BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE
AND ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING

In the Matter of the
2022-2023 EXECUTIVE BUDGET ON
HUMAN SERVICES

Virtual Hearing
Conducted Online via Zoom

February 2, 2022
9:33 a.m.

PRESIDING:

Senator Liz Krueger
Chair, Senate Finance Committee

Assemblywoman Helene E. Weinstein
Chair, Assembly Ways & Means Committee

PRESENT:

Senator Thomas F. O'Mara
Senate Finance Committee (RM)

Assemblyman Edward P. Ra
Assembly Ways & Means Committee (RM)

Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi
Chair, Assembly Children and Families Committee

Senator Jabari Brisport
Chair, Senate Committee on Children and Families

Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal
Chair, Assembly Committee on Social Services

Senator Roxanne Persaud
Chair, Senate Committee on Social Services

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PRESENT: (Continued)

Assemblyman Ron Kim
Chair, Assembly Committee on Aging

Senator Rachel May
Chair, Senate Committee on Aging

Assemblywoman Didi Barrett
Chair, Assembly Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Senator John E. Brooks
Chair, Senate Committee on Veterans,
Homeland Security and Military Affairs

Assemblyman Khaleel M. Anderson

Senator John C. Liu

Assemblyman Harry B. Bronson

Assemblywoman Marianne Buttenschon

Senator Pete Harckham

Assemblyman Eric M. Dilan

Assemblywoman Jennifer Lunsford

Senator Samra G. Brouk

Assemblyman Demond Meeks

Assemblywoman Yudelka Tapia

Senator Simcha Felder

Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara

Assemblywoman Rebecca A. Seawright

Assemblyman Michael Cusick

Senator Andrew Gounardes

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Assemblyman Billy Jones

Assemblywoman Sarah Clark

Assemblywoman Marcela Mitaynes

Senator Daniel G. Stec

Assemblyman Jake Ashby

Assemblyman Chris Burdick

Senator Diane J. Savino

Assemblywoman Michaelle C. Solages

Senator Sue Serino

Assemblyman Mark Walczyk

Senator James Tedisco

Senator Gustavo Rivera

Assemblyman Matthew Simpson

Assemblyman Mike Lawler

Senator Leroy Comrie

Assemblyman Robert Smullen

Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani

Senator George M. Borrello

Assemblywoman Jessica González-Rojas

Assemblywoman Karines Reyes

Assemblyman Philip A. Palmesano

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PRESENT: (Continued)

Senator Alexis Weik

Assemblywoman Kimberly Jean-Pierre

Senator Mike Martucci

Assemblywoman Nathalia Fernandez

Assemblywoman Phara Souffrant Forrest

Assemblywoman Pamela J. Hunter

Assemblywoman Jenifer Rajkumar

Assemblywoman Marjorie Byrnes

Assemblyman Brian Manktelow

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CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Good morning. I'm Helene Weinstein, chair of the New York State Assembly Ways and Means Committee, cochair of today's hearing.

Today we begin the sixth in a series of hearings conducted by the joint fiscal committees of the Legislature regarding the Governor's proposed budget for fiscal year 2022-'23. And the hearings are conducted pursuant to the New York State Constitution and Legislative Law.

And today our committees will be hearing testimony concerning the Governor's budget proposal for Human Services.

Let me recognize the Assemblymembers in my conference who are here. We have the chair of our Children and Families Committee, Assemblyman Hevesi; the chair of our Aging Committee, Assemblyman Kim; Assemblyman Bronson, Assemblywoman Buttenschon, Assemblyman Jones, Assemblyman Santabarbara. And I know people will be joining us shortly.

Let me introduce Senator Krueger, chair of Senate Finance, to introduce the

members of her conference who are here, the Senators who are here with us.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you so much, Assemblywoman.

All right, we are joined by Senator Diane Savino, Chair Roxanne Persaud, Senator Pete Harckham, Senator Tom O'Mara and Senator Jim Tedisco -- I just took your job away from you, Tom. I thought you were the only one here, and then I saw Jim pop on.

I'm sure we will be joined by more as the day goes on. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: So then let me send it to -- I see Assemblywoman Clark has joined us.

And Assemblyman Ra, can you introduce the members of your conference who are here with us?

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Sure. We have a few of our relevant rankers today. We have Assemblywoman Byrnes, who's our ranker on Children and Families; Assemblyman Ashby, our ranker on Veterans' Affairs; and Assemblyman Simpson, our ranker on Social Services.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: So just in particular for the members who have not been here before, and for those listening who will be witnesses in the future, today the witnesses -- the governmental witnesses will have up to 10 minutes to present their testimony. Nongovernmental witnesses will be in panels and will have three minutes each. (Microphone muted.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Lost you, Helene.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: I hit the bar on the thing. Okay. The commissioners will have -- governmental witnesses will have 10 minutes. The nongovernmental witnesses who have asked to testify before us today will be in panels and will have three minutes each. When the panel finishes, members of the Assembly and Senate will have three minutes each to ask a question of the panel, not each individual panel member.

And I just want to note that for all the witnesses, we have your testimony in advance, submitted via email to all of the members of the relevant committees and the

Ways and Means staff -- Ways and Means members.

And I would just remind people it may be Groundhog Day today, but Senator Krueger and I are not looking for another 14-hour hearing like we had yesterday. So please, when you ask a question, please -- like they say in Jeopardy, make it in the form of a question -- ask a question. It's not a time to be making statements. The legislators will have opportunities in our respective conferences to advocate for our particular positions.

And with that, I'm very happy to welcome the commissioner of the Office of Children and Family Services, Sheila Poole.

Commissioner, the floor is yours.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you so much. And good morning, everyone. And good morning, Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, Children and Family Committee Chairs Brisport and Hevesi, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. My name is Sheila Poole, and I am the commissioner of the

Office of Children and Family Services. I'm delighted to be with you today to present Governor Hochul's fiscal year 2023 Executive Budget as it relates to OCFS.

As a result of the state's currently strong fiscal position –- certainly a refreshing change from recent years -- this year's Executive Budget includes a number of new, fiscally prudent investments that provide much needed support for OCFS's child welfare, childcare and juvenile justice programs.

Beyond what is proposed for OCFS, we're very excited to see investments in other budget proposals regarding gun violence prevention, mental health, workforce, substance use, and social equity. Taken together as a whole, this ambitious agenda holds great promise for improving the lives of New York's children, youth, and families.

Last year New York received a historic amount of federal stimulus funding for childcare that has led us to expand access to children, lower costs to families, and

provide stability for our struggling providers. The enormously successful stabilization grant program has awarded $900 million to almost 15,000 providers with over $767 million already fully paid out. In addition, we have provided $80 million in childcare scholarships for 12 weeks of care to over 41,000 children of New York's essential workers, and $35 million has been allocated to enable an additional 1,000 providers to participate in QualityStarsNY.

I am pleased to report that Phase 1 of the $100 million Childcare Deserts Grant opportunity was launched last Friday. As many of you know, over 60 percent of the state is considered a childcare desert, meaning that there is not enough care for families in that area. This unprecedented investment is an opportunity to address longstanding capacity challenges across every region of the state.

OCFS, in collaboration with our statewide network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies -- our CCR&Rs -- the

Regional Economic Development Councils and other stakeholders, has launched a comprehensive outreach and media campaign to promote this opportunity, as well as to provide information and support to grant recipients.

Funds made available in last year's federal stimulus package also enabled the state to begin implementing a number of critical, long-sought policy changes in childcare. We capped parent co-pays at 10 percent; we established a 12-month eligibility period for families receiving a childcare subsidy; we're providing payments to providers for a minimum of 24 absences per year; and we've guaranteed subsidy eligibility for families up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

The Executive Financial Plan assumes the cost of these initiatives in future years, after the federal stimulus funds have been depleted.

We've made great progress over the course of the past nine months but as you and

I know, there's always more work to be done. The challenges facing our entire nation concerning childcare led to sweeping proposed childcare investments in the Build Back Better legislation. Needless to say, I am sure you share my extreme disappointment in Congress's failure to pass this bill. And, in the absence of true federal partnership, Governor Hochul's Executive Budget takes responsible steps to build on the progress of the past year in several meaningful ways.

In addition to supporting childcare subsidies for approximately 132,000 children by maintaining our state's Child Care Block Grant at $832 million, the proposed budget would expand access to subsidies for thousands more children by increasing the eligibility level to 300 percent of the federal poverty level over the next three years. Additionally, the budget includes $62.5 million this year and $125 million in future years, to ensure that the state can continue serving the same number of families when the new market rates take effect in

October of this year.

And in recognition of the vital work our childcare workers have done, whose work is often undervalued, the budget also invests $75 million for wage supports for this essential workforce.

The Executive Budget also includes legislation that will modernize and significantly boost foster care maintenance rates, and remedy years of inequity by requiring that local departments of social services pay the full foster-care rate that is established by the state. Because adoption subsidy payments are based on foster-care maintenance rates, nearly 25,000 families with adopted children will also benefit from these actions.

These changes represent tremendous progress for child welfare and will assist in the recruitment of foster families.

The 5.4 percent human services COLA that's included in this year's budget will also benefit the families and voluntary agencies who care for New York's children in

foster care, and for adoptive parents.

The budget also proposes to extend the current child welfare financing structure for an additional five years. Child Welfare Financing Reform established a financing system that has helped improve outcomes for families and has greatly contributed to a reduction in the state's foster care caseload, from over 50,000 children in the 1990s to a little over 14,000 children today.

New York's highly regarded home visiting program, our Healthy Families NY, currently serves 6,000 families. Despite its proven success in helping families achieve positive outcomes, only 37 of New York's 58 local departments of social services currently operate home visiting programs due to flat funding. To expand the reach of this evidence-based, primary prevention strategy, this year's budget invests an additional $11 million in the home visiting program, and that will allow us to provide additional support to an additional 1600 families across the state.

This year's budget will also have a meaningful impact on the lives of New York's runaway and homeless youth. To better enable us to meet the needs of this vulnerable population, the budget increases funding for runaway and homeless youth programs by $2 million, representing a nearly 45 percent increase from current funding levels.

The budget also advances legislation to empower homeless youth to consent to their own medical, dental, health, and hospital services. Without a parent or guardian to provide consent, accessing healthcare can be nearly impossible for these youth. This proposal will, for the first time, provide these youth with a clear pathway to meet their most essential healthcare needs.

This is truly a new day, and it's imperative that we seize upon this once-in-a-generation moment to make New York better, more fair, and more inclusive for the people that we serve. And I know that I can count on your support.

Thank you again for the opportunity to

address you today, and I look forward to your comments and questions.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Commissioner.

So we will now go to the chair of our Children and Families Committee, Assemblyman Hevesi, for 10 minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Chair Weinstein and Chair Krueger and all of my colleagues.

Commissioner Poole, it is great to see you. How are you today?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I'm doing well, thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Good. Good. So I'm going to start -- I'm going to burn about 30 seconds of my own time to express my gratitude, my heartfelt gratitude, and it's not for -- to you and Governor Hochul, but it's not for the investments and the things you put into the budget. But this is the first time since I can remember watching a children and families portion of the budget where you haven't put the Legislature on

defense. We're not -- I'm not angrily struggling that you're going to -- or that, not you, that the administration was going to do something that would hurt kids. And not having that is such a relief and puts us in a position where we can actually start really working together.

That is the most important thing, I believe, that has happened. You've set the tone by not trying to do something we have to defend against, that we can work together. So thank you, and to Governor Hochul. It's a game-changer, and that is the basis on which we're going to build. So thank you.

Let me go right to -- you started by saying that the state is currently in a strong financial position. It is my belief that preventative service providers throughout the state have been keeping our families afloat, they've been providing food, diapers, behavioral health, anything you can think of.

So considering that we're in a strong financial position, how does the Executive

Budget -- or how can we not, at this point, invest in children, invest in families, and invest in our counties by returning to the statutorily required 65/35 reimbursement rate to counties for preventative services? That is my number one -- that's the most important thing for me and I hope for many of my colleagues. We've got to reimburse.

So is there a reason why we weren't able to do that in the Executive Budget?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you so much, Assemblyman, and I do appreciate your opening comments.

You know, it has been a number of years since we have been at 65 percent reimbursement. You know, I will always welcome additional money for sure. You know, we have done very, very well as a state with the current 62/38 reimbursement. You know, we have been able to consistently serve over 50,000 children through our preventive service program.

And I couldn't agree more, Assemblyman, about our not-for-profits'

long-overdue cost of living adjustment for them. There are many more workforce, right, discussions to be had to better support them in the workforce crisis that we face.

And the other thing again, Assemblyman, that I would also say is in addition to our more traditional 62/38 prevention, which is typically offered to families who have already come to the attention of our child welfare system -- you know, you and I have spent a lot of time talking about the power, the potential of the Families First Prevention Services Act. And I do just want to remind everyone that we still have our $20 million federal Family First transition fund that we have in collaboration with our statewide implementation team --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Commissioner, I'm with you and I'm really appreciative, I'm just cognizant of the time. Is that okay? So I appreciate it --

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, of course.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Maybe if I can jump in. And we're focused on FFPSA too.

Let me take you to, if I can, would the Executive be open to removing KinGAP from the Foster Care Block Grant? We believe that that is, you know, if we're going down the list, the second most important. The Foster Care Block Grant, now counties are going to be, based off of a court decision, required to increase their MSARs, and the state has not put up the state share in this budget. So the counties are going to have to pay more to pick up that MSAR rate that the courts have required. That the state hasn't put up the money, that's another unfunded mandate.

So can we take -- it's a separate issue -- KinGAP out of the Foster Care Block Grant? Which does two things. First, you free up more money in the Foster Care Block Grant for all of your counties. Now you have money for the MSARs. On the other side, you expand KinGAP, so you can get kids not going into congregate or home foster care, you get them going into kinship families.

Is the state open to doing that?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: So I actually have some very good news for you, Assemblyman, on that very point.

So as you heard me say in my testimony, we are long overdue to raise our MSARs that will cost the state, in total, about $80 million to raise the long overdue threshold for that.

I want to just talk a minute about the ability of the state to offset the $80 million cost by about $72 million, and I will tell you why. So the Foster Care Block Grant, as you know, Assemblyman, has always been intended to cover 50 percent, right, state/local share, net of federal. And as you heard me say, the foster care population in New York has plummeted since the '90s. But in many recent years the state has not --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Commissioner, can I -- can I jump in just for a second? It's relevant.

