fines and fees on individuals in poverty, highlighting the cycle perpetuated by ever-increasing penalties for non-payment. These elements combined only further increase vulnerability in employment, education, and housing. Many low-income or immigrant families face difficulty attaining legal representation when facing serious legal hurdles, such as eviction.

*Housing.* According to Attorney General Letitia James's 2023 report on racial disparities in homeownership submitted to the Committee by the Attorney General's Office, white households own their homes at nearly double the rate of households of color. Lower homeownership rates for people of color are present in every single region in the State. The AG's report also noted the disparity in lending costs by race for when individuals are approved for mortgages, with an estimated \$200 million additional paid by Black and Latino borrowers each year. Three of the top five poorest zip codes in the State are in Rochester, and according to testimony presented by Rochester Mayor Malik Evans, these zip codes not coincidentally "align with the boundaries of the city areas categorized as Red (hazardous) or Yellow (definitely declining) on the Depression-era Homeowners Lending Corporation map of Rochester. Maps like these are the historic source of the term redlining."

The lack of quality, affordable housing options was also a frequent theme for witnesses. In upstate New York, the housing stock in both rural areas and small to mid-sized cities is predominantly old, and often plagued by hazardous conditions. Dr. Michener, who is involved in a comprehensive research project with Syracuse University, highlights the prevalence of lead, asbestos, mold, and insect infestations in these aging structures. Habitability conditions are found to be as significant as concerns about affordability and eviction. Sally Santangelo, Executive Director of CNY Fair Housing, also emphasized the dire need for improved housing:

*"There is definitely a need for better affordable housing, but we need people to have choices and options. The problem now is that people have so few options that they end up having to rent from slumlords who have absolutely no concern for their quality of life. The only way to change that is to give them more, give them more choice, and give them access to the educational, social, and economic opportunities that everybody else searching for housing gets to choose from."*

Nick Coulter, Co-Founder of Person-Centered Housing Options, highlighted income disparities, soaring cost of living, and escalating mortgage rates as barriers to housing stability. He specifically noted the funding levels for individuals with TANF have remained at \$460 per month, which includes both rent and personal needs assistance, even though HUD fair market rent levels are set at \$1,050 a month. Additionally, Jason Mays, Executive Director of the Hudson Valley Justice Center, pointed to absentee landlords, who "siphon wealth out of the local residents in the form of rent, and when those investor landlords are multinational private equity firms, there is no reason to believe that this wealth will return as investment in the economy in the future." In 2022, MetLife Investment Management predicted that these institutional investors will hold 7.6 million homes or more than 40% of all single-family rentals on the market by 2030.

**Zoning.** Several witnesses noted that a large part of the cause of the concentrated nature of poverty in the cities examined is the exclusionary nature of suburban communities around the cities. Sally Santangelo, Executive Director of CNY Fair Housing, pointed to how local zoning laws play a crucial role in enforcing segregation and restricting housing options in certain areas. Racial and economic segregation is prevalent in upstate New York, and the Syracuse metropolitan area is identified as the worst in the county for racially concentrated poverty.



**Jeanell Coleman-Grimes (left), Chief Program Officer of Person-Centered Housing Options, and Sally Santangelo (right), Executive Director of CNY Fair Housing, testify before the Committee.**

In Onondaga County, where half a million people are governed by 34 distinct municipal zoning codes, the patchwork of disparate policies results in racial and economic segregation. Zoning in the City of Syracuse allows duplexes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), apartments, and townhouses, while these types of dwellings are banned in all but 1% of the rest of the County. The City of Syracuse, not coincidentally, is where almost two-thirds of residents of color in the County live. "These zoning laws don't just constrain the private market's ability to provide a diversity of housing options in well-resourced areas, they also frustrate New York State's effort to promote fair housing by providing quality affordable housing and opportunities in a variety of neighborhoods." - Sally Santangelo, Executive Director of CNY Fair Housing.

*Food Security.* Income disparities and increased cost of living impact the ability of families to access resources as basic and essential as food. Karen Erren, President and CEO of Feeding Westchester, noted that the amount of food that they have distributed in the last three years, averaging 20 million pounds of food, doubled the 10 million pounds of food distributed by their organization in 2019. "Realization of a growing unmet need is troubling. To fully supply all Westchester County residents in need identified by the ALICE report, we would need to increase our annual distribution to 35 million pounds."

