



**TESTIMONY OF
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NORTHERN RIVERS FAMILY OF SERVICES**

**PRESENTED TO THE
NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
AND
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS**

**REGARDING THE
NEW YORK STATE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR HUMAN SERVICES
STATE FISCAL YEAR 2021–2022**

FEBRUARY 8, 2021

NORTHERNRIVERS

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Place a moratorium on reductions to critical child welfare prevention, protective and adoption services for children, adults, and families.
2. Amend the Executive Budget proposal to redirect facility closure savings to a re-investment fund for juvenile justice, social justice and community services
3. Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience
4. Carefully Draft Legislation for legalized marijuana with a focus on treatment, distressed communities, and the Impact for individuals younger than age 26

Good afternoon. My name is William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services located in the Capital Region.

About Northern Rivers Family of Services

Northern Rivers Family of Services was established in 2012 through affiliation with longstanding family services agencies **Northeast Parent & Child Society** and **Parsons Child & Family Center**. In 2019, we affiliated with **Unlimited Potential**, whose operations began in Saratoga Springs. Together, the 1,400-strong workforce of Northern Rivers and member agencies serve more than 18,000 children and families in 41 upstate counties each year, with \$88 million invested through more than 60 social services and child welfare programs. Northern Rivers builds a strong, successful, and healthy future for our children, families, and communities through quality services, collaboration, and innovative leadership. Our program areas include:

- Residential and community-based child welfare programming including foster care, preventive services, postadoption services, and evidence-based home visiting programs;
- Educational services for 400 students including early learning, pre-K, and Early Head Start, as well as accredited 853 schools (elementary, middle, and high school);
- Community-based child welfare and crisis services programs for children and adults including mobile crisis, school-based services, and licensed clinic programs; and
- Community-based waiver programs for children and adults including Health Home services.

I would like to thank Chairwomen Liz Krueger and Chairwomen Helene E. Weinstein, Human Services Committee Chairs, and members of the Assembly Ways and Means

and Senate Finance Committees for this opportunity to testify on the Governor's Executive Budget for State Fiscal Year 2021–2022.

As has been stated many times:

***The budget is not just a collection of numbers,
but an expression of our values and aspirations.***

Governor Cuomo has proposed a \$190 billion Executive Budget to deal with our state's needs and priorities including closure of a \$15 billion deficit, managing the impacts of the federal proposals, improving the infrastructure, increasing county and education efficiency, and promoting economic growth and development across the state.

While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor and the Legislature have taken over the past few years to stabilize the state's economy and help to build a better New York, **more needs to be accomplished to make New York State a great place to live, raise a family, and operate a business. Unless the proposed Executive Budget is adjusted to adequately support the human services sector and the children, adults, and families we serve each day, New York State will not reach its goals. Without support and opportunity for ALL New Yorkers, we will not be truly successful.**

COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected many people's child welfare and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders. In a recent Kaiser Family

Foundation (KFF) brief, [53%](#) of adults in the United States reported that their child welfare has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. This is significantly higher than the [32%](#) reported in prior months. Many adults are also reporting specific negative impacts on their [child welfare and wellbeing](#), such as difficulty sleeping (36%) or eating (32%), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12%), and worsening chronic conditions (12%), due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. As the pandemic wears on, ongoing and necessary public health measures expose many people to experiencing situations linked to poor child welfare outcomes, such as [isolation](#) and [job loss](#).

Child Welfare providers and their staff did not allow the pandemic to negatively impact the delivery of services.

- Front line staff left their homes each day and provided services on an inpatient and outpatient level
- Providers pivoted and provided remote and tele services to avoid any disruption
- Agencies were forced to deal with the 20% Withhold Provisions and delayed cash flow

We cannot however let the COVID- 19 and fiscal stress undermine the critical child welfare system across NYS. Following are specific recommendations with regard to the proposed budget.

- 1. Place a moratorium on reductions to critical child welfare prevention, protective, and adoption services for children, adults, and families**

The social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of children and youth is a critical aspect of human development that lays the foundation for lifelong health and well-being. And as a state, it is our responsibility to provide every opportunity for growth and development while ensuring safety and protection.

We call on the Governor and the Legislature to restore these funds and refuse to balance the State budget on the backs of vulnerable children and families.

Local Departments of Social Services have already endured months of financial withholding from the State, which has impacted their ability to support and protect children and families across New York. In the face of widespread economic hardship, and the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black and Latinx communities, this is the wrong time to lock-in cuts to State support for critical child welfare programs for the difficult year ahead.

Last spring and summer, 4,200 of New York's children lost a parent or guardian to COVID-19—that is one out of every 1,000 children. And, 325,000 children were pushed into poverty. Black and Latinx children experienced the death of a parent or caregiver at twice the rate of white children. Today, as we face a second wave of COVID-19, and the sustained stress that the last year has wrought on families, we cannot divest from the minimum supports that communities need.