I would argue that the reason why it's dropped goes back to our first point, the

65/35. The reason why you're so low is the 65/35, which is why we can't leave it at 62.

It was too good for me to not jump in. But go ahead.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I appreciate that, Assemblyman.

But I want to just get back to this conversation about the MSARs. So, you know, the Foster Care Block Grant has not been reduced even though the number of kids in foster care has been dramatically reduced. And so the state share for a number of the past recent years has been significantly above 50 percent. And so there is an excess, if you will, of available Foster Care Block Grant money to the total of $72 million, which will leave an approximate $7.8 million statewide local share to be spread among all the local social services districts.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I gotcha. I get it.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: That's the math.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: And I -- so I

appreciate it. I still want to make sure that the counties don't have to spread out that little bit of money. The counties have been an enemy of the past administration, and helping kids, having enemies in any corner, is just not smart. So we hear you.

The last question I think I have time for. I believe for our childcare -- first of all this is all about workforce for me, okay? If I can. So I believe the Legislature is going to be coming forth with a proposal to -- and it's going to sound like a grand proposal, but it's not. It's what New York State requires to start following the science. The science is telling us that we are having generations of kids that are traumatized, we're not preventing it, and then we have generations of kids who we're not giving help to after.

So we need to set up a trauma prevention and mitigation system. That's what we're doing. So it sounds like a lot of money. No. This is what we're doing to get back to a normal baseline. And we need to do

that -- this is worth the time to opine. You need to do that to help the children because if you do not get them the help that they need, you're losing kids, they're being doomed or defined by their trauma every day. And if people know what that means, look at the newspapers. Look at all the crime and the terrible things that happen in the newspapers. Those are kids who were traumatized who we never got help to. So that's what we're going to be pushing for.

But for me, the general theme is workforce, workforce, workforce. That's prevention workforce, that's foster care workforce, that's childcare workforce. And I'll tell you why. The science tells us that one of the ways to help the kids, the protective factors, is to get them access to a caring adult. That adult can help them build resilience by giving them emotional support and help them problem-solve. That's how you make resilient kids.

So we're going to be looking to do that, but you can't do that unless you care

for the workforces. So let me ask the question, the last question.

For the childcare workforce -- and I'll get back to the other workforces because we're coming to help all of them. For the childcare workforce, would you be open to raising at least -- I'm sorry, would you raise to the 90th percentile the market rate for childcare providers? I think if we do that -- and I know we're at 69, and your budget holds us to 69. If you get to 90, then you're doing and getting us much, much closer to our vision and Senator Brisport's vision of universal childcare, and Senator Ramos and Assemblywoman Clark and all of our friends.

Are you open to doing that to the 90th percentile?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You know, the way I would answer that is, Assemblyman, you know, I think the estimated cost to get to 90 percent, just to socialize the cost, is about $370 million additional. So again, significant investment. Although, you know,

you're never going to hear me, as the commissioner of OCFS, you know, say that we don't need to continue to support workforce in every corner of our human services sector.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So, Commissioner, I'm going to burn the rest of your time. You did great. Thank you. But let me just end with this.

That is a fraction of the money to support this workforce that has been -- they've been heroic during this pandemic. And we've visited childcare providers now, and I know my colleagues are going to talk about this, doing the most difficult jobs with kids crawling all over them. They have not been respected historically. The last administration attacked them every year, consistently, cutting funds, cutting funds, cutting funds.

It's enough. This is the get-right year. If it's a $370 million cost, that's an investment that's going to save billions. Because the kids that we help now are not going to wind up costing us money -- I'm

watching the clock -- for homelessness, alcohol and substance abuse. They're not going to drop out of school. They're not going to be recidivists. You get the idea.

This is our year. Commissioner, this is a great budget and a great starting point. Thank you for your time.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: My pleasure.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: And hopefully all members will follow our chair's example of keeping an eye on the clock.

I just want to -- many members have joined us in the Assembly since we began. Let me just go through them and mention their names before we move to the Senate: Assemblywoman Barrett, chair of Veterans' Affairs; Assemblywoman Rosenthal, chair of Social Services; Assemblymembers Anderson, Fernandez, Lunsford, Mitaynes, Seawright, Tapia, Mamdani, Smullen, Burdick, Lawler, Solages, Palmesano.

And now to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much, Assemblywoman.

And before we get to Chair Brisport, I'd just like to read off the many Senators who have also joined us since we started: Senator Simcha Felder, Senator Alexis Weik, Senator Dan Stec, Senator Gustavo Rivera, Senator John Brooks, Senator John Liu, Senator Samra Brouk, Senator -- I think that's all the Senators, I mentioned them earlier.

And now I'd like to hand it over for 10 minutes to our chair of Children and Families, Jabari Brisport. Good morning.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Good morning, Madam Chair. Thank you.

And good morning, Commissioner. Good to see you.

So let's get started. I would like to just start by talking about the All Funds appropriation. So it is about 2.4 billion lower this year than it was last year, about 36 percent. Do you feel like the needs of New York's children and families are lower than they were last year?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Absolutely

not, Senator. And just to clarify that, so we have reapproped. That represents the childcare pandemic dollars that were in last year's budget. So they're in a reapprop, we don't need a new appropriation. And that accounts for what looks like a $2.4 billion reduction in the budget.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you. Thank you so much, Commissioner.

And, you know, I'm aware it was federal money, but my question wasn't whether it was, you know, reapproped or not or whether or not the federal government failed us this year. My question was, you know, have the needs of New York's children and families decreased? Because the needs of what people need for childcare and preventative services are independent of what the federal government gives us. And I heard you say no, the needs have not decreased.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Absolutely not. I would agree with that.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Do you see this discontinuance as a problem?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Again, Senator, there's not a discontinuance. That money that appears as a reduction in the budget is a reduction because it reflects money that is already reappropriated. And it's particular to the childcare pandemic funds that we received last year.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Okay. Well, since I'm hearing you say it's not a problem, let's talk about the status of the childcare sector.

Do you have a sense of how many providers in New York State have closed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah, we have tracked that a bit. You know, somewhere in the ballpark -- and again, I want to qualify it by saying, you know, we do require folks who are going out of business or ending their business to notify us. So these are based upon the notifications that we've received. It's over 2,000 providers, again, very deeply impacted by the pandemic.

I will also say that in addition to

that, we have processed an additional 1,600 applications for new childcare providers as well. But at the end of the day, Senator, there certainly has been a loss of childcare capacity across the state.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Would you say this is tied at all to the fact that the federal money is starting to dry up?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I think I would say that the pressures and the dramatic, significant impact of the pandemic is really what has led as a primary reason. I think the workforce challenges that our childcare industry -- which Assemblyman Hevesi has indicated -- have also deeply impacted our childcare sector as well.

I think, you know, the expansion of pre-K and universal pre-K, we've heard this consistently from providers, you know, has made it challenging particularly for those providers, you know, left operating primarily infant and childcare programs.

So there are a variety of reasons. But, you know, that is why, Senator, we have

just announced, you know, part one of a $100 million investment to sort of restore where we have all of those childcare provider deserts throughout the state. So we're very hopeful that between that desert, an infusion of $100 million across the state, and using very precise census tracking and GIS mapping, will help us do that.

And just, again, also back to the sort of drumbeat of workforce, want to reference in the proposed budget there's $75 million for a workforce stabilization grant that we will be getting out the door very soon.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you. And I just want to circle back to some numbers that I heard you say earlier. You said 2,000 -- you've processed around 2,000 that closed and then processed around 1,600 applying.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah.

SENATOR BRISPORT: So that's a net loss, right?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: That is a net loss, yes.

SENATOR BRISPORT: And you're

confident that the $100 million will get us back to where we were pre-pandemic?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I hope so. I hope more than that. I hope more than that, Senator.

SENATOR BRISPORT: That's my question as well. I mean, do you feel like we had enough pre-pandemic? Or we had maybe childcare deserts across the state?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You know, it's really tough -- I mean, I wish I had my crystal ball to give you a really complete answer. You know, there's so many things that are changing in our world. Teleworking, right? I don't know that we're sure yet, you know, what will be the new demand capacity.

One of the things that we're really hearing and going to address in the desert is families who would want to access subsidy and childcare programs were there more nontraditional hours offered. So many of our essential workers working weekends, overnight shifts, holidays. We clearly do not have enough of that capacity.

So again, I think as we roll out this -- you know, this hopefully very impactful childcare desert opportunity, we will begin to really fill in the picture and know more.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Okay. Well, I would just -- I would say two things before I move on. One, people who telework still need childcare. They're not people like, you know, working from home and also making sure their kids are okay. And also, you know, I am not confident that there's enough money in the budget right now to really just turn the ship around on the closure of these centers. A lot of centers that I spoke to throughout the fall basically said they don't know what they're going to do when their stabilization grant -- I mean, do you feel like -- I mean, they were called stabilization grants. Do you feel like the sector is stabilized right now?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: No. It's clearly -- you know, right, it's not.

And so we're going to, you know, to do

everything we can with our federal pandemic dollars, as we have. As you heard me say and you know, that we were very aggressive in getting our billion-dollar stabilization grant out, and very successful last year. And we're going to have to do everything we can to continue to watch and hope that enrollment also increases. But for sure as we sit here today, the industry is still very unstable.

SENATOR BRISPORT: I would agree. And I would just, you know, say that even if the federal money doesn't come, the state has the ability to generate new revenue. That is my -- you know, I don't think the Governor agrees that she wants to do that this year. I'm going to continue to push, you know, if we need to do it, to keep an industry that's in free fall from continuing to go there.

But I want to shift onto childcare subsidies. What I read was that, you know, the estimate is that moving it up from 200 percent of federal poverty level to 225 percent should make about 100,000 new

children become eligible. How was that number determined?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: My goodness. Well, this is where I wish I had my fiscal people with me.

So, you know, the annual income for the percentage of poverty level at 225 is $59,625. And at the estimates based upon how we serve families now, the 100,000 target was arrived at. So it's derived based upon current subsidy, adding the additional percentage to it.

And then of course as we get up to the 300 percent, the estimate is that that will go to about 400,000 additional families served -- children, rather.

SENATOR BRISPORT: That is helpful. I would like to get a clear answer, just because -- you know, there may be 100,000 additional children in that whose families are in that income bracket, but that does not mean that 100,000 children will be taken up. There are also work requirements on top of it as well. Counties may opt out of the

program. Right?

So I would just love, you know --

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You bet.

SENATOR BRISPORT: -- if you could get me -- later, if you could fiscally reach out, like how exactly did they make the estimate 100,000 would become eligible and then, you know, the additional 400,000 later.

So if -- let's say 100,000 become eligible and all become newly covered, do you have estimates of how much that would cost?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: What I do know, Senator, is that, you know, we feel very, very confident that there is more than enough money in the system because we have quite a bit of rollover of our base CCDF childcare subsidy dollars in the state.

So today as we sit here, statewide we have $300 million of unused childcare subsidy dollars. So we know that that will go a long way for a considerable amount of time to be able to afford to pay for this.

You may also recall last year we issued $20 million of supplemental subsidy

dollars. That's still available to the local districts as well. So there is a high degree of confidence that we will be able to afford that.

And finally, I would say that the Division of Budget has indicated that in the state's outyear plan there will be ongoing support to make sure that as we raise these subsidy and access levels, that these families do not hit a cliff in the future.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Gotcha.

I'm sorry, can I get a -- I heard you say the 300 million rollover, you said, could probably last for some amount of time. Do you have a more specific estimate of how long you think --

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: We'll have to watch that very carefully as our proposal, right, is to raise the eligibility and subsidy levels. So we will have to watch that. It just depends on how many families and children, right, we get uptaked into the system.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Okay, gotcha. And

just rounding out, just because I heard you mention income cliffs. And I do want to stress in the Governor's proposal there are still income -- I mean, I believe in no income cliffs. But whether the income cliff is at, you know, 200 or 225 or 300, there are income cliffs.

But I have about 10 seconds left, so I just want to thank you for answering my questions. I'll have more later, but I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to all of us today, Commissioner.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You're welcome, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Back to the Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblywoman Byrnes, the ranker on Children and Families, for five minutes. (Pause.)

I saw her a moment ago. I guess she is not -- her hand is raised. She is not there. So why don't we -- we're going to skip the Assemblywoman, and we will go to Assemblywoman Barrett for three minutes.

Change the time clock to three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: Thank you, Chair.

And thank you, Commissioner. Thank you for being here. Nice to see you. Happy New Year.

I just want to focus -- because I know you'll have a lot of other questions on the substance of what your comments were, but I would like to talk about a district like mine, a rural district that has a shortage of programs for childcare, a shortage of mental health facilities, no mental health beds for children and families. We're losing pediatric and maternity services in our local hospitals. We don't have transportation.

What does the budget have for communities like mine, Commissioner?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I can certainly say that, again, our childcare desert investment, the $100 million for sure will be of assistance to your community. You will see -- I don't know if you had a chance

to see the press release last week, but there's very detailed maps so you could go to the communities in your district and be able to see, and they're shaded in colors.

And we want to incentivize, for providers -- potential providers, right? Part of this strategy is to get new providers to come to the table with a lot of support, with start-up dollars, with funding, you know, to recruit and retain staff in those communities. So that, first and foremost, I think --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: You mean that they should come to you with start-up dollars or somebody with an idea should come -- or the county could come to you, or one of our towns or something like that?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: So it will be providers, right? So we're working very closely with the CCR&Rs. You have them in your community. And they're going to be part of our technical assistance support so that as there are potential -- they're going to be doing a lot of public relations campaigns.

We have got to get the word out that we are looking for people who are interested in getting into the business of being a childcare provider. Whether it's opening up a new center, whether it's becoming a family daycare or a family group daycare provider. So there's a huge public awareness campaign, a lot of technical support about helping people understand what it takes to become licensed. You know, what are the staffing ratios.

So that's the whole idea of this $100 million investment that, you know, Part 1 was just released last Friday.

With respect to, you know, rural mental health and services, you know, I do know that, you know, Commissioner Sullivan in the Office of Mental Health has some very exciting new models, you know, to again expand healthcare services, particularly in underserved areas -- I'm sure she will speak to that -- in the budget.

And then, you know, finally, one of the things that we've been trying to be

really creative with here at OCFS on our child welfare side is to understand that transportation for other reasons -- you know, that you said -- is an issue for families. They can't drive 45 minutes, you know, to get to help.