<b>Table 5: Households Receiving SNAP, 2023</b>			
	<b>Number of Households</b>	<b>Percentage of Households</b>	<b>National Ranking</b>
Rochester	28,250	30.9%	8
Buffalo	35,956	30.5%	9
Syracuse	16,436	28.8%	11

(Source: Kevin Tampone, syracuse.com, May 5, 2023)

<b>Table 6: Effects of Expanded Emergency SNAP Benefits, 2021</b>	
Individuals kept out of poverty	4.2 million
Reduced poverty rate	9.6%
Reduced child poverty rate	14%
Average loss of benefits in NYS after program ended	\$151/month
Percentage of NYS households receiving SNAP benefits that include children	32.4%

(Sources: Urban Institute, 2022; Feeding America)

*Education.* Like many small city school districts, Poughkeepsie has grappled with the effects of concentrated poverty. Testimony from the Superintendent affirmed that Black males who grew up in extreme poverty could expect to remain impoverished as adults, with high levels of incarceration and low employment and income prospects.

*"Children in impoverished communities enter school with fewer academic skills than peers growing up in other communities. These children tend to be at least one grade level behind their peers in other communities. These disparities translate into lower academic achievement, childhood mental health challenges, and alarming high school graduation rates, which are predictors of low economic mobility and a lack of financial stability in adulthood, and are a precursor to intergenerational poverty (poverty that exists through multiple generations due to children not having an opportunity to escape the poor economic conditions that they grew up in)." - Dr. Eric Rosser, Superintendent, Poughkeepsie City School District.*



## Policy Recommendations and Interventions



**Steph Silkowski (on screen), Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives at the Bridge Project, testifies before the Cities 2 Committee. Committee members (left-right): Senator Rolison, Senator May, Senator Brouk, Senator Webb.**

Many witnesses provided testimony at the hearing pointing to existing legislation working its way through the Senate and Assembly, as well as novel proposals and the renewal of expired credits and programs. Policy suggestions echoed much of the testimony brought forward by the witnesses and ranged from expanded tax credits to licensure requirements in different fields. Though the following summary of legislation proposed is not exhaustive, it aims to provide a picture on the possible solutions and interventions that are within the State's power to implement. Many of the solutions recommended in this section were brought to the Committee by several witnesses, and more specific information about the testimony can be found online.

### **Tax Credits and Cash Transfer**

Ms. Lake and other witnesses serve as members of the Child Poverty Reduction Council, established by the Child Poverty Reduction Act signed into law by Governor Hochul in 2021. The aim of this council is to cut child poverty in half over 11 years, with specific attention to racial equity. The council will aim to assess policies impacting poverty and racial inequality. Kate Breslin, President of the Schuyler Center, mentioned that this council can be viewed as a potential blueprint for combating poverty in the future and recently published a progress report in December 2023. The Urban Institute's upcoming report is expected to provide detailed insights into the effectiveness of different policy solutions. The importance of measuring outcomes over time and addressing poverty across all age groups is vital, and children are a particularly vulnerable population.

Central to solutions proposed by witnesses at the hearing was the urgent need for sustained financial support for families. Many witnesses pointed to the positive impact of the tax credit system to relieve poverty, in ways that can impact families' financial situations regarding childcare, food, clothing, and other necessities. These witnesses represent varied organizations in different parts of the State, including (but not limited to) The Bridge Project, Westchester Children's Association, NYIC, NYSCAA, the Schuyler Center, and the Children's Agenda. Ms. Lake of Westchester Children's Association pointed out, "Robust refundable child tax credits and child allowances [are] long understood to be among the most effective strategies for reducing child poverty and building family economic security."

Rising interest rates and inflation have contributed to the rising costs of raising a child. Steph Silkowski, Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives at The Bridge Project, testified that the cost of raising a child through high school in the State has ballooned to \$300,000, a \$26,000 increase from five years ago. The Bridge Project is a non-profit cash transfer program, addressing urban and rural child poverty. They focus on supporting low-income pregnant and parenting individuals and their babies, providing regular cash payments to participants, and promoting financial stability during critical periods of maternal health and child development.



Photo submitted by The Bridge Project.

