

THE CHILDREN'S AGENDA

THE IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED 2008 MONROE COUNTY BUDGET ON CHILDREN

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The Children's Agenda is independent, non-partisan and promotes evidence-based change for the health and well-being of children in Monroe County. For the fifth consecutive year, The Children's Agenda has conducted an analysis of the proposed Monroe County budget.

KEY FINDINGS

The 2008 proposed Monroe County budget is a good budget for children. It is clear that the administration has worked to protect basic services for children, while maintaining or expanding evidence-based programs that have been shown through independent research to be effective at strengthening families and therefore reducing reliance on the system.

In addition, by increasing the capacity of key areas, Child Protective Services and Financial Assistance, the County is offering critical support to departments responsible for time-consuming work that must be done right to ensure safety for our most vulnerable children (CPS) and successful movement off of public assistance (FA). With these opportunities, the County is poised to make long lasting change – change which is supported by evidence and by state and national policy and is economically prudent as well - in the way we do the business of providing human services.

FINDING:

This year, the County Executive and DHS Commissioner Kelly Reed announced **Project SAVE**. Project SAVE is funded in part with a State grant of \$1.3 M from the Office of Child and Family Services. It will significantly increase staff in Child and Family Services. This increase of staff will provide children in the Child Protective Services (CPS) system with more attention than has been possible under current staffing levels in both investigations and management (services received once neglect or abuse is indicated). These resources are critical and necessary.

CPS Investigations have continually been on the rise, with steady increases in reports of abuse and neglect, while staffing has not increased to keep pace with the workload increase, which potentially undercuts investigation quality, and most alarming, compromises child safety. Cases are expected to rise over 7200 in 2008, an increase of more than 7% since 2006, continued evidence of the need for increased capacity. The additional resources being allocated to CPS through Project SAVE will allow for more timely and thorough investigations as well as tighter oversight by supervisory staff on this important work. **TCA has called for increasing the capacity of CPS for the last two years; TCA strongly supports Project SAVE and its implications for increased capacity in CPS.**

CPS Management Staff provide services for those families where neglect, maltreatment, or abuse has been indicated, and children either remain at home under the supervision of CPS, or live in foster care or with relatives until their family is safe and sturdy enough to assure adequate care for the children or children are freed for adoption. These staff are also being expanded. Project SAVE intent in this CPS area is to increase the level of attention and support that families receive from CPS Management Staff with the explicit goal of moving families through the system as swiftly as is safely possible. **We strongly support this goal.**

RECOMMENDATION: While goals have not been formally articulated, indicators suggest that Project SAVE

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intends to increase the timeliness and thoroughness of Child Protective investigations; ensure that families and children receive the services that they need to improve family functioning and keep children safe; and, for those children who must be placed in foster care, see them reunited with their families or adopted in the shortest possible time. **These are the right goals, but the measures contained in the budget are too modest. With such an investment of public dollars the community should expect and the County Executive should demand ambitious goals and anticipated outcomes for children and families.**

FINDING:

The foster care appropriation is decreased by \$4.6 million for 2008, but at \$56.7 million remains the highest cost center for children in the County Budget. As we highlighted last year in our foster care discussion, The Children's Agenda's primary concern is the number of local older youth, specifically PINS youth, placed in residential care. Most other counties in NYS have reduced these placements and associated public costs of \$80,000 to \$120,000 per placement per year by providing more effective community based services that are less costly. The projected decrease of dollars spent in this area is welcome; the budget narrative says it will result from reduced lengths of stay in placements and a small decrease in residential placements next year. The numbers reflect cautious estimates, but we know that the Family Access and Connection Team (FACT)¹ is beginning to have an effect, resulting in fewer PINS placements even since budget projections were made.

RECOMMENDATION:

We are glad to see the number of residential placements projected to decrease for 2008. Models utilized in the past have had the initial effect of reducing placements – only to see them rise again after a short 'honeymoon' period. **For this reason, we press for vigilance in tracking these numbers to ensure that the reduction of use of placement continues.**

Other counties have been particularly successful in reducing PINS placements and length of stay when staff efforts have been coupled with a directive from the County leadership. **A clear policy statement from the County Executive to all County staff who affect the decision-making around PINS youth could continue the effort initiated with FACT by stimulating swift change in how PINS youth are approached and handled.** We would also like the County Executive to make, and Senior Members of her Administration to support, a strong, clear statement requiring flexible and energetic efforts to resolve family programs in the community, using placement only when other options have been fully considered or tried for older youth and teens, and moving them out of placement as quickly as is appropriate.

FINDING:

For the third consecutive year, dollars are increasing for the Purchases of Preventive Services.