So we at OCFS a couple of years ago we retrofitted six Winnebagoes and we deployed them with teams of child protective workers, with multidisciplinary staff, and in some rural communities -- Sullivan County, Delaware County. We are taking that model now and using some existing federal child welfare money we have to bring these mobile vans so that we can bring service delivery to families where we know there are service gaps.

So whether it's bringing them diapers, you know, gift cards for food, we're really trying to get much more upstream in our prevention. And we're working with the Office of Mental Health and other sister state agencies to sort of try and be part of that mobile effort with us.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner. We go now to the Senate.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

And our next Senator is Diane Savino.

SENATOR SAVINO: Thank you, Senator Krueger.

Good morning, Commissioner. Always good to see you. I only have three minutes, so I'm going to focus on a very important issue. As we know, in 2018 the state through the budget process enacted Raise the Age. It's an issue that I worked on for several years. I was not happy with the final product, as it was hijacked by the Governor and stuck in the budget.

One of the areas of contention was the financing model that was put in place. And the financing model for Raise the Age says that every April 1st local governments must submit a plan to the OCFS to talk about how they're going to run their program in order

to be eligible for reimbursement. And one of the requirements is that they must remain under, operate within the 2 percent property tax cap.

So I scoured the Governor's budget and I had our finance team check it just to make sure, because I'm not as smart as they are, and in fact Governor Hochul continues that. And so what that means is the City of New York, which has the largest number of kids who would be affected by Raise the Age, does not qualify again.

So can you share with us the wisdom behind stiffing the City of New York on the Raise the Age program, and why does that make any sense?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: So you are absolutely correct, Senator, that the Raise the Age statute as it was enacted and passed by the Legislature, stands as it was originally enacted.

I will say I believe that there was a provision in the Raise the Age statute that any municipality could also apply to the

Director of the State Budget to make a case for hardship caused as a result of having to implement Raise the Age. I think that is certainly something, absent a statutory change, that the city could potentially consider as well.

I will say, Senator, that since we are now fully implemented on Raise the Age, that the majority, right, because they're adolescent offenders, when they are sentenced they come to OCFS secure facilities. So when those young people come to OCFS, those are paid for 100 percent by the state. There's no charge-back for the Raise the Age kids that come to state secure facilities.

SENATOR SAVINO: But that doesn't help the City of New York. So I would suggest that as we go further into the budget negotiations, that might be an area that we might want to amend. Because as we're seeing, particularly with the City of New York -- they will speak for themselves next week, I'm sure, during the Local Government Hearing -- they are having an

extraordinarily difficult time recruiting and retaining people to work in the Horizon and Crossroads facilities. The staff are as likely to clock in on Monday and clock out on Friday and never come back.

The program is difficult to run to begin with, and we have a lot of problems with it. And so you'll be hearing more from some of us about Raise the Age. But the financing model is certainly insufficient. I know our colleagues on Long Island are also seeing problems. Their young people are being forced to be shipped upstate because they can't finance facilities in Nassau and Suffolk counties.

So my time is up, but I just wanted to bring that to your attention. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We've been joined by Assemblywoman Forrest.

And I see that Assemblywoman Byrnes is back from her committee meeting, so we will go to her for five minutes, the ranker on Children and Families.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BYRNES: Thank you. Thank you very much. And I appreciate the opportunity to ask questions of the commissioner.

Commissioner, I also want to speak about the Raise the Age issue and about the fact that very, very violent basically young adults are being put in the certified detention centers by OCFS.

In Monroe County we have the Monroe County Secure Detention Center. And just in 2021 alone, the staff were repeatedly being assaulted and sent to the hospital. Twice Monroe County sheriff deputies received urgent calls to go there. At one point they stayed at the youth facility for a week, Monroe County jail deputies, in order to bring order to that location.

My question to you is how prudent is it -- because I'm sure this facility is not unique to the entire state. What is being done as these young violent adults -- and at one point this facility had 11 accused murderers. What is being done to protect the

staff and to protect sheriff deputies when they go to even respond to 911 calls there?

You know, one female sheriff deputy was literally picked up by a guy much bigger than her, who was a youth, body slammed, and to this day has not been back to work.

What's being done to protect the staff and to protect anybody else in that facility?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, thank you very much for asking very important questions.

So I want to say that like so many sectors of our human services industry, you know, our secure detention, were also deeply -- and they are locally administered detention facilities -- you know, were really deeply impacted by COVID. So Monroe County is a great example of a local detention facility that had plans to make significant capital investments in its facility to create better hardening, to create better programming for the new Raise the Age population.

They were also hit, right, as is

everyone -- my own facilities here at the state level were no different -- hit by the workforce crisis. COVID, right, impacts staff on and off, et cetera. All these, you know, issues combined with increasing gun violence, right -- we could spend a whole session on guns alone -- really led to a perfect storm in Monroe County.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BYRNES: Commissioner, not to interrupt you, but time is somewhat of the essence.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BYRNES: I met with the union that represents the people that work at the detention center, and they were not quitting at that point this summer because of COVID. People were quitting because they were getting hurt. They were getting beat up. They were not allowed to carry any form of protection -- no mace, nothing, not even very basic type of apparatuses and tools to protect themselves in that facility.

And even when the sheriff deputies tried to go there to restore order, your

office tried very hard to ban them from even bringing in mace, billy clubs, the things that they normally would even use in any other facility should they be attacked, to defend themselves. And I'm not even talking about guns. They don't carry guns, the jail deputies. They have other tools to protect themselves.

And you tried very hard to deny them the ability to even protect themselves as law enforcement officers when they were within that facility.

Don't you think that when we start putting 20- and 21-year-old gang members who are accused of murder in with legitimate children that are 16, 17, 18 years old, accused of far lesser crimes, that this is a recipe for disaster?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I have to respectfully disagree with you on that point. I think that the research and the brain science behind Raise the Age, and the failure of young people having been in such settings to rehabilitate themselves, points us in an

entirely different direction in terms of creating the right kind of programming for young people.

And I can appreciate why folks would feel like pepper spraying and battering rams and those kinds of things, you know, might restore order. I will tell you from my many years of experience running the state's juvenile system, where we have these same kids in our programs, it's about adequate staffing, it's about adequate programming that is of interest to young people, it's about clinical services to address their historic trauma and the violence they have been exposed to, it's about hope, jobs, certification, training. Those are the kinds of things that were our investments.

And I will say to you that we worked hand in glove with the county executive and his team in Monroe County --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner. We're going to turn it back over to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very

much.

Next up is Senator Pete Harckham.

SENATOR HARCKHAM: Good morning. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And good morning, Commissioner. Great to see you, and thank you for your testimony.

I want to follow up on Chairman Brisport's line of questioning regarding childcare thresholds and also reimbursement. So three quick questions.

In Westchester County a family with two parents, both making minimum wage, did not qualify for either Title XX or low-income. So question one, will they be eligible under the new income threshold?

Question two relates to reimbursement rates. What the providers have told me is when the state went from 75 percent to 69 percent, it wasn't nearly adequate and they were losing a lot of money on each student. Is there any improvement in the budget in the reimbursement formula?

And finally, only being reimbursed on a daily basis. So if a child calls in sick,

they still have the same overhead of staff, utilities, et cetera.

So if you could address those three questions, please. Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You're quite welcome.

So the first one is a little hard because every family's situation is a little bit different. But again -- so for example, if the family's income -- and this is sort of based upon a family of four. If their annual income is under $60,000, then they should be eligible for a subsidy.

So again, I think -- and again, it depends on if they're working or seeking a job. There's other variables that we would have to take into account before I could answer definitively yes to your first question.

To your second question, the 69th percentile is still what is included in our proposed budget when the new market rates take effect in October. So that is the current standing proposal at 69 percent.

And then finally, maybe some good news on the answer to number three, which is around payment for absences. So one of the provisions that we passed last year will allow up to 24 absences to be paid to families per year. So that should help mitigate -- actually, it's a minimum of 24 absences -- to help mitigate that issue.

SENATOR HARCKHAM: All right. Good news on number three, possible good news on number one.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: We'll keep at it.

SENATOR HARCKHAM: On number two, I would just share with you that the 69 percent is really inadequate. What I'm hearing from all the providers in my district, they're just losing too much money. And, you know, some are fortunate enough to have donors to help defray the costs, but a lot of them don't. So I hope we reconsider that number.

Thank you very much.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You're quite welcome.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Thank you. Assembly?

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblyman Kim, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to continue the line of questions from Senator Brisport and Assemblymember Hevesi.

The first question is, do we have a rough breakdown of the pandemic federal dollars versus the sustainable federal dollars versus the state revenues that's funding the programs?

The second question is of the money tied to state money, revenues, how flexible, fungible and transferable are these dollars in terms of meeting the need of different programs?

And third, in terms of the contracting to third parties, what percentage of the money that goes to programming goes to secondary or third-party nonprofit providers versus local government agencies that's actually administering the services

themselves?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Okay, so I'll take it from the top there. So the Executive Budget -- so this is federal subsidy that comes to the state, we refer to as CCDF dollars. This year is proposed at $894.6 million. So that's, if you will, our base funding for childcare subsidy.

And in New York those dollars flow through all of our local departments of social services, who administer the childcare subsidy program. So there's that base funding. And it's increased $62.5 million to pay for the market rate that will go into effect in October.

Then you asked specifically about the federal pandemic pots of money that we received. So for CARES, we received -- and again, this is just exclusive to childcare -- $163 million of childcare funding. The vast majority of that has already been obligated and liquidated. We received the CRRSAA funding, in the amount of $468 million. And then finally, ARPA, $704 million -- again,

all for childcare.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Commissioner. Sorry to cut you off; I only have 30 seconds left.

But I guess through the line is that most of this money is tied to federal dollars and it's regulated, it's inflexible. And one area that we should be looking at is the flexible money that we give to corporate subsidies, in the amount of 7 to 8 billion dollars a year. That's something that a number of economists have seen that, you know, we should be transferring towards childcare and child development. And I hope that the administration and the Second Floor would take that seriously into consideration.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. We've joined by Assemblywoman Rajkumar.

We move to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

Before I introduce Senator Persaud, I believe we have been joined by Senator Leroy

Comrie. Not sure I caught Senator Rachel May earlier. I think that's everybody so far.

And I will turn to over to Senator Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Commissioner, it's great to see you. You know, we've had great conversations. I appreciate everything that you're doing. I just have a few quick questions pertaining to homeless youth healthcare consent.

I was speaking with some students a couple of days ago, and could you give us some information on how they'll be identified and the determination of who can give consent for non-emergencies? And do providers -- will providers be held liable for consent under the proposal that's in place?

And then also, coming -- the city is looking to have the 18.5 percent reimbursement rate restoration for the Committee on Special Education.

And also, would we be able to have additional conversations about Raise the Age

and the funding that goes with that? There are things that still -- you know, as Senator Savino has spoken about, there's lots of conversations that we should have. There's funding needs that have not been addressed. What is OCFS willing to do to move that conversation?

And the last thing I want to ask, the gun violence funding. We have a spike in gun violence. You know, every day we turn on the television or whatever and we're hearing about gun violence. However, the funding that's been allocated is not moving as quickly as possible to communities. What will you do to ensure that this funding is getting to communities as fast as possible so that we can tackle the upswing of gun violence in our communities?

Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: That's a lot right there, Senator.

So first off, with respect to our proposed Article VII allowing runaway/homeless youth to consent, this

became so illuminated during COVID when we had young people in runaway/homeless youth shelters, you know, who wanted to consent to their own -- or get, right, the COVID vaccine, and because they're disconnected from their families, were not able to.

And this has been talked about for many years, that these young people, who are in effect functioning as very independent adults, you know, do not have access to take care of themselves. So that's really our goal here.

And we will need to find a way -- I think that's a great question about how do these youth identify, right? When they go to a provider and can't consent, how do we figure out a way with, again, protecting their confidentiality as much as we can. We need to find a way so that that doesn't create a barrier.

The model is also predicated upon that they are under the care of a professional medical, right, personnel, who is, you know, presumably recommending care and treatment.

So that's the other part, is that we trust that these young people are getting good medical care and that their medical providers will want to support the youth in obtaining it.

But happy to work through some of the operational implementation issues with you so that we achieve the goal.

With respect to the Committee on Special Education issue that you mentioned, Senator, I do want to say for New York City that that state reimbursement went away permanently back in the 2017-2018 budget and that the current Article VII proposal proposes to make that statewide. And, you know, quite simply this sort of state reimbursement for what are wholly Committee on Special Education decisions seems to be an artifact of a decision many, many years ago about some part of rate setting so it should be in OCFS's budget. But these are -- these are all decisions for residential placement that are made by local committees on special education --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner. We're going to move on to the Assembly.

Assemblywoman Rosenthal. And before she -- well, I think, yes, she can just go. We don't have any new members yet.

Three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay. All right. Can you hear me, Commissioner?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I sure can. Hi.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Great. Great. Thank you. Commissioner, it was lovely speaking with you earlier in the week, or maybe it was last week -- the days all melt together.

So, you know, I've long been concerned with runaway and homeless youth. And it was back in 2015-'16, I believe, that -- you know, I fought hard, the Assembly gave $2 million for that category, and so we had about 4.5 million. Which hasn't been increased till now in the Governor's budget, $2 million, another -- so it's 6.5, which is

fabulous.

But I've talked to advocates who say really the need is more like 15 million. So my first question is, when do you think we can get there? Because as we know, it's a huge problem. And there's so many people that we need to pay attention to. And I appreciate the increase a lot, but we need more.

The next question also is do you know about the breakdown of population of runaway and homeless youth throughout the state, and how many counties actually have programs to address their needs throughout the state?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Sure. So I am glad that you are encouraged by the $2 million. We're heading in the right direction of more investment, as opposed to having less. And I do appreciate that. You know, it has been a population of young people for whom we have not made enough investments in the past.

And just to put a bit of a fine point on the $2 million, you know, we are looking

to help restore some of the loss of runaway/homeless youth shelter beds, particularly upstate. New York City, to their credit, has actually added, at their own local cost, hundreds of runaway/homeless youth beds in the past couple of years. But it's become a real pain point upstate, so we're looking to sort of fill in some of the beds that have been lost there.

And I don't want to misspeak about the number of programs that are operating. I will absolutely follow up and get you very specific information about where the beds and the services are remaining.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay, thank you. Because I know, as you said, the city is increasing, but I don't know that that's true. And I believe like fewer than half the counties in the state have programs. And we know the runaway and homeless youth are everywhere in the state.