#### Specific New York State solutions proposed include:

- **The Working Families Tax Credit, 2023-S.277A**, sponsored by Senator Gounardes. Passing this bill would result in a 13.4% reduction in children living in poverty, and a 19.5% reduction for children living in deep poverty, according to Taina Wagnac of NYC, who pointed out that “the bill would also increase the credit provided to all families to a maximum credit of \$1,500 per child, provide a minimum credit of \$500 per child regardless of income, and eliminate the cap on children eligible to receive the credit.”
- **The Mothers and Infants Lasting Change Allowance, known as MILC, 2023-S.4578**, sponsored by Senator Ramos, would be a pilot program serving 15,000 mothers in areas of high child poverty, currently focused on cities with populations greater than 140,000 and rural areas.
- Other tax credits that deserve attention and strengthening, as testified to by the Schuyler Center and RMAPI, are the **Earned Income Tax Credit, 2023-S.6774**, sponsored by Senator Parker, and the **Dependent Care Tax Credit, 2023-S.4873**, sponsored by Senator Ashby. Removing the **Empire State Child Credit’s** current income phase-in could reduce existing racial disparities amongst children benefiting from the program.

## Childcare Access

Access to high-quality, affordable childcare has economic and social benefits for children and their parents. Childcare can boost parents', particularly mothers', access to employment, as well as social development for the child. "The gap in childcare options specifically," however, "is one of the single biggest obstacles when participating in the economy," as Taina Wagnac of NYC pointed out. Childcare can be expensive, even with the increased availability of public subsidies. As Aqua Porter of RMAPI mentioned, "many workers in lower wage jobs need the child care system to be more flexible – with options for nontraditional schedules, hours, and more ways to pay family members or trusted friends to provide care." Some of the problems faced in childcare access is a lack of workforce, including low pay and high rates of turnover for individuals working in childcare. Ms. Porter pointed to a general lack of community support for childcare workers further exacerbating existing issues of access. Additionally, low-income families attempting to access childcare can be penalized by a subsidy system that requires childcare providers who accept subsidies to file extensive paperwork as the market rate increases.



Photo submitted by The Bridge Project.

### Policy recommendations:

- Many witnesses advocated for **increased funding for out-of-school-time programs** for school-aged youth. 2023-S.2749A, sponsored by Senator Bailey, would provide grants for youth sports programs. The Legislature has proposed significant funding for such programs in the Budget. Governor Hochul has proposed \$100 million in funding for after-school programs serving over 40,000 children in high-needs areas.
- Increasing access to childcare assistance was a point emphasized by many witnesses. 2023-S.4924, sponsored by Senator Ramos, would **eliminate the minimum wage or hours worked for parents** to be eligible for State-provided childcare assistance.
- Retaining high-quality childcare providers for families across the income spectrum is also an important piece of the childcare puzzle. 2023-S.3070, also sponsored by Senator Ramos, would **automatically implement market rate subsidy increases**, eliminating unintended consequences faced by childcare providers serving families on subsidies.



## Education

Policy solutions in education focused on more equitable access to well-resourced schools, and the reduction of socio-economic and racial segregation among schools.



**NYSUT President Melinda Person (right) testifies before the Committee.**

### Policy proposals and models:

- Melinda Person of NYSUT recommends earmarking \$100 million per year in categorical State aid to **increase the implementation of the community school model**. Community schools provide wrap-around services to students and their families, through a “series of strategic partnerships designed to leverage resources to address socio-economic disparities,” according to Melinda Person of NYSUT. She pointed to improved graduation rates, student engagement, and overall well-being, as well as a near 14:1 ratio of return on investment in community schools in Waterville, Rome, Dolgeville, and the Town of Webb. She stressed the need for dedicated funding for hiring community school directors as key to a program’s success.
- Jason Mays of Hudson Valley Justice Center argued that **building affordable housing in wealthy school districts** would allow more people to enjoy a higher quality education. This issue is addressed below in zoning.
- The Children’s Agenda urges the State to find ways to **integrate schools beyond existing school district lines**. They recommend looking for ways to create more socio-economically and racially diverse schools in communities like Rochester, with intense concentrations of child poverty. The STEAM High School in Syracuse (see next page) is one such example.
- **School-home-community collaboration**. Senator Rolison noted in his opening statement the success of the Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet in the Poughkeepsie School District. The Superintendent of the Poughkeepsie School District, Dr. Eric Jay Rosser, wrote in his testimony that the district is finding success in implementing “a school, home, and community approach to addressing children’s academic, social, and emotional needs — prenatal to college/career.”

