

# American Academy of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

NYSAAP, District II, Chapters 1, 2 & 3

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the Joint Budget Committee on Health 2023-2024. I am Elie Ward, Director of Policy for New York State American Academy of Pediatrics. NYSAAP represents nearly 5,000 pediatricians across New York from the tip of Long Island to the Shores of Lake Erie, from small private practices to large multi-site practices to giant university and hospital systems. The pediatricians across our state urge you to target state budget investments to meet the vital needs of our youngest New Yorkers.

Child health is multifaceted, multi system and intersectional. It is not a simple formula, if a child has coverage the child has access to quality care and that means the child is healthy. Poor children most often have significant health challenges, resulting in higher levels of asthma, obesity, diabetes. Poverty and health are inextricably related.

Healthy children require a family that has financial security, adequate funding for healthy food, quality educational opportunities, an environment free of toxins in the air they breathe, the water they drink and the soil they play in.

Healthy children also need healthy parents. They need high quality accessible childcare and access to a caring community. Healthy children need to be protected from gun violence. They need stable housing and the family resources to put healthy food on the table every day. They need to know that their mother, father or other family member will not be taken away and deported. They need love, caring, support and a sense of stability.

Although we all know that this is the world we could and should create and support for all of our children, the reality is that more than one million children across New York do not live in this world. Rather, they live in a world of danger, insecurity, hunger and fear. They live in a world where they may have an insurance card, but no way to access care. A world where many days they are hungry, or afraid a parent will be deported, or concerned that the apartment they have will be taken away, even if that apartment and neighborhood is not safe and not free of toxins. A world where they go to a school that cannot meet their needs, and live in a neighborhood where friends and family members are killed and injured by guns.

There are 4.1 million children under the age of 18 in New York State. That translates to just under one quarter (21%) of our total state population. 1.1 million of New York's children are under the age of five. But perhaps even more important is the fact that our youngest children are our poorest New Yorkers. New York's public and budget policies over the last several decades have perpetuated a level of child poverty that has kept between 20-25 percent of our children trapped in poverty. We have missed every opportunity to address the high poverty rate of our youngest children.

We have also failed to recognize and address the fact that our poorest children and families are black and brown. Poverty and race are inextricably related. Families of color in New York are twice as likely to be living at or near poverty. Twenty eight percent of New York's Black/African American families are living in poverty. Twenty six percent of Hispanic/LatinX families across our state are also struggling to live at the poverty level. Thirteen percent of New York's white families are living in poverty.

So, what can you, the legislators of New York, do to help these children who live in your neighborhoods and your communities and go the schools in your districts? You can pass a budget that focuses on meeting their needs. You can make decisions that truly invest in our children.

## **To Keep Children Healthy:**

### **Address Child Poverty and Increase the Financial Security of New York's Most Vulnerable Families:**

**Raise the base of the minimum wage and link increases to the rate of inflation.** Working families need to be able to keep pace with the financial pressures of inflation. Working full time and still living in poverty is simply not fair. Working full time and still being homeless or hungry because the cost of housing and the cost of food is outpacing minimum wage income is not an acceptable public policy. We need to create a more equitable state by raising low-income workers' pay to meet the requirements of a decent life.

**Provide Universal Free School Meals** so that all children have access to healthy meals at school with no regard to family income and no stigma.

**Include The Working Families Tax Credit in this year's State Budget.** The Working Families Tax Credit covers all children birth to 18 and restructures the credit so the highest credit goes to the lowest income families, by ending

regressive minimum income requirement. The WFTC makes the refundable payment payout monthly. The WFTC includes all working immigrant families with a TTN, regardless of status. The WFTC will immediately lift tens of thousands of children and families across our state out of poverty. It is a progressive and fair tax policy and it will support the healthy development of low income children across our state.

**Create and Fund a Statewide Diaper Bank** to provide support for diaper banks that are currently funded by private dollars. Diapers are not luxury. They are a necessity to keep infants and toddlers healthy. And yet diapers are very expensive, often costing more than struggling families can afford. Providing \$1.25 million to the Diaper Banks across the state from Buffalo to Brooklyn will go a long way to helping families keep their infants and toddlers healthy and dry!

**Expand Infant and Child Care Access and Quality** so that New York families can work, and children can experience supportive and educationally appropriate childcare to facilitate school readiness.

Build an equitable and diverse childcare system that meets the needs of families.

Provide adequate childcare subsidies and supports to make the system affordable for all families who need child care.

Build and finance a childcare workforce that can not only offer high quality educational and developmentally appropriate services, but also provides a decent living for those providing child care services.