So thank you, and I look forward to working with you on that and other issues.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I do as

well. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Back to the Senate.

We have Senator Stec, the ranker on Children and Families, for five. Are you there, Senator Stec?

THE MODERATOR: Trying to get him to start video and audio.

SENATOR STEC: I'm here. I'm here.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay.

SENATOR STEC: I'm so sorry. Good morning, everyone.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Good morning.

SENATOR STEC: Well, the good news is I'll spare you all using my whole five minutes.

But, Commissioner, I appreciate your testimony today and I want to echo a lot of the sentiments of many of my colleagues in both houses, both sides of the aisle. I want to thank you for your positive efforts for working for our kids and families, and certainly working with the Legislature to

make the state a little better in that regard.

The state received $2.4 billion in pandemic stimulus funds in fiscal year '22 from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan Act of '21. The fiscal year '23 budget does not contain an appropriation for COVID relief funds. Can you tell us how much COVID relief funding remains, and how you will target use of the remaining funds, please?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah. So just to be clear, I think you're the second person to ask that question. I want to be --

SENATOR STEC: I missed it.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah, no, that's good. It's good news that we've not lost the 2.5 billion, that it's actually already -- it's just simply been rolled over and reappropriated. So it doesn't look like a new appropriation. That's I think the first answer to your question.

And the second is that 2021 was an

extraordinarily busy year for us at OCFS. We are very, very anxious, as I know are all of you, to get -- make sure that we are spending every dollar of our federal childcare pandemic funding. So there are lots of things that were released in 2021 that are now out there for spending in local social service districts.

So it's the 10 percent cap on copays, and that means that counties -- that's a cap. They can -- you know, they can, many of them, afford less than a 10 percent copay for families. We launched an essential workers scholarship, where we originally allocated 25 million. It was so popular, we had left over CARES dollars, we spent $80 million supporting essential workers. We expanded QUALITYstars by 35 million.

And then we have 12 months eligibility, we're paying for a minimum of 24 absences. And then we just announced last Friday 70 million of a 100 million desert. And then we've got a couple of things that we'll be rolling out soon.

So we are on an all-out effort here to get that money out the door to districts and to make sure that districts -- this is where we need our county executives, who are I know busy with all kinds of pandemic funds. But we have a lot of money in our childcare space, we have rollover funds that are on the table, and we need an all-out effort to make sure that it's getting spent before these funds expire in a couple of years.

SENATOR STEC: But I wasn't sure I heard you. They rolled over, but how much rolled -- like how much of that 2.4 remains? All 2.4 or --

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Oh, there's -- I'd have to calculate that. I know that we spent -- well over a billion has been spent, between the stabilization grants, we've obligated 900 million. And then, you know, we've paid out the QUALITYstars and other initiatives.

So there remains a lot, to be clear. We've pushed out a lot, but there remains a lot still to be liquidated. It's been made

available to spend.

SENATOR STEC: How long do you think what remains will last? And is there a clock on how long you have to spend it?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, there is. And we have multiple clocks going here, right? So there's the base subsidy, our federal dollars that we have rollover. We've got to make sure that they do not lapse and expire, so we watch those.

And then as I said, the CARES money, we're good there, almost all of that has been liquidated. It's the CRRSAA and ARPA that are left to be spent. The ARPA is the largest pot that we have left to be spent, and that has to be liquidated by September 30th of 2023. So we've got some time. But the clock ticks fast, so we've got to get people spending.

SENATOR STEC: {Inaudible.}

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, it does.

SENATOR STEC: It sure does. All right, thank you very much.

Chairwoman, I'll yield my last 15 seconds back.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblywoman Clark, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Hello, Commissioner, and thank you so much for joining us today.

I wanted to dive into childcare a bit. And I have another question I hope I can get in as well. But the first one is -- I call childcare in its current form in our state a math equation that does not work. So as much as we continue to say that we're going to expand eligibility for subsidies for more families to be included, what we continue to hear from both families and providers is that the rate is just not enough.

So if we are not paying providers true cost of care, they're going to not take subsidy families. So we are creating a problem by not actually addressing the root

cause, which is that we are not covering the true costs of childcare even in its current state, let alone if we started to increase wages for the childcare workforce, which is the main driver of why people are leaving.

So I know it's set at 69 percent, but I just don't see how we get past -- how the state can ever get past fixing childcare if we don't start to put our own dollars that are sustainable and renewable every year to address the real issue, which is that we're not covering the true cost of care.

So my question is, how do we get there? Why is there such a hesitancy to increase the actual rate we pay providers so that they can keep their doors open?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I think it's a very fair question, Assemblywoman. And we do have cost estimates for what it would take to get to the 75th, you know, as well as the 90th. I don't know if you were on, I think Assemblyman Hevesi asked me the same question.

You know, how I would answer that for

now is I think we have to try and watch how we are spending some of the dollars now. If there is some room, right, in our base federal subsidy dollars -- because the pandemic dollars, we're not going to have them forever. And that's our challenge as a state, is not going to 90 percentile now where that would cost us almost 400, you know, million more a year and then hit a cliff down the road. As much as we're all anxious to get there now.

And again, the more all of us can advocate for Build Back Better -- right? We need more federal dollars to help us get to some more sustainable market rates for our providers. But I think there might be some opportunity as we watch spending.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Excellent. Well, it sounds like, I think, the state needs to come up with a commitment as well to really fix it.

My second quick question is after-school programming. With such emphasis on childcare, the proposed Governor's budget

also slashes some funding for after-school. So -- and also it's not getting to the true cost of after-school. So what are we doing to address that? And why are we cutting money for after-school?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: So the Executive Budget for after-school is whole. We have the $28 million in TANF for the Advantage After School Program. And we have the 55 million in the Executive Budget for the Empire, the legislative initiatives, which is, as you all know --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Commissioner, thank you. Why don't you give us the -- send an email with the answer to this question.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Certainly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: And I'm sure there will be some others that we can circulate to all the members, because we do want to keep an eye on the clock.

So we're going to turn it back to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much. And we have Senator Sue Serino.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And Commissioner, it's so nice to see you. And I just want to say thank you for always being so responsive to the needs that I bring to your attention.

Right now I'm going to talk about the Governor's Executive Budget with the Child Advocacy Centers, which as you know provide critical support to abused children. They're funded at 5.2 million, which has been the same amount proposed in the Executive Budget since 2010. These centers were funded at nearly 7.8 million in 2007, and in recent years funding stagnated at 7.2 million.

So given that the number of children served has really nearly doubled compared to 2007, would you agree that these centers need a commensurate increase in funding?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Senator, it's good to be with you. And thank you for participating in the Adult Protective Services Roundtable earlier this week.

The CACs are absolutely invaluable to

the work they do in communities. And as you say, the Executive Budget proposal is what it is. What I will commit to you, Senator, as we here at OCFS continue to look under every corner that we have within our existing, you know, federal funding streams in child welfare, any opportunity we have here to try and bring some more resources to the Child Advocacy Centers, you have my commitment to do so.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you, Commissioner.

You know, there was a time in my life when I was a single mom, so to be able to access childcare I actually opened up my own childcare small business. So I really understand the challenges that both the parents and the providers are facing with this today.

And as you know, the Governor proposes to utilize 75 million from Childcare Stabilization funds to support childcare wages. Do you have an estimate of how many childcare workers this is going to impact and

how the funding would be distributed? And kind of how much of an increase can childcare workers expect to receive?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah. So the $75 million allocated for the Childcare Stabilization Grants, I want to be clear and honest, they are pandemic funds. So they are not going to last forever.

So our proposal, Senator, is to go about the distribution of that 75 million like we did the billion dollars in the stabilization grants. So we will have a portal where childcare providers can go in, and they can attest to the number of employees that they have. And we will have a methodology in the background that based upon the number of staff that they have, et cetera, other things that we will ask them, that they will receive a grant that they will distribute to their staff.

And the intention -- we obviously can't raise wages, right, because you can't sustain that. So these grant funds are really intended for bonuses, to help offset

employee retirement costs, payments there to help childcare employees, many of whom want to advance their educational degrees, do things like we can to support the child welfare workforce without creating, right, an artificial raising of wages that can't be sustained, at least at this point post-pandemic funding.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you so much, Commissioner. I know our time is up.

Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Of course.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblyman Anderson for three minutes.

I just want to remind all the colleagues -- please stop the clock -- all the colleagues that, you know, please leave time for the commissioner to be able to answer your questions. I don't really like having to cut people off, either you or the commissioner. Thank you.

Assemblyman Anderson. There you are. You have three minutes. Assemblyman

Anderson, can you hear me to unmute yourself?

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Can you hear me?

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes, now we can. Three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Okay. I started talking and I didn't know if folks were hearing me.

All right. Thank you so much, Commissioner, for being here. And thank you, Chairwoman Weinstein, as well as Chairman Hevesi.

So I have a couple of questions for you, Commissioner. In terms of your strategies around personal protective equipment and supplies for OCFS sites, what does that process look like? And what if any additional funding do you guys need in the budget to ensure that our children and our families who are at OCFS daycare centers, sites throughout my district and throughout the state, have those very important supplies and resources? That's the first question.

The second question I have -- and it's

specifically around funding streams. I want to read it correctly. So last year you guys expanded or we expanded in the budget subsidy, and we went down to 200 percent of federal poverty level. But it took a while to implement, you know, that poverty level. It took over eight months to implement it. Actually, the regulations just came out a month or two ago, which is wholly unacceptable.

But the budget this year proposes an expansion to 225 for those families in that bracket, but it won't go into effect, again, for another eight months. Why is there such a delay for the implementation of these subsidies? And couldn't you guys just advance some of the stimulus dollars that you have to help assist with getting these funds out?

So I'll allow you to answer, and then I have one more question if I have time. Thank you, commissioner.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Sure. Of course, happy to.

So I appreciate your question on the PPE. So we have been very fortunate between the ability to use federal pandemic money as well as support from our own state government, from DHSES, that we have an ample supply, both for my state-operated juvenile justice facilities -- you know, we have KN95 masks, we've got all the right PPE and we've had a good supply.

We've also, throughout the, right, much too long, protracted course of the pandemic, we have been able to provide childcare, foster care, domestic violence, runaway/homeless youth programs with masks. Recently we've been able to do testing supplies as well. So just in recent weeks we've pushed out, I think, close to 300,000 testing kits to childcare centers and many, many more across the state.

So I think we've fared pretty well in that area, but I absolutely appreciate the question.

You know, with respect to the subsidy expansion, you know, last year about why did

it take so long, you know, I just want to go back. You know, we had to develop regulations for these new subsidy provisions. You know, they take a little bit of time to develop once the budget was enacted. So we put those out for public comment in July, you've got to give time for public comment, they get back.

But I also want to say we also put the local districts on notice, we sent them an INF, we call it, that said, Hey, these things are coming soon. Take the time now before these regulations become final to get your, right, systems changes, administrative changes, retraining your childcare staff as necessary. Like these things -- it's not just fairy dust, right? They require -- local districts have to have time to make things happen. And the system changes, you know, can be considerable.

So that is --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner. We'll go to the Senate.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Thank you, Commissioner. Thank you, Chairwoman.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, Assembly. We have shockingly run out of Senators with their hands up. Once they hear this, no doubt they will raise their hands. But I'm going to pass it back to you --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Not to worry. We have many.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: -- until I see more Senators. You do have many Assemblymembers.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Just shout out when you have a Senator.

We'll go to Assemblywoman Lunsford, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you.

And Commissioner, I'm going to give you an opportunity to finish your answer to Assemblymember Clark about the cut to after-school funding. And I'd also like to ask some additional questions about whether there's anything to do about the terrible cost of summer care for our families with

school-age kids.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, so I think we actually have, on the whole, really good news on our after care. So like I said, we have the 28 million in the TANF, the Advantage After School, that serves 17,000 kids across our state. We then have the Empire 55 million of General Fund dollars that serves 34,000 children across 300 sites. So we have that base funding continuing to be available.

I also just want to say that we did a lot of work -- there were some pain points along the way, I will be candid, with our after-school providers, who were asking us for more flexibility in how, right, as part of the pandemic that they could provide after-school programming. So we worked with our partners at the Division of the Budget and we were able to create a more flexible hybrid model so that these programs could say I'm going to do only in-school, maybe, you know, a hybrid of in-school or remote, et cetera.

We had to redo all those contracts. My team here, I do have to give them a lot of credit. We have made tremendous progress. We are pushing out all kinds of money to the after-school providers, who have been incredibly patient with us.

So I think overall we're in very good shape with --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you. I'm just going to pivot just because I only get three minutes.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Can you talk just a little bit about the Monroe County Children's Detention Center from the perspective of the kids who are being housed there?

That facility -- like, the building itself really shouldn't have been certified. It is itself inadequate, and it's causing issues not just for the employees there but for the detainees. I've had children who got transferred to the Monroe County Jail for a period of time say they don't want to return

to the children's detention center. And I'd like to know what we can do to help address the just fundamental inadequacy of that facility.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, absolutely. So I have very good news in that Monroe County has submitted to us their request for a capital plan proposal, which we are -- we are expediting this at record speed. We're delighted the county, you know, needed to make the right decision for them. They had a number of options they were considering.

So we are working very closely with the Division of the Budget, we will work with DASNY, we're going to work with engineers, Assemblywoman, to get this done just as quickly as possible so that the physical plant is really modernized, right, to be able to do the kind of programming.

I will also say I want to give a shout out to Monroe County. In spite of all the challenges that they faced in July of last year, which were very considerable, they've

done a tremendous job bringing on new staff, raising salaries, bringing on additional managers and supervisors. You know, there's been a lot of good partnership work with them with our partners at State Commission on Corrections. And things are much better in the Monroe County Children's Center today. So kudos to them.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you. To continue with Monroe County, I call on Assemblyman Bronson, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you, Chair. Sorry for the delay, but the technology wasn't working for us.

Commissioner, good to see you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Good to see you.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: I have one line of questioning, and it is extremely important.

As you know, over the last two decades mental health practitioners licensed under Article 163 of the Education Law have been under an exemption that would allow them to

diagnose and create assessment-treatment plans. They've been doing this for 20 years. That sunsets in June 2022.

I carry a bill that would modernize their scope of practice and lift up their educational and clinical requirements to a level that would allow them to continue this ability to diagnose. If we don't deal with this issue, there is going to be an extreme crisis in our community-based organizations that serve many of our families and children, including Hillside in my district. It will also impact your agencies that you oversee across the state.