- **Increase support for educational opportunity centers.** Dr. Roosevelt Mareus, Dean and Executive Director of the Rochester Educational Opportunity Center, noted the impact an education at REOC has, with average earnings jumping from \$23,100 before completion of a degree to most students making at least \$36,000 after. His career began as a security guard at REOC, working 60 hours a week to make ends meet. “After a few months of working at REOC and witnessing so many successful people of color in senior leadership positions, a mental shift occurred,” he reported. Empowered by their example, he began advocating for better labor practices and eventually rose to being Director.



The STEAM High School in Syracuse is a collaboration between the City of Syracuse, Syracuse City School District, and Onondaga County. It will draw 60% of students from SCSD and 40% from the rest of the County and OCM BOCES component districts. The curriculum will include an array of Career and Technical Education subjects, like Construction Management, Robotics, Automatic, and Media Technology and Design, as well as visual and performing arts concentrations. Funding for renovating the vacant Central Tech High School in Downtown Syracuse was provided by the State of New York and has been supplemented by grants from Amazon, Micron, and local businesses.

## Health and Well-Being

Dr. Michener described the role of Medicaid as an anti-poverty program. The continuation of State investments in Medicaid are essential to not only the health outcomes of New Yorkers, but expansive beyond that, as children have better educational outcomes with greater access to healthcare, and adults are more effectively able to stay employed with long-term healthcare access. “It’s a support for people who are in the most vulnerable points in their lives,” Dr. Michener reported. Children who have access to healthcare when they are young are, in the long run, “more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to be incarcerated, and more likely to be employed. Medicaid is the largest anti-poverty program that we have.”

### Policy proposals:

- **Alleviate the administrative burden that comes with Medicaid enrollment,** as continuity within the program points to better and better outcomes and can reduce out-of-pocket expenses for healthcare.



- **Support continuous Medicaid for children from birth to age six** and Child Health Plus. Many other states across the country have committed to multi-year continuous coverage. The Governor has proposed implementing this policy in 2024. 2023-S.7747, sponsored by Senator Brouk, would codify this in statute.

## Mental Health

Aqua Porter testified to the growing concern about mental health for community members with lived or living experience of poverty, and urged a focus on populations that are less likely to receive access and on adequate training for those who respond to mental health crises. Kate Breslin pointed to research that shows that children who live in low-income neighborhoods with access to quality schools, parks and playgrounds, clean air, food and healthcare, and safe housing have lower stress levels than low-income children who grow up in neighborhoods without these attributes.

### Policy proposals, which came primarily from RMAPI, include:

- **Increase the reimbursement rates for pediatric mental health services.**
- **Incentivize mental health practitioners** to focus on working directly with individuals facing poverty.
- Incentivize more therapists and mental health practitioners to work with children and youth, and explore **changing licensure and insurance regulations** to allow clinicians to see patients in non-clinical settings.
- **Support Daniel’s Law**, 2023-S.2398, sponsored by Senator Brouk, which would prioritize community-based responses to mental health crises.



**Senator May tours a neighborhood market that has added significant stock of fresh fruit and vegetables, thanks to the Double Up Food Bucks program.**

## Food Access

People who are food insecure are subject to a number of health issues and are disproportionately affected by diet-sensitive chronic diseases.

### Policy recommendations:

- **Support universal school meals**, as laid out in 2023-S.1678, sponsored by Senator Hinchey. Not only would this increase access to school meals across New York State, supporting the nutrition of every K-12 student in the State, but it would also help reduce stigma faced by students across the State.

- **Increase the monthly minimum allowance for SNAP.** 2023-S.7663A, sponsored by Senator May, would support households in need by establishing a State SNAP minimum benefit of \$100, well above the current minimum of \$23. Increased eligibility to access SNAP would not only improve a family's ability to feed their children, but it would also have a positive impact on the local economy as consumer purchasing power increases.
- **Support programs like Nourish New York and Double Up Food Bucks** that incentivize healthy fresh fruits and vegetables in the diets of those on food assistance.

## Infrastructure

Many witnesses testified to the necessity for upkeep of infrastructure and the transformational role the infusion of capital can play in an area.