These funds are used to purchase services from local agencies. Some of these dollars are used to purchase services that *prevent* child abuse and neglect – so that the children

¹ FACT strives to serve as the centralized entry point in order to offer immediate response, effective triage, family assessment, short-term care coordination and linkage to supports and services for families experiencing significant behavioral and emotional challenges with their children without court intervention.

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involved in such services should not be victims of child abuse or neglect. Some of these dollars are used to purchase services that *protect* children from further child abuse and neglect once there has been an investigation confirming child maltreatment in the family. With that investigation, children and families are provided services to protect the child and improve family functioning, if possible. Another portion of these purchased services is used for intensive services to *reduce residential placements* by providing a variety of intensive community based treatment programs for troubled adolescents and their families.

For the reasons noted above –the rising number of reports of child abuse and neglect, as well as our continued high use of residential Foster Care- **Monroe County needs to invest in effective preventive services for county children and families.** We know that Project SAVE intends to closely review the services purchased during 2008 to measure the effectiveness of that which is purchased. We commend this commitment to review the way that public dollars are spent on such vital services.

RECOMMENDATION: **In addition to this evaluation of current services purchased, we strongly recommend that contracts be awarded in the future based on the evidence or evaluations available of a program, that programs that receive dollars have clear outcomes, and that the selection process is a transparent one.** In addition, we recommend that any consideration of use of private dollars to draw down NYS Community Optional Preventive Services (COPS) dollars for new programs, or any significant increase (e.g. more than 20% increase) in funding for current COPS-funded programs, be evaluated by a committee consisting of both County and non-county representatives focused on the effectiveness of the proposed new program or enhancement. The Children's Agenda would like to work with the County in this effort.

FINDING:

It's been a significant year for child care subsidies. **First, we commend the County for increasing the reimbursement rate that child care providers receive when caring for subsidized children, an important step to improve quality of care.**

Second, there has been important research around the under-utilization of child care subsidies. Despite the real value of child care aid to families and children, County data showed that use of these subsidies had been declining in recent years. In the last year, local child care advocates came together to examine this issue more closely and a study was commissioned by the Center for Governmental Research (CGR) and released this fall. To be eligible for a child care subsidy, families have to both meet work requirements and have low income. CGR's report on child care subsidies showed that most eligible families are not receiving these subsidies. In particular, just 13% of families with income between 140-150% of FPL (for a family of 2 parents and 2 children, this represents an annual income about \$30k) and just 9% of families between 150-165% of FPL receive subsidies. In addition, there has been a five fold increase in the proportion of applications denied by the County, from 11% of all applications in 2001 to 50% of all applications in 2006. The County has pledged to create a subcommittee to research the cause of this significant increase.

In addition to the low percent of eligible families who currently receive subsidies, we expect more families will need subsidies this year due to the loss of fourteen 21st

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Century after-school programs (high quality programs offered for free that will be closed by end of the school year). Demand for subsidies is also linked to the projected increases in families who will transition off of welfare (TANF) and Safety Net. Most employed TANF leavers have low wages. Research over the last decade has documented that families that have left welfare for work continue to face hardships in making ends meet. Research also has shown that policies that “make work pay” by providing benefits to working families improve employment outcomes for families because they serve as an effective incentive for families to find and keep jobs. CGR’s report showed that over a 6 month time frame only 5% of families who had left FA were receiving Income Eligible subsidies. This is not sufficient when the stated County goal is to move these families successfully off of Financial Assistance; without support for child care costs, families working but earning very low-incomes will have difficulty continuing to work and remaining off of FA.

Increased dollars needs to be allocated to more adequately reach the families who are eligible and in need of subsidies to pay for child care. Given our tight local budget, increased funding needs to be sought at the State level; advocates and County administration have already begun to work together to advocate to the State for an increased allocation to serve more currently-eligible families. It is important to continue to work together to bring more state dollars into Rochester. In view of pressures on state funds, however, we anticipate that that Monroe County may need in future years to allocate local dollars for eligible child care subsidies. Monroe County did this in the past; other counties do so currently.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue to work with advocates for increased state funding to better serve currently-eligible families.

Select members of subcommittee to analyze causes of denial rate and schedule initial meetings to define research questions and methods.

Child Protective Services, Foster Care, Preventive Services, and Day Care are four departments that are critical to children. Child care subsidies strive to supplement low-income families with additional resources to be able to provide for their children’s basic needs; CPS, Foster Care, and Preventive Services strive to ensure that children are kept safe. **All of these areas have seen impressive and important work in the last year; these are important advances for our County’s children.** With the investment of time, dollars, and effort being given, though, it is critically important to be able to measure and document what we have gotten for our money. We believe that measures need to consider outcomes as well as process, need to be realistic and based on existing data sources, and, above all else, be directly related to the improvements we hope to achieve. **We believe the expectations around this exciting investment can be more ambitious and would like to see the County be more aggressive in what they demand for their investment.**