My question to you is, number one, how do we address the shortfall in the community-based organizations, and can we move forward with this bill, A6008? And what are your plans for the state agencies that -- or state facilities that you oversee that are utilizing these professions as well?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you, Assemblymember. So certainly I will go back and take a more careful look at your Article

VII bill. I know that that has been extended, right, many times to extend those provisions.

I would imagine, given the workforce crisis and in particular, right, the role that mental health practitioners and clinicians have played throughout the pandemic would perhaps bring some renewed conversation to your proposed bill.

And I will say I know that the State Office of Mental Health -- and I don't want to speak for Commissioner Sullivan, but I know that they have many strategies underway to try and, you know, do a better job supporting the mental health workforce, providing bonuses and other kinds of things to thank that workforce.

So I'm happy to continue conversations. We need those mental health practitioners more than ever. And that is also true for me, right, in running our state's juvenile justice programs. They're foundational, given the trauma and the mental health issues that so many of our young

people and families, frankly, are dealing with these days.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Well, thank you, Commissioner. I agree with you a hundred percent, we have to address this. The need has grown exponentially because of COVID. And this bill would standardize these master's-level educational clinical and training and requirements. So we've got to get this done. Thank you so much.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblyman Burdick.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you. And thank you, Commissioner, for your work.

I have two questions. I'll ask them both at once, in the interests of time.

I think it's clear that the Legislature would like to provide more resources, more funding, to the programs and services under your agency. But you mentioned that the pandemic funds will not last forever, we should advocate for Build Back Better. Do you see that in order to maintain even the present funding levels

there would need to be long-term reliance on federal funding?

And a related question is whether your agency has identified any other dedicated funding source.

The second question is that the budget includes 500 million in COLA for human services providers, which is very welcome. It's great. However, the statute that governs the COLA is outdated and it's important that the COLA goes to all current human services contracts. So two questions. Is your agency doing anything to try to update the statute? Because apparently in order to be eligible, you've got to be listed in the statute.

And in the interim, what is your agency doing to ensure that the COLA is applied to all current contractors, regardless of whether they're listed in the statute?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you very much. So great questions, you know, on childcare and how much of what we are doing

in the pandemic, you know, can be supported.

You know, again, I think the subsidy pieces in particular -- raising the eligibility to 300 percent, keeping copays as minimal as possible for working families, you know, trying to support providers with sufficient market rates -- are really I think the three core pieces that we need to watch carefully. Right? So that absent not knowing what's going to happen perhaps with Build Back Better or additional base funding, we believe -- and this is why I think I've been asked this question, like why are you taking seemingly such a cautious approach. You know, the 225 in October, the 260 next year is because I think we are very -- we want to be really aggressive, but we also have to be cautious until we see what the spending starts to look like.

So I don't have an exact answer, because as always there are unknowns. We could get --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you. But the second question, if you could provide an

answer about the COLA and those contractors not in the statute. What about them?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Well, I will say to you very candidly that that is troubling for me, and has been, that that --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Maybe we can consider that offline, then. Thank you so much for your work.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, happy to. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Continuing with the Assembly --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: No, sorry, a Senator popped up.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Okay, to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Another Senator popped up. Sorry.

Senator Tom O'Mara, thank you.

SENATOR O'MARA: Thank you, Chairwoman. I think you're going to start referring to me as Senator Pop Up, I think.

(Laughter.)

SENATOR O'MARA: Thank you.

Commissioner, thanks for being with us this morning. I have a couple of questions with regards to our youth detention facilities and the Raise the Age. I'm picking up a lot in the news with concerns from law enforcement of the use of 16- and 17-year-olds for criminal activity to avoid the more serious criminal responsibility of 18- and 19-year-olds, particularly in regards to gang activity and the gun violence that we're seeing.

I'm just wondering what if anything your agency is doing as overseeing the Raise the Age program as far as trying to gather information on just exactly what's going on and what you're picking up in your facilities on and hearing, kind of at least anecdotally, on what these 16- and 17-year-olds, or even younger, are doing. Are they being exploited so that older gang members or other criminals are utilizing them?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, I will say I've read about that. Right, there's

been obviously a lot in the news every single day, it seems about that. I've not heard that quite a bit in my own -- you know, in my own facilities.

You know, what I will say to you is I think we have to just not conflate the Raise the Age law that was passed several years ago with what's happening now in our world. You know, between the number of guns on the street, between just the impact of COVID and court processing, we're seeing kids stay in detention for much longer periods of time than they were ever intended for. That's creating an issue, on occasion, where there's not access to specialized secure detention beds.

Those are all real issues for sure that we are working our way through. And as you heard me say, we're now starting to see a number of capital proposals for detention programs now that the pandemic seems to be lifting a bit. So we absolutely need to move forward in building capital capacity.

But I think we have to be very careful

in not conflating what's happening around gun violence with sort of throwing the baby out with the bathwater on Raise the Age.

SENATOR O'MARA: Well, right, but we have to be very careful that 16- and 17-year-olds and those underage are not being either exploited or utilized because they're going to avoid this criminal responsibility.

And I think we're seeing longer stays in these facilities because there's more individuals, 16- and 17-year-olds now, going into those facilities that are committing much more serious crimes.

And I would just encourage you and your department -- because I have been in contact talking to Assemblywoman Byrnes, who was talking before about the issues in one of the facilities in her area where they're hearing this, that the 16- and 17-year-olds are being used to avoid the more serious criminal responsibility for the 18, 19 and older with that. And so I'll just leave it at that.

And with regards to the capital

facilities, I hope we're looking at regionalized facilities for multiple counties and a localized region can send their youth to a more close facility anyways. Because I do think those that certainly have --

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah. Yeah. I would agree.

SENATOR O'MARA: -- family contacts and interested family, their ability to be able to interact with them while they're undergoing that.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

SENATOR O'MARA: So I'd just encourage that.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you so much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, Senator.

SENATOR O'MARA: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We've been joined by Assemblywoman Forrest, Assemblywoman Gonzalez-Rojas, Assemblyman Meeks, Assemblywoman Hunter, and

Assemblywoman Reyes.

And we go to Assemblyman Walczyk, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: Thanks, Madam Chair. Hey, Commissioner. How are you doing today?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I'm well, thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: So I was looking at Casey and the way that New York State, in comparison with other states, invests some of its Title IV-E and Title IV-B in our foster program. And by way of comparison, they've got some interesting looks.

So in prevention services, we spend 7 percent of our total in prevention and 93 percent of our budget to foster care. Compare us to somebody like Alabama, who's considered to have a really successful program when you compare them to others, they've got 76 percent in foster and 24 percent in prevention. So a significant amount more of their Title IV-B is pushed into those prevention programs.

Do you have any thoughts on that?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I actually don't. I'd be very interested, though, in seeing the report that you are referencing.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: Yeah, if you go to Casey, it's pretty easy to find.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Actually we work very closely with Casey Family Programs.

So we do -- I mean, we invest, because of our high state reimbursement, the 62/38 model, I find it impossible that -- you said Arkansas?

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: Alabama.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Or Alabama. Yeah, I would -- I would be very happy to try and put that into better context for you.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: Yeah, great. And -- yeah, I'll follow up with your office on that.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Please. Happy to.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: The same study shows 9 percent of our foster kids in New York enter the system for abuse, which is

one of the lowest in the nation.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: But that also means that we have the highest entering for reasons that aren't abuse. What do you think accounts for that?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: That is a fantastic question, and I can tell you we're doing lots of work on that.

So, you know, we know, right, from the data that you just described that many, many families are swept into the child welfare system for neglect. And we know that much of neglect is derived from poverty. So we're working very hard here at OCFS to really try and create much more upstream prevention so that families, who many live in fear of coming into contact with the formal child welfare system, can feel safer in this accessing help from their community.

So we are working on a number of fronts. One of them is we are going to pilot a basic income project, which I know many of you are aware is becoming very popular, right, this

notion that many families just need some additional cash income to help them do better and take better care of their children. So we're working with the University of Pennsylvania, with Redlich Horwitz here, we're going to have a randomized control study with a small subset of our child welfare families here, to really better understand the impact of that model.

We are creating a "warmline," so instead of a hotline where families get called sort of into the formal child welfare system, we want to create places where families or folks who know families are in need can call and ask for help and get that help --

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: Commissioner, I see that I've asked a complicated question. I'll follow up with your office --

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: It's a great question, though.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: We've exceeded our time here. Thanks.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I'd love to tell you more.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Senator, I think you have a Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I do, thank you. I have a Senator, the Senator Alexis Weik.

SENATOR WEIK: Thank you.

Commissioner, thank you so much for being here today. And I'm concerned about the lack of secure facilities for teenage offenders charged with felonies.

So recently I met with my Suffolk County sheriff, Sheriff Toulon, regarding this issue. And these teenagers are transported hundreds of miles from their communities and families, they're driven from Nassau and Suffolk to Albany, Syracuse and even Buffalo. Housing these teenagers so far away of course is costing our taxpayers a thousand dollars per day -- per person, excuse me. And we have to reassign deputies from their regular duties to make these long trips. And it seems like a wasteful diversion of local resources.

These teenagers are far from their families, their attorneys, and from their local support programs.

So as you know, Nassau and Suffolk are working on a joint facility to house adolescents. What is it you're doing to help speed this process? Because my local officials are telling me they're not getting much guidance or assistance from your office to help obtain the OCFS approval for their proposal, and we'd like to see that happen.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: So would we.

Yes, we are very excited to have received fairly recently the county's proposal, which as you're probably aware, right, is to purpose a new facility for close to 40 young people. So we are ready. The money is available, there is money in the State Budget for capital, there is DASNY bonding authority.

And I will say -- and please feel free to reach out to my office offline -- I am surprised to hear you say that there appears to be a lack of cooperation on my agency's part. We've been trying to work very closely with the county. So if there's some disconnect, I want to know about it so we can

get after it very, very quickly, because we need all due speed.

And especially in Long Island, where there has not been an adequate secure detention facility before Raise the Age. And of course we know that COVID sort of put a stop on all kinds of capital projects. But we are ready and we want to move forward very quickly with Long Island and with the other many capital projects that are before the state today.

SENATOR WEIK: Okay, so is there someone they should be reaching out to? Because again, when they're reaching out to me telling me they're not getting guidance or assistance, that tells me that perhaps they're not reaching out to the right individual or department, so --

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah. Yes. I know that my deputy, Nina Aledort, is the lead. She's been in frequent contact with I believe the county executive's office in Suffolk County. So we should talk so we get all of this back on track.

SENATOR WEIK: Okay. Thank you very much.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You're welcome.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. We go back to the Assembly, and Assemblyman Mamdani.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you so much, Chair Weinstein.

Thank you, Commissioner Poole. I'm going to jump straight into it in the interests of time.

There's a growing concern around public and community safety, yet Governor Hochul is proposing $51 million in cuts to various children and families initiatives that provide just that. Some examples include 2.5 million from settlement houses, 2 million from Safe Harbor, 1.9 from the Kinship Program. Most of these are normally restored through the Legislature, but why cut in a year when these services are sorely needed to help quell violence in communities?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes. That's

a challenging question to answer. All of those programs that you mentioned do do valuable work. They have been supported, as you point out, by legislative proposals for a number of years.

So perhaps as we continue, right -- this Executive Budget is just a beginning conversation -- that we can find ways. But I do, I appreciate your lifting up -- those are important programs.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Absolutely. And I appreciate your answer. I think for me it's just hard to understand why we would begin the conversation with cuts to such vital programs.

But I'll move on to my second question. Last year, Commissioner, you testified that childcare is a, quote, really aspirational goal for us as a state. If we were to implement universal childcare, what would the benefit be to our children, our families, especially our working ones, job creation, and our state economy?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah, it's

another great question. You know, right, I still believe that. That is still our North Star goal.

And I also just want to point out, you know, that all the investments that we've been able to make -- and again, granted, some of it is pandemic funding, but there's also a lot in subsidy that we are committed to continuing -- are foundational steps toward universal childcare. Is it good to take more money to sort of get us, you know, to universal childcare, which I would also say requires a lot of discussion about how do you define that in the first instance. There's many ways to define universal childcare.

But without question, right, we've all seen the economists' reports. This is why it's been such an issue on a national level about universal childcare should in some way, I think, be our goal as a country.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: I'm sorry, Commissioner Poole, just because I only have 35 seconds left.

Can you speak a little bit to what it

would mean if we had universal childcare in terms of what you would see in the difference in childcare provisions as well as the economy and for families in general?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You know, I think it would remove, right, these sort of thresholds for eligibility. You know, it's a policy shift that potentially looks at access to childcare as one does have a right to childcare in the same way that children, all children, have a right to a free public education. Right? That's sort of the broadest perspective of universal childcare. That also happens to be the most expensive one. But again, there's all kinds of flavors and varieties, and a lot of that just depends on how much we have to support that.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you so much, Commissioner. I think that nothing should be out of reach when it comes to our children, and we should fund that through additional revenue.

I'll give the time back to the chair.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblywoman Buttenschon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Thank you, Chairs.

Good morning, Commissioner. And thank you to your staff for responding to me so quickly. I appreciate the efforts in prioritizing childcare, and I want to just reconfirm what many of my colleagues have stated today about after-school programs, mental health, and the overall concern for our children.

My question is directed towards what has been placed in your hands after the Raise the Age legislation that others have brought up. As you are aware, in the district I live in, the word "crisis" is identified by the stakeholders that have been meeting over the last few months. And to ensure that we can provide safe beds that are healthy and can provide those services for the children that are in the Family Court system, how do we ensure that they get those services? And clearly I can't change what the county's done in the past, so my question is looking at

what the state can do for the future.

And the second question I ask is: You've looked at the budget, what do you see missing that I can help, as well as my colleagues, advocate for you to ensure that the support is there? Because these are children in need, and they are desperately in need of those services. Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you. And Assemblyperson, I want to call out your leadership and, you know, your persistence in keeping us at the table and having conversations about really important issues in your community.

And one of the things -- you know, I know you've been speaking with Deputy Commissioner Aledort, right? One of the things we want to offer your community is to bring in a national consultant to help work with a broad group of stakeholders, you know, in the counties and to really try and get all the stakeholders together in a new way to try and see where there are opportunities for better cross-system solutions.

With some of the young people, as I referenced earlier, the State Office of Mental Health is bringing many more services to bear. They're rolling out youth assertive treatment teams. I want to see where we can build some real partnerships with other state agencies to -- again, we're never probably going to completely eliminate the need for beds, you know, or for detention, but I do feel like there's some real opportunities for not just OCFS but perhaps other state agencies to help your community out. And I commit that we will do that with you for sure.