### Policy recommendations:

- Mayor Malik Evans of Rochester pointed to **transformation capital** as a potential target for State funds for lifting areas out of concentrated poverty and mentioned the need to increase the share of aid and incentives to municipalities (AIM aid) with high rates of poverty concentration. 2023-S.8629, sponsored by Senator May, would increase the share of AIM aid to small and medium cities across the State for the first time since 2012.
- **Remediating lead paint and eliminating lead pipes** in and around city homes is key to reducing the epidemic of lead poisoning that affects many low-income children and families. 2023-S.2947, sponsored by Senator Kavanagh, enacts the Childhood Lead Poisoning and Safe Housing Act. The Federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Act provides significant funding for lead pipe replacement.
- **Improving urban parks and tree cover** raises quality of life and reduces dangerous heat island effects, and maintaining roadways reduces the cost of vehicle maintenance and improves safety. 2023-A.1780, sponsored by Assemblymember McMahon, creates an urban reforestation fund.

## Housing

To address possible policy interventions and solutions for the housing crisis across the State, it is essential to consider the role of location when considering different possible policy implementations. As Sally Santangelo, Executive Director of CNY Fair Housing, put it, "Where you live matters. When a lack of housing opportunity leads to extreme concentrations of poverty, it robs people of educational, economic, and social opportunity." According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, housing is the key to reducing intergenerational poverty and increasing economic mobility. In an effort to combat a statewide housing shortage, Governor Hochul released her Housing Compact in 2023 for FY 2024 with a plan of ultimately introducing 800,000 new homes. This proposal did not make it through budget negotiations in 2023, and advocates across the State are looking for interventions from the State government as housing becomes more and more critical, particularly affecting those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Witnesses presented many ideas for policy intervention that pertain directly to housing, some of which follow.

### Zoning changes

*"The best time to make these changes was 70 years ago. The second best time is now." - Sally Santangelo, CNY Fair Housing*

Ms. Santangelo noted that upstate cities are growing for the first time in decades, and in Syracuse, that growth is tied partially to the Micron announcement to bring more jobs to the area. "Zoning laws will shape that growth," Santangelo said. "We need to make sure they create the housing diversity we need in order to create inclusive, thriving communities. The State can and should stop spending money on housing in a way that continues the proliferation of economic segregation and poverty," Santangelo said. When the State does fund affordable housing projects, local zoning laws frequently funnel new low-income buildings into areas where poverty is already concentrated, and it is easiest for HCR or OMH to get approval. These projects would provide affordable housing units to existing households in a high-poverty



area, and market-rate units to higher-income households all in the same property. While the construction of mixed-income projects to deconcentrate poverty is still a relatively new intervention, initial outcomes from these projects around the country are displaying positive results. Guidelines for low-income housing tax credits should prioritize mixed-income projects in low-poverty areas as well, according to Ms. Santangelo.

### Policy recommendations:

- **Examine solutions to exclusionary zoning.** 2023-S.667A, sponsored by Senator May, adapts a successful program that has expanded affordable housing in Massachusetts by allowing for appeals to override local exclusionary zoning. In 2021, Governor Hochul signed S.1358A, which regulates agencies administering housing laws to affirmatively further fair housing.
- **Use State funding to steer the siting of affordable housing projects** to give families in affordable housing the opportunity to live in the neighborhood of their choice. 2023-S.688, sponsored by Senator May, requires zoning information to be published. The Urban Institute has identified housing data as a key to breaking down barriers to home ownership.
- **Prioritize mixed-income housing projects** over 100% affordable projects in high-poverty communities upstate.
- **Allow land value taxes in place of traditional property taxes.** This change would disincentivize holding vacant lands or surface parking lots in favor of building housing on urban lands. 2023-S.7871, sponsored by Senator May, creates a pilot program to enable land value taxes in select communities.



**Freedom Commons, a new mixed-income housing project in Syracuse, provides emergency, transitional, affordable, and supportive housing to members of the community.**

## Housing Access

*"This cycle breaks when we offer real solutions in meeting people where they are at, and providing the necessary supports along the way." - Beatriz LeBron*