## **Address and Improve Child Physical & Mental Health**

**Provide Continuous Medicaid Coverage for children from birth through age 6.** The current requirement that families reenroll each year creates churn, which drops thousands of children from their health insurance each year. A better option is to keep children covered for the first six years of their lives. The chances that their families will suddenly become too well off to continue to receive Medicaid is very slim. And the administrative cost savings from constant reenrollment applications will reduce whatever increases might be incurred.

**Level the Payment Playing Field between Medicaid and Medicare.** Recognizing that more than 50% of New York's children are covered by Medicaid, it is imperative that the state implement a payment system that

would support the development of an adequate pediatric work force. Having coverage without access is not coverage at all. How does it make sense that physicians are paid more for caring for a 70-year-old than a 7-month-old? It doesn't. Payment for services in Medicaid and Medicare should be harmonized. Let's start this year by bringing New York State's Medicaid rates for immunizations and well visits into 100% parity with Medicare visits for the same services. Surely it is much easier and takes less time to give a flu shot to a 70-year-old than it does to work to immunize a wiggly 7 month old.

**Build Pediatric Capacity at all Levels of Care.** Across New York State hospitals have closed pediatric beds at all levels of care, from newborn intensive care units (NICU's) to pediatric intensive care units (PICU's) to general pediatric beds. These actions have reduced access to care for thousands of children, as more and more pediatric beds, most especially in community hospitals, have disappeared. Many families need to travel great distances to get their children the level of hospital care needed. And the hospitals that do have adequate pediatric services are most often at or over capacity. The state needs to focus on the needed levels of pediatric care from community hospitals to those able to provide the most specialized care as it starts its refocusing on hospital care and health care delivery statewide. The new Health Care Task Force must include a focus on strengthening pediatric care capacity.

**Build Children's Mental Health Service Provider Capacity Statewide.** The fact that there is a current epidemic of children's mental health is widely known and accepted by both the medical and educational communities, and politicians on both sides of aisle. However, very little has been offered to address this epidemic. The Governor's investment in School Based Mental Health services is most welcome. But alone it cannot make a real difference to the thousands of children and families who desperately need mental health services. And there is the ongoing shortage of appropriately trained mental health professionals, with a specialty in caring for children, so staffing any expansion of services children's mental health services presents a significant challenge.

To help meet the challenge now, we encourage the State Health Department and State Office of Mental Health to work together to make integration of children's mental health services into enhanced pediatric primary care a reality. We can and must create opportunities for pediatricians to be first line mental health providers and to be paid for the work entailed in the new responsibilities. In addition, we must design and financially support having mental health and mental health wrap around services available in multiple levels of pediatric health care. The state must also rebuild and support vital

community-based children's mental health services, from the most intensive community based residential care to outpatient mental health treatment to community based and school based mental health services. We are also demanding that a percentage of hospital psychiatric beds be set aside for children. The current absence of children's psych beds has created a huge problem in getting children the care they need when they need it and then moving them on to the next lower level of care as they engage positively in treatment.

Right now, we have a backup of children in hospitals who cannot move to community-based care because there is no community based care. We also have very sick children waiting for a psych bed in the hospital who are being held in hallways and other inappropriate spaces. Or ever worse, many children and families are simply told to wait until a bed becomes available. These are the children in come again and again to emergency rooms and don't get the help they need. It is past time to rebuild New York State's Children's Mental Health System.

**Increase rates for Early Intervention Services by at least 11%.** The current Early Intervention Program across our state is failing most children. The waiting time for services is too long in every community. In some communities, services are simply unavailable. Low rates and a disinvestment in infrastructure has resulted in a system on the verge of collapse.

Developmentally delayed infants cannot wait months or even weeks for services. Every week of delay is a week too long. Early intervention works because it starts once a delay is diagnosed and continues intensely to help that child develop the maximum functional capacity. Miss the early window to address physical, intellectual, or social challenges and the work becomes much harder and often less effective. The goal of Early Intervention is Early Intervention. New York must invest in an Early Intervention system that can and does provide vital services to all infants and toddlers diagnosed with a developmental delay.

## **To Keep Children Safe & Healthy**

**Focus on budget investments that will improve the environment for children and families.**

Invest in clean air and clean water through the Bond Act

Address Lead Sources to reduce childhood lead poisoning from both housing and indoor water sources

The decisions you make as you deliberate the State Budget will directly impact the most vulnerable children and families across our state. You can, and we encourage you to, make a positive difference by investing in our children. Offer children and their families a hand-up financially by creating a more equitable and a refundable Child/Family Tax Credit. Provide them with access to high quality health care and available mental health care, by investing in the provider networks that make access a reality for all children.

The choice is yours. This is a year where you can choose to make a real difference in the lives of millions of New York's children. We urge you to make that choice and invest in the lives of our young New Yorkers.

For further information please feel free to contact me

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