I'm sorry, what was your second question?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: You looked at the budget. What did we forget? What do you need?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Oh, the budget. The magical question. Oh, my goodness.

I am concerned about workforce. Workforce is -- I mean, the COLAs are great,

they're a good start. But, you know, we -- and it's not just OCFS, you're hearing it from every commissioner, right? You heard it from the Civil Service, you know, commissioner the other day. And I know we've got some exciting initiatives in the Governor's State of the State and in the proposed budget, but we have really -- especially in human services, right, we have got to put all of our heads together and make long overdue investments. Because, you know, we know, just for example in childcare, our workforce, 60 percent of our childcare workers, you know, receive at least one form of a public benefit. Like we have got some work to do.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Well, thank you, Commissioner, and I look forward to hosting in Utica.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You bet. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblywoman González-Rojas.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank

you so much, Commissioner, for being here.

I'm personally someone who's benefited from childcare. As a mom, it's allowed me to engage in the workforce and have my son cared for. So a really simple question. Do you believe that the Governor's administration -- the Governor is the first woman and the first mom -- is it the belief that all children should be safe, nurtured, and that women and families should be able to join or return to the workforce?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: I don't think I know. Right? We have heard -- you know, we have heard the Governor, you know, say that repeatedly as Lieutenant Governor. As you probably know, Assemblywoman, you know, she was very instrumental in our Childcare Availability Task Force, which I am really looking forward to that resuming. There are so many just critical conversations and things for us to be weaving together, now more than ever.

But yes, you know, there's no mistake that our Governor talks about this all the

time. About how essential our childcare workforce is and about how essential childcare is to our economic recovery.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: And do you believe this budget, if enacted as is -- like how many families will still be left behind without childcare? Because, as you said, it doesn't adequately address all the concerns.

And to the comment about workforce, you know, grants, bonuses, you know, good start -- but certainly not a sustainable means of getting our childcare workers off public assistance in order to care for our children.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Right. Yeah. So as I said in, you know, my opening remarks, I -- you know, I think we've been clear that without -- and I know there are other proposals, legislative proposals out there. Those aside, you know, for a moment. I mean, we are using all of our available subsidy dollars, there are General Fund dollars, we used some TANF toward, you know,

childcare expenditures. We're raising subsidy access.

We do know, though, that the number of families and children benefiting from subsidy has continued to drop in our state, you know, in recent years. We saw a 20 percent reduction in uptake in subsidy last year. And money is not the only issue. There's UPK, there's all kinds of other -- you know, other issues here.

But again, I think, you know, the Governor's proposal in raising subsidy, you know, over time is the prudent one just given our overall current fiscal situation and not having any sign from Washington that the Build Back Better legislation is going to bring more money to New York. That is our current reality.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Commissioner.

We've been joined by Assemblyman Cusick, and we go to Assemblywoman Solages.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SOLAGES: Thank you, Commissioner.

You know, as we saw during the COVID pandemic, universal forms of cash assistance was a promising way to help families. It enabled families, especially those in the foster care system, to have financial security to fulfill their potential dreams and have access to opportunity.

We want to ensure that these children in the foster care system do not have deeper involvement in the system. And so it's interesting to see that, you know, OCFS was proposing a universal basic income pilot.

So first, can you elaborate on the project? Second, can you tell us if this project is similar to what's happening in California? And third, would you support, you know, making this program permanent for foster care youth?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you.

So we are -- I'm very excited in trying this out, this model, because we believe that so many families who are drawn

to the child welfare system -- you know, not as far down as getting into foster care, which is an entirely different situation -- can benefit from this. So it is modeled after California and other states who are doing this, not just for families in -- actually, I think we're going to be the first state who is focusing our basic income or our guaranteed income on families in the child welfare system. Others have done it in more broader economic -- excuse me, the TANF population.

So we are working on -- I don't know if you're aware, we have a dual-track system in New York State, so there's Child Protective Services investigations and then there's Family Assessment Response. So it is sort of a more family-engagement approach where the allegations are not serious, they're not abuse.

We have 15 counties that are participating in Family Assessment Response right now, and so we are going to pilot this basic income with a small subset of those

counties. The idea is to give $500 a month for a year, without a lot of questions asked, to those families who are currently sort of -- they touch the child welfare system, they're not involved in a traditional investigation, and then track and evaluate over time, right, how has that family fared, how has it helped that mom or that mom and dad stabilize? Have they been called into the hotline again? Is their family better? All the kinds of things that we really want to learn about in child welfare.

So as I said, we have the benefit of a foundation partner that is actually going to pay for the evaluation. We're working with the University of Pennsylvania, who has done all the research and evaluation for the other universal basic income pilots. And I am proud that we are going to be I think the first state to try this out in child welfare.

As for sort of a permanent status, you know, I think there's a lot of conversation. We have a new OTDA commissioner, right, coming on board. And I had the opportunity

of a very brief conversation, you know, with Commissioner Tietz last week, and I am excited about us, right -- the sort of child welfare agency and then the temporary assistance agency, right, antipoverty, right -- to work together. I am excited.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you, Assemblymember, Commissioner.

The final -- Senator Krueger, I see that you have a Senator who has raised her hand.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much. I apologize for not looking in the boxes carefully enough.

I see Senator Samra Brouk.

SENATOR BROUK: Right under the wire. Thank you so much, Chairman. And thank you, Commissioner, for all of the thoughtful answers you've given today.

I just have one question that hopefully you will have enough ample time to answer in three minutes. You mentioned to one of the Assemblymembers recently that one of your greatest concerns for children and

families in this state is the workforce shortage. So digging deeper into that, obviously in the Executive Budget the COLA increase, which a lot of us fought for, is a step forward, and various other programs and incentives. But I think at the end of the day we simply do not have enough licensed professionals, especially when it comes to mental health providers, especially at facilities like Hillside here in Rochester, where I represent, which services, as you know, children both through OCFS and OMH.

Given that you do recognize this is a workforce crisis, do you agree that our bill in the Senate, it's 5301A, that would equalize licensure requirements among our key mental health practitioners, including LMHCs, LMFTs and LPs, and ensure that people who have been doing this work for decades and filling these much-needed gaps in service for decades can continue to do that, should be passed in this year's budget?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: So I'll answer that -- I think this question was

answered before, and I'll -- I'm happy to answer it again, Senator.

I obviously have not studied the bill. I certainly will as we get closer, you know, to those deliberations. And I would agree that the mental health licensure and workforce -- certainly during the pandemic, right -- requires sort of renewed focus and attention. And I think one way or the other we need to find out new strategies to make sure that we have an adequate pipeline of qualified individuals, knowing that the mental health and behavioral health needs are at an all-time high in our state.

So I'm happy to continue discussions with you and others on this issue.

SENATOR BROUK: I appreciate that, Commissioner. And I'll just add, to put a fine point on it as well, you know, one of the things we see a lot of is the fact that we are so restrictive here in this state, that a lot of really talented folks who are graduating from our universities are leaving the state. And so that is really compounding

our crisis here as well. No matter how many incentives we give, if they simply don't have the ability to diagnose, as you know, it really kind of cuts their knees off where they're able to actually practice.

So I look forward to continuing that conversation and look forward to gaining your support. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblywoman Forrest, three minutes.

We heard you for a second. Please unmute yourself. There you go.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

And thank you, Commissioner, for being here today.

The Governor's -- I have a small question. The Governor's proposed budget proposes to use $75 million to support increasing childcare workers' wages from underutilized stabilization grant funds, right? How much will the average childcare wage in New York State be impacted by a $75 million investment? Which we all know is

like a drop, it's like a penny. But you tell me.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Okay. Thank you, Assemblywoman. So I just want to clarify that the $75 million that's in the proposed budget is drawing upon federal pandemic dollars. So this is not -- not our long-term answer to our childcare workforce challenges. I just -- I want to be clear and honest about that. So what we're proposing to do is -- I think you're probably familiar with how we rolled out our childcare stabilization grants. Our billion-dollar offering last year made it very easy for providers to apply on a portal. We're going to use that model again.

And so the $75 million is not -- is not really so much for permanent wage increases, because it's not a permanent funding stream. We want to support, you know, bonuses or, you know, if there is a wage increase, knowing that this funding will lapse at the end of September 2023, you know, providers can help their childcare employees

by offsetting costs for their health insurance, they can give them stipends to help on educational or professional development activities. And so they're meant to be sort of more one-time grants that employers, right, the childcare employers can use flexibly with their employee workforce, depending upon the needs and the things that will work best for them.

I hope I answered that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: No, thank you for the clarification. So really it's the employers that are getting this money to then decide what they want to do as far as staffing needs.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yes, it will go to -- but they are required to spell out, in a plan to us, right, verify the number of employees and how they will plan to use the grant fund for their workforce.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: No problem. We're not spelling it out for them, they're going to figure it out and then report back to us.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: That's right, yeah.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Thank you, Commissioner.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: My pleasure.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

And to end questioning for the commissioner, the ranker on Ways and Means, Assemblyman Ra, for five minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you, Chair. So I just wanted to get back into Raise the Age. I'm just wondering if -- and if you don't have it here, certainly if you can provide it afterwards. But if you have any data regarding, you know, now that we're a few years into this, how many adolescent offenders have been redirected from DOCCS facilities to OCFS facilities at this point.

And then also, you know, whether as this has gone on, you know, some of those first individuals who would have been assigned have either been released subsequent or been transferred to DOCCS facilities, you know, once they reach the appropriate age.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: So I can answer the first question. I'll get you the data on the second, the number of kids who have aged out of our secure facilities and have gone on to finish their sentences with DOCCS.

But I will say -- I want to say -- the years are sort of blending. I want to say, Assemblyman, it was in 2020 that -- it was either 2019 or 2020, I'm pretty sure it was '20, that we worked collaboratively over a couple of months with our partners at DOCCS to transfer back to OCFS secure facilities -- I want to say it was about -- it was between 15 and 17 young people under the age of 21.

That was a provision allowed for in the Raise the Age legislation. So we worked very closely and carefully with DOCCS to effectuate a safe transfer. And as I said, that took place in 2020, which seems frankly like a lifetime ago. But that did take place. And happy to follow up with your office on the data going the other way, when youth age out of our secure facilities and go

to DOCCS.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay. And then I know there's this provision regarding the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act in the Executive Budget. If you could just shed some light on that relative -- you know, individuals up to the age of 21 can remain in OCFS secure detention facilities. So what are we trying to accomplish there?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yup. So it's an Article VII bill that we have. It's in response to a federal Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act that actually took effect in New York on December 21st.

And so our Article VII -- and we get about $2 million, or DCJS does, rather, $2 million to support community-based initiatives. But in order for DCJS to draw down the funds, the entire state needs to be in compliance with the federal bill.

So what our Article VII does is it actually goes beyond what is required to meet the federal statute, and it creates very specific guardrails. So that if there is a

young person under the age of 18 for whom an alternative jail sentence is being sought -- or a jail placement is being sought, that it can no longer happen by administrative means. So I can't make a decision that a kid can go into a local jail.

That now this says, right, that young people really don't belong in jails, that by default they belong in secure facilities. And that we're proposing that we set very clear parameters around that, and that there is a newly created interest of justice hearing that requires that a judge must hear a request for a young person under the age of 18 to be held in a local jail placement.

It also requires OCFS, if we are looking to move a young person out of an OCFS facility under the age of I believe it's 21 -- or under 18, rather, to DOCCS. That we can't do that administratively, as we have done for decades, but that too requires an interest-of-justice hearing.

So it's really to make sure that youth have great representation, that there is a

360-degree view of why a young person might need a temporary jail placement. And the goal of our bill is to really create much stronger guardrails so that we are -- you know, we're making the right decisions for these young people.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you, Commissioner.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Of course.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We send it back to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, thank you. We have a final second round for Chair Jabari Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And Commissioner, thank you for all your work. I know you've been here for over two hours, and it's definitely not easy to field these questions.

I have childcare questions again, but I do want to clarify just a few things before I get into that. One, I would like to reup what Assemblymember Hevesi said about the

65 percent reimbursement level.

And also following up on Assemblymember Solages' questioning about the UBI, I just want to clarify that I believe the Governor's proposal is different than California's. The Governor's is for the families, and what happened in California was specifically for youth that are aging out. And I say that because I have a bill for -- relative to the youth that are aging out of foster care for a UBI that I'd love to collaborate on.

And going back to childcare, I want to circle back to the $75 million that was -- we've heard it many times, and just talk about what is our sustainable solution. Because it is a one-time bonus, and I know in a year and a half we don't want to be back at the drawing board where childcare workers are leaving because they don't want to get paid $14 an hour for childcare when they can make $17 an hour at Burger King.

So can we get to a scenario where they're paid at parity with public school

teachers, for example?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Yeah. Yes. That -- that is our North Star. You know, our North Star, Senator.

I would say two things. One -- three things. One, Childcare Availability Task Force. This is one of those things, right, that's spelled out in the proposed chapter amendment which we hopefully get signed and we can get busy back around the table really, you know, trying to get after some of these very, very challenging issues.

Secondly, you know, I think there may be additional opportunities, again, if we wind up having some additional unspent federal dollars, right, the pandemic dollars. Again, we put all this money out there, we've got to really watch what the uptake is and how much of it is going to be spent. And if there is some unspent, then potentially there could be another conversation, right, about a different version of a stabilization grant.

You know, and then thirdly I always hope, I am an eternal optimist, even after

all these years, you know, that the federal government -- and I know you feel differently, but the federal government will recognize that we do need additional stable federal support to be able to support this workforce once and for all.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you. You know, I have hopes that Build Back Better will come through, but my hopes are slim.

So with the time I have left, I know earlier when replying to Assemblymember Mamdani, you know, there's many competing visions and, you know, there is the issue of funding for a universal childcare program, but one in which there is no means testing, it's free, available for all parents. You know, there are proposals in the Legislature to invest $5 billion into the sector. Is that something that you would support?

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: You know, I would love -- and I know we all would, right -- I would love for us, you know, to be able to get there. But I absolutely respect, right, the many -- the many demands that the

Governor and her administration are facing.

So I look forward, this is -- right, this is just the beginning, Senator, and I know we're going to have lots of conversations in the coming weeks ahead.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Before we say thank you for your presence here, Commissioner, I just wanted to mention that Assemblyman Dilan has joined us.