### **Policy recommendations:**

- **Housing Voucher Access Program**, 2023-S.568B, sponsored by Senator Kavanagh. This piece of legislation was mentioned by organizations from Westchester Children's Association, the Schuyler Center, The Children's Agenda, RMAPI, and NYSCAA. According to Nabozny of The Children's Agenda, "research shows that rental assistance programs have tremendous benefits to the families that receive them, but the federally-funded Housing Choice Voucher program only serves approximately a quarter of the households who are eligible to receive it. A State-funded voucher program like this one... that operates alongside the federal voucher program could help eliminate waitlists... and could be tailored to help address some of New York's specific needs and challenges."
- **Increase the State's Public Assistance housing allowance**, last increased to \$347 a month in 2003. This would stabilize housing for more families.
- Support a strategic **increase in State funding for transitional housing**. Long waitlists for housing exacerbate housing instability. There is a need for increased investment in short-term transitional housing, for those transitioning out of shelters, substance abuse programs, or other situations.
- **Use rental caps** to prevent unjustified rent increases and protect vulnerable tenants from falling into poverty cycles (see below).
- **Give poor tenants an equity-like stake** in improving economies. S.221, The Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, sponsored by Senator Myrie, would be a step in this direction.

## Tenant Protections

The necessity of tenant protections was raised by several organizations. Because children are disproportionately impacted by eviction – children under five make up 9% of the population but 12% of the evicted population – working to lessen eviction statewide is of significant importance.

### **Policy recommendations:**

- **Good Cause Eviction**, 2023-S.305, sponsored by Senator Salazar. Many witnesses advocated for this policy to prevent arbitrary evictions and stop unjustified rent increases.
- **Statewide Right to Counsel**, 2023-S.2721, sponsored by Senator May. Access to legal counsel for those facing eviction dramatically reduces the rate of eviction and housing instability.
- **Yearly rental licensing fee** for landlords. According to Mr. Mays, there are 3.5 million rental units in New York, and imposing a nominal fee for landlords would help raise funds for programs that provide support for poor and low-income tenants.
- **Build data infrastructure** to understand the real state of housing availability and quality. 2023-S.688, sponsored by Senator May, would require reporting of data on construction and demolition of housing around the State, as well as information about zoning restrictions.
- **Include tenants' voices in our political processes**. Senator May's "Tenants Organizing Act," 2023-S.6348B, would help address inequities in the political power of tenants when it comes to interacting with elected officials and candidates and organizing within a multi-unit building.

## Homeownership

Homeownership is seen by many as a way to build lasting financial security. Establishing additional paths for lower-income individuals to achieve homeownership would be linked to increases in health and well-being, as well as greater influence in the political sphere and in neighborhood associations and assets. There were a number of policy interventions recommended by witnesses to increase access to homeownership.

### **Policy recommendations:**

- **Invest in limited equity co-ops**, which would allow homeowners to have a greater long-term stake in their communities.
- Direct State funds to **subsidize construction and renovations for low-income, first-time homebuyers**.
- **Pass the New York Public Banking Act, 2023-S.1754**, sponsored by Senator Sanders, to help guarantee fair access to mortgages, credit, and funding for repairs for homebuyers of color in order to address the racial wealth gap and increase housing and neighborhood stability.
- **Continue and increase funding of the Mobile and Manufactured Home Replacement Program**, which remains a viable homeownership option statewide.
- Senator Cooney sponsors 2023-S.6574, which would **create a savings program for first-time home buyers**.

The Attorney General's report said that "residents of majority POC neighborhoods in Syracuse are 59% more likely to be denied a home purchase mortgage, despite equal credit scores, loan-to-value ratios, and other criteria." [Home Headquarters](https://www.syracuse.com/news/2024/02/a-syracuse-nonprofit-steps-in-to-give-mortgages-to-black-homeowners-neglected-by-banks.html) is stepping in to finance home purchases for people in those census tracts through debt consolidation and concerted collaboration with local banks. (Source: <https://www.syracuse.com/news/2024/02/a-syracuse-nonprofit-steps-in-to-give-mortgages-to-black-homeowners-neglected-by-banks.html>)

## **Legal and Organizational Support**

Shifting community dynamics to address concentrated poverty requires considerable organizational support. Nonprofits and grassroots organizations play a key role, as do volunteer legal services.

### **Policy recommendations:**

- **Shift away from a reimbursement model of State support** so that organizations that don't have upfront cash can perform the interventions that would be helpful to their communities.
- 2023-S.313, sponsored by Senator Salazar, would **eliminate court surcharges and fees** that disproportionately impact individuals in poverty.
- 2023-S.999, sponsored by Senator Hoylman-Sigal, would **establish the right to legal representation for individuals facing immigration proceedings**.

## **Employment**

While ideally, interventions in employment would grant high-quality employment to everyone in the State, which would certainly help reduce poverty rates, it is important to consider how the State supports those who are under- and unemployed due to no fault of their own. In addition to undocumented workers, many citizens who work freelance or as independent contractors are currently ineligible to access State unemployment funds.