The Governor's budget cuts:

- Child welfare preventive and child protective services that promote child safety and family stability; 5% cuts to reimbursement would affect every county, a reduction of \$30.5 million;

- Kinship care programs that help family members care for children by 5%;
- Adoption subsidies that enable children to leave foster care by 5%, a reduction of \$9.4 million; and
- Community-based programs to prevent children from entering the child welfare and juvenile justice systems by \$4 million (an overall reduction of 20%).

Cutting the reimbursement that counties rely upon to serve children and families is something we have seen before. In 2008, the State reduced its support for child welfare preventive services from the statutorily set 65% to 62%, based on similar “capped” funding as part of state-wide austerity measures. Despite the law stating otherwise, the State never returned to meeting its commitment to pay its fair share under the law, even during New York’s economic strength before the COVID-19 pandemic. We cannot permit the FY2022 budget to continue to whittle away at State support for these essential family supports.

Further, these cuts are inconsistent with the State’s preparation for federal Family First Prevention Services Act implementation, which is included in the Governor’s proposed budget. Under the new federal law, states like New York have financial incentives for investing in family stability supports and reducing the need to remove children from their homes.

As New York strives to **Build Back Better**, we must prioritize the needs of children and families—especially Black and Latinx communities hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and over-represented in the child welfare system.

COVID-19 has brought into high importance what we have long known: for children to thrive, they need a strong family and systems that are aligned, coordinated, and

well-resourced. With Family First implementation around the corner, the urgent need to address racial disparity in child welfare, and another wave of rising COVID-19 cases, now is the time to support families in crisis, not pull the rug out from under them

The foundation of a strong New York State is our people, and strong people are built by strong families. New York's families need the state's support this year more than ever. The Governor and Legislature need to invest, not divest, in these services that keep children safe, ensure child well-being, and give families the tools to survive this time of crisis and thrive in the future

2. Amend the Executive Budget proposal to redirect facility closure savings to a re-investment fund for juvenile justice, social justice and community services

This year the proposed Executive Budget proposes the closure of four (4) OCFS juvenile justice with low census. The facilities to be closed by October 1 under the plan are Goshen Secure Center in Orange County; Columbia Girls Secure Center in Columbia County; Red Hook Residential Center in Dutchess County, and Brentwood Residential Center in Suffolk County. We recommend approval of the closure in light of juvenile justice reforms. Closing the facilities would save \$21.8 million annually in operational costs as well as avoid \$14 million in capital costs. This savings would end up in the State's general fund instead of being re-invested in community juvenile justice and child welfare services.

We encourage the Legislature to amend this proposal to create a re-investment fund to support community based juvenile justice services. Re-investment efforts in other human services programs has historically supported the transition of services from a residential or out of home service to more normal, efficient, and effective community based services. Implementation of this concept will represent a cost effective strategy to ensure that community efforts yield long term community health, child welfare and safety impacts.

3. Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience

New York's families have faced many challenges in past years: the down economy, joblessness, homelessness, opiate/substance abuse, and violence in already plagued communities; for these forgotten New Yorkers, times are still hard. When families are in crisis and children are at risk, New York's network of not-for-profit human services providers are both the first line of defense and the safety net. **The agencies and the women and men in the not-for-profit human services sector are the first responders for at-risk and vulnerable families, children, and individuals.** Throughout the state, not-for-profit human services welfare agencies respond to critical family situations 24/7/365, and our fiscal viability is at risk.

Existing law provides for an annual increase for these not-for-profit agencies.

Unfortunately, for the last decade, the funding increases for these agencies has been manually removed from the New York State Budget, which has led to a loss in excess of \$1 billion in promised financial support. The result is that the quality of services are declining, many agencies have had to institute waiting lists for care,

facilities are deteriorating, and agencies are unable to offer competitive living wages to attract and retain the skilled staff necessary to deliver quality care and support. Those friends, family, and neighbors of ours most in need are not getting all the help they deserve.

Our agencies are the safety net for New Yorkers in greatest need. While our agencies' missions prevent us from turning away people in need, many of our agencies are now fiscally unstable and in danger of closing due to inadequate funding.

The importance of our organizations cannot be overstated. **Individuals** rely on us to fulfill their dreams of independence. **Families** rely on us to provide their loved ones with the quality care they need to keep them safe and thriving. **Communities** rely on us as economic engines and employers. **Taxpayers** rely on us to support New Yorkers in their home communities, off the streets, and out of expensive institutional settings and emergency rooms. Every New Yorker is being impacted by this ongoing crisis—even those who don't yet realize it.

This investment is a cost-effective win for all New Yorkers. In addition:

- Not-for-profit human services organizations support is a social justice issue;
- Not-for-profit human services organizations are an economic engine; and
- Not-for-profit human services sector operates as an efficient business.