And we thank you, Commissioner Poole, for all of your -- for being here with us. And to the extent that there will be some written responses to members' questions, please make sure to share them with Senator Krueger and myself so we can share with the rest of the members on the panel.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Happy to.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you for being here, and we're going to call the next witness --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER POOLE: Thank you all.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: -- who is

Acting Commissioner Daniel Tietz, acting commissioner for the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, commonly known as OTDA.

And Commissioner, the floor is yours to begin. You have 10 minutes. There you go.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: There you go. Thank you.

Good morning, Chairpersons Krueger and Weinstein and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. I'm Daniel W. Tietz, acting commissioner of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. I'm pleased to join you today to discuss the impact of Governor Hochul's 2023 Executive Budget on the important work of our agency on behalf of the residents of New York State.

OTDA is responsible for supervising programs that provide economic and other assistance and support to eligible families and individuals. This vital government function includes helping New Yorkers meet their essential needs and ensuring their

economic security by providing opportunities for stable employment, housing, and nutrition. Importantly, our mission is accomplished in cooperation with the local social services districts and community-based service providers.

We are pleased to report that Governor Hochul's Executive Budget makes long-overdue adjustments to public assistance that will help low-income New Yorkers achieve economic security. These program improvements -– the first in many years -- are sure to have a dramatic impact on struggling households.

The Governor's budget also continues steady funding of our agency's core programs, which serve the critical needs of millions of New Yorkers daily. These programs include ongoing public assistance, emergency assistance, housing supports, and a range of services, including programs that help refugees start a new life in our state.

While OTDA's work has always been important, our programs have become increasingly critical amid the far-reaching

economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Simply put, our assistance programs are helping millions of New Yorkers avoid food insecurity and housing instability during this public health crisis.

Last year alone, OTDA distributed nearly $5 billion in additional food benefits to schoolchildren and struggling families throughout the state, infusing our communities with critical federal dollars. Under Governor Hochul's leadership, our agency has fully committed all $2.4 billion in federal rental assistance through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, or ERAP, which has brought critical eviction protections to hundreds of thousands of tenants and much-needed relief to struggling landlords.

While our state is well-positioned to emerge from the economic toll brought about by the pandemic, there remain many challenges ahead. Governor Hochul has continued to call on the U.S. Treasury to provide high-need states like New York with additional funding

for ERAP to ensure all eligible tenants who apply have access to this assistance. Recently the state formally requested $1.6 billion in reallocated funds from the Treasury Department, and we await a response.

We must also continue the vital work OTDA was doing prior to the onset of the pandemic to address homelessness. Specifically, this includes supporting the Governor's new five-year, $25 billion comprehensive housing plan to create and preserve 100,000 affordable homes, including 10,000 units of supportive housing for vulnerable populations. OTDA's Homeless Housing and Assistance Program, with $128 million in this year's budget, is a central component of this effort by funding capital projects statewide that provide supportive housing to families and individuals experiencing homelessness.

Supportive housing brings together permanent housing and tailored services necessary for individuals to achieve and maintain stable lives in the community.

These services play a critical role in helping families and individuals to overcome the obstacles that may have contributed to their homelessness. New funding is included in OTDA's budget to support these critical services and ongoing operation of this permanent housing through the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative, or ESSHI.

As I alluded to earlier, a core OTDA function is helping New Yorkers relying on our assistance programs to achieve economic security. This year's budget proposes changes to the public assistance program to encourage increased earnings and allow more savings among recipients without forcing them off the so-called "benefits cliff" -- the loss of benefits resulting from a quite modest increase in income that then places a household slightly over the eligibility threshold, thereby ending all assistance.

Rather than incentivizing work, this benefits cliff often results in recipients who work becoming ineligible for any public assistance even though the household remains

below the poverty level. With the Governor's proposed improvements, a single adult in receipt of public assistance in New York City will now be able to earn up to $1,094 per month before losing eligibility, more than double the $487 per month threshold that exists today.

Similarly, the improved benefits will permit a New York City family of three to earn up to $1,876 per month before losing public assistance eligibility, an increase of $417 over the previous formula. And the fixed earned-income disregard for all public assistance cases will increase monthly benefits for an estimated 25,000 households with and without children. Taken together, these improvements will make a significant impact on the economic security of individuals and families.

Governor Hochul's budget will also permit applicants and recipients of public assistance to save more before that savings renders them ineligible for assistance. In addition, the budget proposes to eliminate

the 45-day waiting period for Safety Net Assistance applicants, helping households obtain critical benefits more quickly.

The budget also continues to invest in the Summer Youth Employment Program, providing a funding increase to reflect a recent boost to the minimum wage so the program can continue providing invaluable employment experience for thousands of young New Yorkers.

And while it is not directly connected to the budget, I look forward to building on these improvements through my work as cochair of the newly established Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council, which will provide an important framework to work with you and a broad range of stakeholders to develop a comprehensive set of recommended strategies and benchmarks to reduce child poverty by 50 percent over the next decade. We are also aiming to expand the council's focus to more broadly address poverty and improve the financial well-being of low-income households throughout the state.

In closing, Governor Hochul's budget outlines a bold vision and a tremendous opportunity for our agency and New York State. This includes building on OTDA's past successes and sensibly targeting resources to better ensure the economic security of every New Yorker in need.

We look forward to working with you, our partners in the Legislature, in the coming months. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Commissioner.

We're going to go to our chair of Social Services, Assemblywoman Rosenthal, for 10 minutes on the clock, please.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Yeah, not three.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Hi, how are you?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: I'm good. I'm waiting till the clock gets reset.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes, the timekeeper, we need to reset the clock for

10 minutes. There we go.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Thank you.

Thank you, commissioner. I see it says "acting" under your name, but I know you will be commissioner one day.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: But it's wonderful to have you as commissioner.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: And it's great, you know, conversing with you and having access to you and your team, and I really do appreciate that.

So I have more than 10 minutes of questions, but let me start with ERAP. You know, ERAP ran out of money, leaving hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers without access to desperately needed rent and utility relief. Now the eviction moratorium has ended, and my office is already getting eviction cases, including an older man with cancer who has an eviction notice.

So tenants in arrears are being asked to apply for one-shots, HEAP and similar

programs. One-shots need to be repaid, and HEAP does not cover everyone. So that's one thing.

And I appreciate that the Governor is urging Congress to supplement the funding, and that's wonderful. I know that there are tenants who applied in June and have still not received any updates or information about the status of their application. And, you know, in light of the fact that Guidehouse is crowing that they're making so much money off this program, can you help me understand what applicants from June, what is their -- how can they find out their status, why is it taking so long, and what is OTDA doing to investigate the Guidehouse statements?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you, Assemblymember. You know, there's a lot of questions in there.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: There is.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I'm going to try and remember them all, but if I forget some, you'll remind me.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I think we should start maybe just with the background. So we have more than 300,000 applications in ERAP. We've paid to date about 113,000 out the door to landlords on behalf of tenants, equals about $1.4 billion.

We have -- working through the June to September period, we believe that with the resources that we have that, you know, looking at the average payment of about $12,500, that we can roughly handle another 54,000 applications with the resources on hand. And we're carefully working through those. So a lot is out there.

I'll note that for someone who's applied, they have the eviction protections. So certainly we've given over to the Office of Court Administration -- they have access, we data share, they know who's applied. So they have the eviction protections.

So I'm going to maybe stop there and you'll remind me of what you want to ask next.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay, I did

wonder about the investigation of the statements made by the Guidehouse CEO about how they're joyously making money off this program that is underfunded.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, so, you know, starting at the place of we're very pleased to have this program. It is as -- the startup may have been a bit troubled. For sure, the impact has been enormous. The Governor has been very invested in making sure that this money got out the door as quickly as possible. And the team at OTDA has worked very, very hard with our vendors to make sure that that happened.

We, like you, were disturbed by that reporting. Nothing about that pleased us. And we have had some, I think it's fair to say, difficult conversations with our vendor in the days since. I would note that while Guidehouse -- well, the CEO made that statement, we've pressed them to explain what that was about, and we've gotten a fair bit of documentation from them. They assert that their profit, their actual profit is

substantially less than that, it's akin to what they told the Washington Post. I'm happy to say that what they report is 13.6 percent as their profit, not 38 percent. And we are working through what they have supplied to us and asking further questions.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay, I appreciate that. Thirteen percent is a huge profit nevertheless. And it was a no-bid contract, before your time. So I think some things are kind of fishy in there.

I want to go to public assistance. The budget increases public assistance amounts for people in residential care facilities but doesn't increase the level for others. Now, the rent portion of the welfare grant hasn't increased since 2002. The portion of the grant for households with children hasn't increased since '88. And the energy portion of the grant has not been increased since the program was created in 1981, when people were listening to Whitney Houston on their Walkmen and watching Beetlejuice on their brand-new VCRs.

I'd say it's more than past time to increase these levels and at least reflect the cost of living. It hasn't kept up with any kind of metric that allows people to survive in this state, and I have a lot of legislation to do just that. I wondered your thoughts about this.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So as I described in my opening, the Governor's proposed several important changes in the budget which substantially add to the benefit. And I want to make clear that those are a start. Those are not the end of this process. The Governor is committed to making real change here and to improve our public assistance programs and the benefits.

You know, as you know, the Governor at the beginning of December signed the Child Poverty Reduction Act. That council is coming together, including with appointments from the Legislature. And as I noted, we are going to take up this whole question of what are the best approaches to addressing the needs.

So again, I don't want to foreclose on any of this conversation, and I think we're going to have it as part of that council in coming up with what all are the strategies that we need to do to improve the lives of low-income New Yorkers. And I'm quite confident that the shelter allowance and the other benefits will be a part of that conversation.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Yeah, I appreciate --

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: And maybe I should just note as well that, you know, districts can have a supplement to that. So there are opportunities here for districts to propose higher shelter allowance, for example.

I think it's also worth noting that, you know, in this budget the Governor has again put in $100 million for a rent supplement program for struggling households that we are waiting on several of the districts to provide us plans about how to use those resources.

So there are other resources out there to assist families to pay the rent and to stay in their homes that they have.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: All right. But, I mean, it doesn't raise the shelter utility basic grant levels. And as you well know, there's an explosion of people who are homeless. And so we can't really afford to wait, because we're going to be paying for people who are experiencing homelessness one way or the other. And it would be better if it's direct grants to them, and we have to hurry that up. It's been a neglected sector for too long.

And speaking of grants, the FHEPS grant -- as you know, Senator Kavanagh and I passed a bill which the Governor signed increasing the state FHEPS level to 100 percent of FMR. But I understand that there's been delays with the rollout, even though it was signed in December. I know that later in February it will be fully implemented.

But I'm concerned that the language in

the Executive Budget shifts the cost of the FHEPS increase to municipalities, and the state does not pay its proper share. Can you explain that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So thank you for the question. I think here too the Governor has really demonstrated her commitment to taking real action to address homelessness.

And this -- we were very pleased when she signed the FHEPS legislation, which raises the value of the vouchers to FMR.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Yes. Yes.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: We think that makes a big difference here. Landlords who were previously reluctant to take the voucher will now actually take that voucher. They'll begin --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: But the state is not contributing -- I only have 30 seconds, so I want to cut to the chase. The state is not helping the City of New York meet these costs, and that is our obligation.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I

understand your concerns about the financing arrangement. And I think, you know, we're open to a discussion about how best to finance this going forward.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay. Because the 100 million that was allocated to the city for various other populations is now being forced to be spent on this, which is the state's obligation.

And I'll see you next round. Thank you so much.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

To the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Our first questioner is Senator Roxanne Persaud, the chair of the Social Services Committee. Ten minutes, please.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

Good morning, Commissioner. It's great to see you.

I am going to follow up with what my colleague just asked. But, you know, I understand what you said about Guidehouse,

et cetera, so we're going to go past that.

Can you give me an update on the LRAP program? We've talked about ERAP, but the LRAP program seems still to be struggling. Can you give us an update about that? We know it's 125 million for the landlord portion, and then there's the additional 125 that's dedicated to the homeowner -- the households above 80 percent AMI. Can you give us some update on that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Sure. Give me one moment.

SENATOR PERSAUD: While you're trying to get your information there, I just want to go on to the cost of living adjustment.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Well, Senator, I'm happy to answer the LRAP question.

So where we are at with that. It's 125 million. So, you know, it has a companion 125 million for households of 80 to 120 of area median income. So in the landlord program, we've had -- paid out 10,000 payments equaling $104 million. And

so we've now spent about 90 percent of the resources in that program.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. But there are many landlords who have not been getting responses. We want to continue to follow up with your agency about that.

Also in terms of NYCHA and the ERAP, can you tell us what's the status of that, the NYCHA residents receiving any kind of ERAP funding?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So in the legislation that was passed last year there were priorities set for certain populations. And public housing tenants were set in the statute as Priority 5, so the last to be addressed with those resources. So this is not a policy choice of OTDA.

So to date, none of the -- essentially none of the public housing tenants have received ERAP payments. Given the status of the program, where we've got much more demand and many more applicants than we can fund with the current $2 billion -- and as we await additional federal funds, something we

hope to hear about by the end of the month -- I think we have serious concerns about whether we would ever get to the Public Housing Authority tenants.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Has your agency been notifying the NYCHA tenants who've applied of the position that they're in, that there's a possibility of them not getting it? Because we have NYCHA tenants who are contacting us stating that they have been told that, you know, they are missing paperwork and, you know, they'll be getting funding.

Could you tell us if you're sending information to NYCHA tenants?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So like all others, to the degree that their application is reviewed, what they'll see is -- if they go in and look, they'll see "Under Review" or "Pending Review."

You know, I think, again, this is first in, first out. And I think the notices that have been sent to most of the Public Housing Authority tenants have actually said that their applications are on hold, or

language similar to that, in part because we're not confident that we can actually pay given that they're the last priority in the statute.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay, thank you for that. We still have issues on that.

Can you comment on Summer Youth? I know -- you know, I appreciate the Governor's commitment to funding Summer Youth. But as you know, every year we have this conversation when we have budget hearings, and that despite the commitments there were not enough slots being funded.

What can you do to ensure that, you know, we continue to push to get additional funds for Summer Youth?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Well, let me start by noting, you know -- thanking you all for your support for the program. So we're pleased that the Legislature provides significant support for the program.

And this year the appropriation in the Governor's budget is 46.1 million, which is a $1.1 million funding increase. And as a

result --

SENATOR PERSAUD: But not enough.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I'm sorry?