## Policy recommendations:

- **The Unemployment Bridge Program**, 2023-S.3192, sponsored by Senator Ramos, would aim to update the State's unemployment system. Not only would this have positive effects on the economy, but it would also allow for these workers to advocate for safer working conditions for themselves, when they know that there is unemployment support for them to fall back on if need be.

## Chair's Conclusion

*"Poverty is a systems issue that requires systems solutions." - Dr. Roosevelt Mareus*

Witnesses from organizations across the State underscored how important it is for the Senate, Assembly, and the Executive's office to recognize the persistent problem of concentrated poverty in our smaller cities and to embrace innovative solutions. Again and again, they insisted that the problem was not caused by the cities themselves or by the people living in poverty, and therefore, the solutions need to engage entire regions and the whole socioeconomic spectrum. If we continue to expect cities to be the only places where affordable housing can be built, or we prioritize 100% affordable developments over mixed-income developments, we will only perpetuate the scourge of concentrated poverty.

We also exacerbate the problem if we continue to deprive low-income urban communities of amenities that affluent communities take for granted — stores selling healthy food, schools with low class sizes and strong enrichment and after-school programs, access to childcare or healthcare, internet or banking services, leafy parks and safe streets. And we need to look at systemic ways we punish poverty, through excessive fines and fees, failure to respond to code violations or unsafe living conditions, unreliable public transportation, or unaddressed potholes that damage private vehicles and endanger pedestrians, as well as the real physical stresses brought on by the constant psychological pressures of racism and a lack of upward mobility.

Just a few weeks after our hearing, Governor Hochul announced a \$50 million investment in fighting child poverty in three upstate cities: Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. We applaud the Governor for taking this action. The Cities 2 Committee will continue to raise awareness about this issue and advocate for legislation and targeted investment in proven approaches to fighting concentrated poverty in our small and medium-sized cities. We hope that New Yorkers everywhere will recognize that when we lift communities out of poverty, it makes whole regions — and the State itself — stronger and more resilient.





## **List of Witnesses and Organizations**

Kate Breslin, President, Schuyler Center

Rev. Myra Brown, Spiritus Christi Church

Jeanell Coleman-Grimes, Chief Program Officer, Person-Centered Housing Option

Nick Coulter, Executive Vice President/Chief of Development and Community Engagement, Person-Centered Housing Option

Dr. Ashley Cross, Founder, The Hub 585

Janet Fry, Deputy Executive Director, Community Resources Center

Barbara Guinn, Acting Commissioner, Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, Co-Chair of Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council

Malik Evans, Mayor, City of Rochester

Karen Erren, President/CEO, Feeding Westchester

M. Deanna Eason, Executive Director, HOME NY

Office of New York State Attorney General Letitia James

Allison Lake, Executive Director, Westchester Children's Association

Beatriz LeBron, Executive Director, Father Tracy Advocacy Center

Dr. Roosevelt Mareus, Executive Director, Rochester Educational Opportunity Center

Jason Mays, Deputy Director, Hudson Valley Justice Center

Dr. Jamila Michener, Co-Director, Cornell Center for Health Equity

Pete Nabozny, Senior Policy Lead, The Children's Agenda

Jacqueline Orr, CEO, NYSCAA

Melinda Person, President, NYSUT

Aqua Porter, Executive Director, Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative

Wanda Ridgeway, Executive Director, Rise Up Rochester

Dr. Eric Rosser, Superintendent, Poughkeepsie City School District

Sally Santangelo, Executive Director, CNY Fair Housing

Steph Silkowski, Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives, The Bridge Project

Taina Wagnac, Senior Manager, State and Local Policy, NYC

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# Rachel May

## New York State Senator

**District 48**



### **SYRACUSE DISTRICT OFFICE**

State Office Building  
333 E. Washington Street, Suite 805  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
Phone: (315) 478-8745

### **CAYUGA COUNTY DISTRICT OFFICE**

144 Genesee Street, Suite 103  
Auburn, NY 13021

### **ALBANY OFFICE**

803 Legislative Office Building  
Albany, NY 12247  
Phone: (518) 455-2838

**EMAIL:** [may@nysenate.gov](mailto:may@nysenate.gov)

**WEB:** [may.nysenate.gov](http://may.nysenate.gov)