We urge the members of Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee to continue your leadership in the human services sector

through your support of the workforce with funding for the annual cost of living increase.

In addition, there are critical workforce shortages in the Human Services professions across New York State. The shortages contribute to higher costs to voluntary nonprofit agencies and impede access to care. For decades, the dramatic shortage of licensed child welfare practitioners has been “masked” by an exemption to the scope of practice for certain practitioners licensed under Art 163 of the Education Law. That exemption was address in Part Y of Chapter of the Laws of 2018 and is due to sunset permanently in June 2020.

The Legislature must act immediately to address a crisis that will ensue in June when the exemption permanently sunsets. The solution is a modernization to the scope of practice and standardization of the Master level educational, clinical training and licensing standards for licensed child welfare counselors, licensed marriage and family therapists and licensed psychoanalyst. There are currently over 10,000 of these capable, trained and licensed practitioners working up to their full scope of training in New York State.

Workforce Support Is a Social Justice Issue

Women make up an astonishing 81% of the human services and direct care workforce in New York. This equates to 268,900+ skilled, well-educated workers who are paid significantly less than women in New York’s private sector, leading to increased staff turnover and jeopardizing the quality of service delivery,

Non-Profit Organizations are an Economic Engine

New York's not-for-profit workforce is not only hard working but also an economic engine. Across New York state, 1 in 7 (1 in 6?) workers are employed by a not-for-profit organization. These workers contribute billions to the state's economic health; including the payment of income, sales, and property tax. Beyond the direct economic impact, the not-for-profit workforce, allow all New Yorkers to stay employed, avert costly medical costs, and educate our young persons. A strong non-profit sector, with a viable direct care staff, creates additional economic growth and allows NYS to attract new business investments and companies.

Non-Profit Sector Operates as an Efficient Business

Our sector understands the need to maximize utilization of our resources and to provide value to our funders. We have worked in partnership with government on countless initiatives to reduce costs, focus on outcomes, use of evidence-based practices, and improve quality services. These efforts come in a climate where the rates and contracts our agencies receive are frozen or lowered. These staff, who we expect to do such vital work, are facing staffing cutbacks, frozen salaries, reduced health benefits, and little or no contributions to their pensions. Not-for-profit agencies have always raised funds from private donors to supplement government resources.

Turnover and Record High Vacancy Rates Create Chaos in Service Delivery

Today, thousands of job openings exist in the not-for-profit world. Not-for-profit executives report that starting about five years ago they have had trouble filling jobs because of the low pay for challenging work, which has historically paid more than the minimum wage. Upcoming minimum wage increases and growing competition

from other employers are expected to make recruiting and retaining staff even more challenging. In addition, turnover rates are increasing, ranging from 25 percent to 44 percent depending on the position.

4. Carefully Draft Legislation for legalized marijuana with a focus on treatment, distressed communities, and the Impact for individuals younger than age 26

Marijuana use in individuals younger than age 26 can lead to long-term consequences. Marijuana, or cannabis, is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States. It acts by binding to cannabinoid receptors in the brain to produce a variety of effects, including euphoria, intoxication, and memory and motor impairments. These same cannabinoid receptors are also critical for brain development. They are part of the endocannabinoid system, which impacts the formation of brain circuits important for decision making, mood, and responding to stress.

Marijuana has changed over time. The marijuana available today is much stronger than previous versions. The THC concentration in commonly cultivated marijuana plants has increased threefold between 1995 and 2014 (4 percent and 12 percent, respectively). Marijuana available in dispensaries in some states has average concentrations of THC between 17.7 percent and 23.2 percent. Concentrated products, commonly known as dabs or waxes, are far more widely available to recreational users today and may contain concentrations of THC between 23.7 percent and 75.9 percent.

The risks of physical dependence, addiction, and other negative consequences increase with exposure to high concentrations of THC and the younger the age of initiation.

Based upon the scientific evidence and the common understanding of brain development, we strongly urge that legalized marijuana be limited to individuals age 26 and older.

At the same time we recommend that the revenues from the sale of legal marijuana be smartly allocated to treatment, distressed communities and public education.

Conclusion

In closing, we urge the Legislature to negotiate a budget with the Governor that ensures that the State remains committed to the programs that produce positive outcomes for children, individuals, and families; one that ultimately **saves the State money on more expensive interventions such as foster care, unnecessary medical care, homeless shelters, and the juvenile justice system.** We strongly encourage the Legislature to support the need of the not-for-profit human services sector. Failure to fund an increase for not-for-profit human services agencies will have a significant negative impact on the ability of individuals and families to receive services and ultimately on the physical, mental, and financial health of New York State as a whole.

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profit human services organizations and communities that yield positive outcomes for all New Yorkers. We

must make New York State a great place to live, a great place to raise a family, and a great place to operate a business.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.