

Submitted

Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation

Testimony to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee

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A Positive Return on Investment!

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On behalf of our Board and the families we serve, the Maternity & Early Childhood Foundation thanks you for supporting a cost-effective prevention program serving the needs of the most vulnerable in our state for almost 30 years. The Maternity & Early Childhood Foundation was founded in 1983 in response to the significant number of teenage mothers and low income single-parent families who were receiving late or no prenatal care and needed information on parenting. Our mission is to ensure a safe and healthy birth of the child and the well-being of the mother by supporting and promoting services to those pregnant and parenting women who are most in need.

The New York State Budget has long supported the Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation, Inc. (MECF). MECF is a not for profit agency that was started in 1983 through efforts of a few forward-thinking individuals including members of the New York State Legislature who realized the importance of supporting young parents at a most crucial time, the birth of a child. Research demonstrates the critical need for preventive intervention for at risk families that begins prenatally and continues through the first three years of life.

Thank you for restoring funding for MECF last year in spite of New York's dire fiscal crisis so that we can continue our important work. We are so pleased and grateful to be included in Governor Cuomo's 2012-13 Executive Budget for \$299,500, the same amount as our State funding for this current year.

Most of the families served by MECF funded programs are living in extreme poverty with unstable housing, lack of transportation and little or no employment. Almost 50% of parents are under age 21 at the time of enrollment. Half of the parents enroll in the program prenatally - the best time to make a positive impact on health of the baby and the mother. Funded programs serve young expectant and new parents and are located in high need communities throughout New York State where other community services are often limited or nonexistent.

The need for MECF funded services is evident when one considers these statistics. The impact of teen pregnancy is a critical problem for the teens, their children and for society. New York State has the 11th highest teen pregnancy rate in the United States. Pregnant teens are least likely to get early and regular prenatal care and are more likely to have a low birthweight baby. Babies of teen moms are more likely to die in the first year of life. One third of teen moms do not finish high school. 64% of children born to teen moms live in poverty and are three times as likely to be incarcerated in their adolescence.

In addition to teen pregnancy, New York State has some serious discrepancies in health outcomes for pregnant women. For example,

- **The New York State rate for maternal mortality is twice as high as the national rate.**
- **The NYS rate for low birth weight (LBW) is 8.2% and very low birth weight (VLBW) is 1.5%. The rate of LBW for Black non-Hispanic women is 13%.**
- **The NYS rate of pregnant women who receive early prenatal care. (within the first trimester) is 72%. For Black non-Hispanic women, it is 60.6%. For Hispanic women, it is 63.6%.**

Unfortunately while the need continues to grow, the fiscal resources are shrinking. Pressure to close the New York State budget deficit has meant reduced state funding for these critical services. In 2009, MECF received over \$1 million from New York State and provided services through 31 programs to 4800 pregnant and parenting women and their family members. In 2011, the number of funded programs has been reduced to 10 and grant amounts to funded agencies have also been reduced. There are many areas across New York State that did not receive MECF funded services this year including Utica, Jamestown, Binghamton, Amsterdam, the counties of Warren, Washington, Franklin, Wayne, and Livingston, all very high need areas. In many high need urban areas, MECF was only able to fund one program. For example, only one program was funded in the cities of Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse. There were only 3 MECF funded programs in New York City.

The Foundation selects funded programs through a rigorous Request for Proposal process. MECF funded services include outreach to pregnant women who might not seek prenatal care, assistance with access to health insurance, crisis intervention, parenting skills training, information on baby safety, and support for education and employment goals. The MECF funded programs provide a positive support, help to reduce stress and give parents hope for a better future.

An example of a funded program is **Community Maternity Services (CMS)** that provides in home services for low income isolated pregnant and parenting teens living in the rural counties of Schoharie and Otsego. The staff connects the young teens with prenatal care and health insurance. They teach the Moms infant safety and positive parenting. They encourage the Moms to go back to school. Last year, the town of Schoharie including the CMS office was totally decimated by the flooding caused by Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. In spite of the hardships caused by the flooding, the staff continues to provide these critical services.

Dominican Sisters Family Health Service, Inc. located in Mott Haven in the Bronx. Mott Haven has been identified as the most distressed congressional district in the nation. All of the families are Hispanic and most do not speak English. Most of the families live in one bedroom apartments with other families in substandard housing. Many of the mothers have a history of depression and domestic violence. Most have only a sixth grade education.

Dominican Sisters is both a center and home based program. During the operation of the center, the mothers participate in ESL, GED, parenting education, self esteem, breast feeding, nutrition, and domestic violence classes. While the mothers are at class, the infants and toddlers play in the infant/toddler room. The Director notes that since these children live with other families in crowded walk-up apartments, they don't have any experience with music or play and few opportunities for gross motor activities. This room is equipped with developmentally appropriate toys. The activities are child directed and promote gross motor, fine motor and language development. The children are screened for developmental delays and referred to Early Intervention Services if indicated. The program serves approximately 65 families each year and always has a waiting list. What a return on investment for those families and that distressed community!

Another example is Catholic Charities of Onondaga County. MECF funding supports the Lullaby League, the oldest consistently offered parent education course in Onondaga County. This program provides parent education classes for pregnant women and young parents. The classes focus on healthy pregnancy, baby safety and connection with community services such as WIC. At a recent class, a pregnant teen attended with her Mom. Her Mom said that she attended the classes 19 years ago and the class made all the difference to her. She went back to school and became a physical therapist. She wanted her daughter to have the same support she received as a young scared pregnant teen. This program serves 80 very low income pregnant women each year.

A Mom reflected on the support she received from **MOMMA'S House located in Nassau County.** When the program started working with her, she was living in a dangerous domestic violence relationship and she had an infant. After residing at MOMMA'S House, she went on to graduate from Russell Sage College. Her personal goal is to start a not for profit agency like MOMMA'S. She writes, "My heart is in giving back what I received while at MOMMAS – unconditional love and support. My experience there helped me to be the self-reliant woman I am today." What a return on investment!

We recognize that the state must do business differently. We believe that we are doing just that - building a strong future for New York by supporting young families at such an important time, the birth of a child. MECF funded services are a cost effective and efficient alternative to longer term foster care and Medicaid costs. The cost of providing services before the family faces the child welfare system is much less than the cost of foster care, and the impact of these services on child wellbeing cannot be overstated. The MECF funded services reduce Medicaid costs by reducing the risk of low birth weight and other poor health outcomes for the mother and baby.

We are asking the Legislature to match the Executive Budget for MECF by adding an additional \$299,500. An increase of \$299,500 would allow MECF to fund 8-10 additional programs in many high need areas and give young vulnerable families a chance for a better life. While New York is facing some very serious challenges, we hope that you will keep our most vulnerable citizens, our children and their struggling families among your priorities. We strongly believe that the Return on Investment in the Maternity & Early Childhood Foundation will reap major dividends for the state in the long-term.

Thank you for your leadership during these challenging times. The support we give expectant and new parents will last a lifetime!