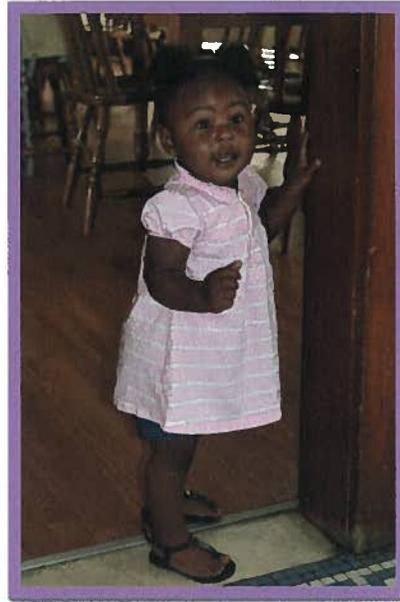


Supporting expectant and new parents will last a lifetime!

Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation
Testimony to the
Joint Legislative Budget Committee
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On behalf of our Board and the families we serve, the Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation (MECF) thanks you for supporting an economical and highly effective prevention program serving the needs of the most vulnerable families in our state. **We urgently need your commitment to support restoration of funding in the Department of Health Budget for the Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation.** Without your support, we face extinction because the 2014-15 Executive Budget does not include a line item for our agency. We look to you to do what you have done for the past 30 years, protect the underserved young families living in extreme poverty in your communities. **Please restore the Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation line item in the 2014-15 State Budget with an appropriation of \$600,000.**

The Maternity & Early Childhood Foundation is dedicated to the health and well-being of New York's most vulnerable young moms and dads and their babies. Your support helps MECF nurture healthy moms, healthy babies and positive parenting- making a lifetime of difference. 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 provided financial support to 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.

In the 2013-14 Enacted State Budget, MECF received \$533,300 which provided services in **18 high need communities across New York State** where other community services are often limited or nonexistent. Through December 2013, over 2,000 pregnant and parenting women and their family members were served. 58% of the pregnant women that enrolled were teenagers.

Most of the families benefiting from MECF funded programs are living in extreme poverty with unstable housing, lack of transportation and little or no employment. More than 40% of the parents enroll in the program prenatally - the best time to make a positive impact on health of the baby and the mother.

The need for our programs 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%.

- **46% of the births in New York State are funded through Medicaid indicating a very large underserved impoverished population.**

The Foundation selects funded programs through a rigorous Request for Proposal process. Funding is distributed efficiently to provide services in high need communities so that there are no gaps in service delivery. 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.

While we understand, the proposed State Budget includes a plan to consolidate individual maternal and child health programs, we are concerned about this plan for a number of reasons. There will be a delay in issuing these funds resulting in many more families without services. The cost of centralizing services is much greater than those provided by not-for-profit community agencies who understand constituent needs and are located in the communities served. Many parents will not receive services because they don't meet the often times narrow eligibility requirements of existing state programs or are not living in areas prioritized for services. Collapsing cost effective community based services into a large centralized bureaucracy makes it much harder to ensure that specific vulnerable populations such as low income pregnant teens and young parents are being well served. The Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation reaches out to pregnant women and young parents who might be afraid to seek services. Our eligibility requirements are only that the families live in poverty. We expand the reach of state programs economically and efficiently.

A Mom reflected on the support she received from **MOMMA'S House**, a MECF funded program located on Long Island. 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. MOMMA's House taught me how to parent, something that no one had taught me. My experience there helped me to be the self-reliant woman I am today."** What a return on investment!

Dominican Sisters Family Health Service, Inc, is a MECF funded program located in Mott Haven in the Bronx which 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, 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 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!

Catholic Charities of Onondaga County is located in Syracuse, New York. 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. This program has recently expanded to include a Baby and Me component where the young Moms bring their babies to the group classes. This program serves 80 very low income pregnant women each year.

Another example 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, Otsego, Fulton, Montgomery, Warren and Washington. The staff connects the young parents with prenatal care and health insurance. They teach the Moms infant safety and positive parenting. They promote healthy life styles including smoking cessation, and encourage the Moms and Dads to finish school. One Dad noted that **"if you can't provide for your children, you feel like you can't do anything. The (MECF) caseworker makes you feel like you are something!"**

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 birthweight and other poor health outcomes for the mother and baby.

We are asking the Legislature to give young vulnerable families a chance for a better life by restoring the Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation line item in the 2014-15 State Budget with an appropriation of \$600,000. While New York is facing some very serious challenges, we are counting on you to keep our most vulnerable citizens, our children and their struggling families among your priorities. With your support, we can prevent child abuse by alleviating the isolation of young mothers and teaching positive parenting and child care. 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. Together we can build strong families and break the cycle of poverty.