

# THE BRIDGE PROJECT

**Testimony of Stephanie Silkowski, Director of Policy & Strategic Initiatives  
New York State 2024 Joint Human Services Budget Hearing  
Wednesday, January 31, 2024**

Good morning. Thank you to Senate Finance Committee Chair Liz Krueger, Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chair Helene E. Weinstein, Senate Social Services Committee Chair Roxanne J. Persaud, Assembly Social Services Chair Maritza Davila, and to all the members of the Committees present today for hosting this important hearing. My name is Stephanie Silkowski and I am the Director of Policy & Strategic Initiatives for The Bridge Project, New York's first unconditional cash transfer program for expecting mothers.

Thank you for using this 2024 Executive Budget Joint Hearing to address the economic hardships facing so many New Yorkers. Poverty, and in particular child poverty, is high and will likely worsen if current economic trends continue. Half of the top six cities in the United States with the highest child poverty rates are in New York State. In Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse, one in two children live in poverty. New York City isn't far behind, with nearly one in four children living in poverty.

Additionally, a recent report found half of New York City's residents can't actually afford to live there, and that a family must be pulling in six figures to even afford basic needs like food, shelter, transportation, and health care. Not to mention, we cannot talk about these troubling trends without acknowledging that they also disproportionately affect communities of color.

This inequity is reflected in New York State's significant disparities in maternal health outcomes across racial lines. In New York City, Black women are eight times more likely than white women to die from a pregnancy-related cause.

We simply cannot keep turning a blind eye to the horrific conditions new families are living in. The prenatal-to-three period is one of, if not the most, important times in a child's life. The conditions they grow up in during that time are critically important for a child's future prospects, as they greatly affect their physical, mental, emotional, and social outcomes.

Some progress has been made on this front in the form of philanthropically-funded programs like The Bridge Project and the now-expired expanded Child Tax Credit. However, the little progress that has been made does not sufficiently address the need statewide. That's why I am proud to support [S4578/A6197](#), the Mothers and Infants Lasting Change (MILC) Allowance. Sponsored by Senator Ramos and Assemblymember Clark, the MILC Allowance will provide income to

eligible participants for the last three months of pregnancy into the first 18 months of the child's life.

This legislation would offer monthly cash support of up to \$1,000 for 15 months to 15,000 new moms and their babies across the state in the areas with the highest childhood poverty rates.

There is support far and wide across the state for the MILC Allowance. In addition to its support from families throughout New York, it has been included in the priority list of the Working Families Party and endorsed by the New York State United Teachers. The Editorial Board of the Buffalo News urged Governor Hochul to support the investment, deeming it “essential.”

As we all know, reducing childhood poverty and supporting maternal health are major priorities for Governor Hochul. In December of 2021, Governor Hochul signed the Child Poverty Reduction Act, aiming to reduce child poverty by 50% over the next decade. The MILC Allowance has the capability of providing families in need with direct financial support while moving New York State closer to its goal of cutting child poverty in half.

This would be the largest pilot cash transfer program to exist across the country - a bold step forward in addressing one of our state and country's most pressing issues. What could be a greater investment than one that directly supports our communities, families, and, most of all, our children?

We're at a crossroads here in New York. As I previously outlined, our children are in dire need of support and there's no shortage of data that backs that claim up. We can either turn a blind eye to these struggling families or choose to be a national leader in fighting child poverty. Simply put, a budget without the MILC Allowance would be failing families and children in need across New York State, and I urge Governor Hochul and all of our legislators to pass this legislation. An investment in our children and families today is an investment in a better tomorrow for New York.