SENATOR PERSAUD: But not enough. But okay.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, so it's a bit more. And we expect about 18,000 youth to be served in the summer of 2022, which is about the same number as pre-COVID. So there is an increase this year.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Right. It seems to be, but it's really not. There's still many youth who are unable to access Summer Youth because of the limitations on funding. So, you know, I hope we can continue to push to add some more money for Summer Youth.

And, you know, I represent a district with the greatest disparities in income and economic opportunities. How does the proposed budget for OTDA address years of reductions to TANF reimbursements to the City of New York? The city is only being reimbursed at 85 percent of TANF claims.

Could you address that? How can we get back to reimbursing the city 100 percent of TANF?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I want to note I think -- thank you for your question.

I want to note that the Governor's budget provides literally hundreds of millions of dollars to the City of New York in a variety of ways for a whole host of needs related to housing and homelessness, to public assistance. We know that this cap is there and are happy to discuss with the Legislature other approaches, but I think it's important to note that the Governor has committed a good deal of resources to the City of New York to meet these needs, and not just with TANF.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. We will hear about that again.

In terms of DAP, the Disability Advocacy Program, do you think the funding is adequate to meet the needs of the services that are needed?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: We proposed an increase in DAP. It's increased

by $1.1 million to two-point -- which is now bringing it up to two-point -- I'm sorry, $5.3 million, which is a doubling of what has historically been, you know, included in the Executive Budget.

We think this program is terribly important. New York, because of this program, has a win rate on appeals of about 70 percent or thereabouts, which is substantially ahead of the national average by some 30 percentage points. And so we are -- we very much thought it was important to add additional resources to assist folks in need.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. But the funding that's proposed, do you think that's adequate funding? You know, I know we have this win rate and all of that. But I'm just asking about the funding that's been proposed, because -- is it adequate enough?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yes.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. We'll stick with that. Thank you.

In terms of earned income disregard,

you know, do you have an estimate of how many New Yorkers would benefit from the income disregard that's included in the Executive Budget? And how does the 50 percent of the monthly earned income proposal differ from the annual disregard, the current 55 percent that it implements annually? And will the assessments of monthly earned income potentially burden the clients, in your opinion?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So, I mean, this isn't so terribly different than the existing budget. The budgeting process isn't changing for clients. The amount that would be ignored from their budget, be disregarded, is changing. But the process for determining that for current recipients isn't changing. So I don't know that it's any more or less burdensome.

And as you know, we've given waivers so that some of this doesn't have to happen in person any longer. So I don't think -- I don't think it's actually burdensome. And as I said earlier, I think it's important to

note here that these changes are the Governor's proposed start of this conversation. I don't think it's the end of the conversation. And for sure, as part of the council, we're going to look at what else might need to be done. But I would view this as not burdensome at all. I think this is a big help to clients. I think our estimate was that 25,000 households will benefit from this change.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Oh, okay. Thank you. And in terms of COLAs, how does the proposed COLA benefit OTDA's funded supportive housing employees that aren't under New York/New York III contracts?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So the cost of living adjustment is in the healthcare providers. So at OTDA there's only a quite limited program area that is affected by that adjustment. And the name of it -- oh, it's the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program. It will see a modest increase as a result of that COLA. But the remainder of OTDA doesn't come within the

means of a -- or the bounds of a healthcare worker.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay, thank you. I just have a couple of questions. I'll come back. Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes, we go to the ranker on Social Services, Assemblyman Simpson, for five minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMPSON: Thank you, Chair Weinstein. And thank you, Commissioner, for being here.

I want to go back to ERAP just for clarification. So we solicited and we reopened, we brought more people in, more applications. Do we know, are we going to be able to meet that financial obligation to those applicants that have applied?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So thank you for your question. It is difficult to say at this point. As you know, the Governor, together with three other big-state governors, have asked the Treasury for a good

deal more money and have appealed to them, recognizing the enormous need here.

As you heard me say, we have more than 300,000 applications. We expect somewhere around half or so, at this point, that there would be resources for. So it is certainly challenging. I mean, we don't yet know what we will get from the Treasury. As I said earlier, I think we expect to learn more by the end of this month. But I think in the coming weeks we're going to have a better sense about where we land.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMPSON: So do we have a plan for those landlords, property owners also, in those applicants that we may not be able to financially fulfill our obligation?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So certainly I think, you know, the Governor has provided a good deal in this budget. And as you know, there is $2 billion for COVID-related costs. I leave it to the Legislature, in its negotiations with the Executive, about how best to use those resources, and this may be one of those

areas.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMPSON: Okay, thank you.

And then I want to move over to HEAP. In last year's budget we saw a $450 million increase in federal funding that isn't in this year's budget. With the increased cost of energy -- we've seen massive inflation affecting everyone -- will there be enough HEAP money to meet the energy needs for those who need assistance?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, I think actually there's a reappropriation here. But by our estimates, yes, we believe there's actually enough money in the budget for it.

I'll note that we've increased the benefit significantly, somewhere between, you know, 32 percent and 43 percent. I'll also note that there is now a new program, the HEAP regular arrears supplement, which opened in September. That pays up to $10,000 for gas and/or electric utility arrears. To date, we've issued 102,000 payments, equal to $160 million. The average benefit there has

been 1500-some-dollars per recipient. We expect to issue as many as 160,000 of those arrears payments.

So we think that there's enough in the HEAP program.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMPSON: Okay. And I wanted also -- another member had mentioned the 50 percent of earned income of a public assistance recipient. Will that accomplish the -- alleviate the benefit cliff proposed? Will that program help us alleviate that benefit cliff?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Absolutely. I think this makes a big difference for households. If you -- this gets every household in receipt of public assistance up over the federal poverty level before they lose eligibility. And that's a big shift here. So for sure this is a big shift.

And again, I think, you know, this is where we're starting today. And I don't want to prejudge where we land as part of the Poverty Reduction Council efforts in terms of

recommendations and strategies, but I think this is an important start down a road to fixing that benefits cliff.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMPSON: Okay. And I want to ask a question about the State Supportive Housing Initiative. How many units are being planned for development this year?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Give me one moment. If you have another question, I'll take that first.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMPSON: And I just want to get a sense of how many units have been built, how many are being planned, how big of a program this is.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah. So right now it's running about 800 to 900 units per year. I'd have to get you the rest of it. Hang on. Yeah, I might have to follow up with you. And I apologize.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMPSON: All right. Well, I'll yield back my time. I've only got 10 seconds left. Thank you very much.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thanks.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much. And our next questioner is Senator Diane Savino.

SENATOR SAVINO: Thank you, Senator Krueger. Good to see you, Commissioner Tietz. It's nice to call you that.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you very much, Senator. It's nice to see you as well.

SENATOR SAVINO: I only have three minutes; I'll be brief. I want to talk a bit about expanding -- I see the Governor's expanding access to public assistance in the budget. You spoke a bit about it. But I'm more curious about what can we do to increase eligibility for more people? Because while this is a good step for those who are current recipients to explain what they're eligible for, there's still way too many people who aren't eligible. So they're not falling off the cliff, they never get up to the cliff.

So for instance, we have a lot of, you

know, seniors who just make too much money but whose lives could be dramatically improved if they were able to qualify for SNAP benefits. So is there a possibility that somewhere in this budget or in future budgets we could do something about expanding eligibility for, say, single seniors so that they could be eligible for SNAP benefits? Because right now the eligibility for a family of one is only -- the maximum income is $25,000 a year. And many people exceed that, and so therefore they're cut out of any supplemental assistance. So what can we do about closing that?

And then the second thing is since homelessness is such an incredibly big problem in the City of New York -- and your agency will play a role with respect to helping the City of New York address it -- what are we doing to help, with our new administration, kind of tackle the problems of chronic homelessness?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you for your question.

So to answer your first question, I think the short answer is yes. And again, I don't want to push off everything on to, Oh, we're going to work on this in the Poverty Reduction Council.

However, I do think, look, that all of these programs and ideas and innovations come with a cost. And I think we have to think sensibly about which have the largest impact, which are the most meaningful. And partly I think that needs to then be an organized effort, and that's some of our organized effort, which is to use that Child Poverty Reduction Council as the vehicle for doing that planning.

I think, again, in the budget negotiations this can certainly be on the agenda. The Governor has started with how we help current recipients not go over that benefits cliff. But I certainly appreciate your point on this.

SENATOR SAVINO: Thank you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: With regard to homelessness, so we've taken a lot

of steps here. And you in particular referenced I think, in part, the new outreach efforts. So the Governor and the Mayor together, Mayor Adams together, have announced additional outreach teams more clinically focused that can help folks in the subways and on the streets, particularly those with mental health and substance use challenges.

OTDA's role in this is oversight of the local districts and their shelter systems and their homelessness prevention efforts. We distribute literally hundreds of millions, a couple of billion dollars annually to the local districts to address homelessness in a variety of ways. This will be an expansion on that effort. It is mostly driven by OMH, and our role is a coordinating role, given that the local social services districts are the ones, and in particular in New York City are the ones with the outreach teams on the ground. So it's a coordinating role with OMH.

SENATOR SAVINO: Thank you, Dan. My

time is up. Good to see you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: You as well.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go now to Assemblyman Mamdani for three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you so much, Chair. Thank you, Commissioner.

I'm just going to jump right in. Earlier you testified that, quote, the Governor's budget continues steady funding of our agency's core programs, which serve the critical needs of millions of New Yorkers daily, including programs that help refugees start a new life in our state.

How does that statement fit with the Governor's proposal to cut $1 million from the Refugee Resettlement Program?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you, Assemblymember.

The program is actually terribly important to the Governor. She added additional funds recently to the program.

The addition was $2 million, particularly targeted toward Afghan arrivals. We have continued enhanced funding in the program at $2 million. I know that there's a significant legislative component, add, to this program. But on the Executive side, we've actually added to the Executive Budget from previous.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: So I understand that there's an improvement on previous Executives. However, I do not think that the previous Executive is a good standard by which we should operate in this state.

And frankly, the funding for the resettlement program was $3 million in total. So by the Governor proposing $2 million, it still leaves the program a million dollars short.

But thank you for your answer. I'm just going to move on to the next question in the interests of time.

So we've recently received notice from OTDA that you've received 26,779 NYCHA ERAP applications, totaling $102.2 million. Given

NYCHA tenants have suffered some of the worst health and income losses from the pandemic, and given that, as you said earlier, they are currently placed last after private housing tenants in priority for access to the funds, do you believe that they should be elevated in priority or that a dedicated fund needs to created for NYCHA tenants?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you for the question.

I think, importantly here, this isn't a policy choice for OTDA. It was written into the statute that public housing tenants were to be the last priority --

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: If I can ask you to opine on whether there should be a legislative change in the future regarding this.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I think I'm going to leave that to each of you in your negotiations with the Governor about where to land in this budget on COVID-related assistance.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you.

I yield back the rest of my time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

To the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

Senator Rachel May.

SENATOR MAY: Yes, thank you.

And hello, Commissioner.

So a little while ago we were talking about the benefits cliff and the problem for people who are close to the poverty level. I am very concerned about the Governor's proposal for bonuses instead of raises for home health aides and other low-paid healthcare workers, that it could backfire by pushing them off the cliff.

Do you share that concern?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you for your question, Senator.

I don't think that that's actually within our purview here at OTDA. I mean, if you're asking me generally around pay and who's at some risk here -- but I don't --

SENATOR MAY: Bonuses in general as a

way of remunerating people. Doesn't it cause problems in social services?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So those home healthcare workers aren't within our purview. We -- those -- I mean, I guess if you're asking me generally around rates of pay and --

SENATOR MAY: That's what I'm asking.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: -- who's at risk here, yes, as I said earlier, I think what's important to understand is that this was an opening here to address something with regard to earned income for current recipients. I don't think it's the end of the discussion, I think it's the beginning of the discussion.

And we're certainly open to doing whatever the Governor and the Legislature decide to do on the size of this benefit and the point at which it kicks in.

SENATOR MAY: Right. It's just the use of bonuses for people who are right at the margins seems like a dangerous policy to me.

I have another question that's kind of specific, but I think it applies to people all over the state. I represent Onondaga County, which opted out of the ERAP program, has closed its applications because they exceed the amount of money they've got. But they have not declared that they are -- have disbursed all the funds. So people in Onondaga County cannot apply for ERAP now and either get on the waiting list, in case there is more money, or avail themselves of the protections of applying for ERAP.

And I'm wondering what are you doing to make sure that everyone in this state has access to those protections.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yes, it's a concern for us too. We're happy to discuss with Onondaga County's leadership on what they'd like to do here. I think it does have to be a request from them to us. And so pending their request, you know, we're happy to reach out to them, but we certainly share your concern.

SENATOR MAY: Okay. Thank you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Assemblywoman González-Rojas.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you so much, Commissioner, for being here.

I represent a district that has been hard-hit by COVID, and we're still seeing the pandemic of the hunger crisis in our community. We're still seeing lines wrapped around, you know, food pantries for food and nutrition.

I'm also representing a district that's largely immigrant. I'd love to hear more about how OTDA is addressing the hunger crisis in our state, and what specific funding streams can you discuss which does outreach for low-income and immigrant communities for entitlement programs that they qualify for?

I understand that, you know, there might be programs that folks qualify for, but not the information, so that the enrollment levels are low. So can you talk about what's being done to address that, given the hunger

crisis we're facing right now?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Well, certainly the SNAP program. Which, you know, takes in more folks than -- you know, the eligibility is much higher than it is for public assistance. And so many more folks will come into SNAP than could otherwise get other public assistance benefits.

Those Emergency Assistance supplements have really increased the benefit to households, which is now $835 a month for a family of four. That's bringing roughly $230 million in federal funding each month to New York State.

In November the Governor announced some important changes to the program: A simplified and shortened application, for example, that can be both used for applications and recertifying. A longer certification period. It used to be you had to recertify every 24 months, and now it's every 36 months. And we eliminated the requirement that you had to do it in person, so now it can be done without having to show

up in person. So we've tried to make a bunch of changes here.

I would say for households with children, the pandemic EBT benefits have also been made available, which are pretty substantial. We're talking over a billion dollars in benefits to 2.5 million children in 2019-2020. In 2020-'21, 1.9 billion to 1.9 million children. So the caseload has gone up modestly across the state for SNAP, so certainly there's been some uptake there.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Great. And then since the portal was reopened on ERAP, we've advised people to apply for protections. Do you know how many New Yorkers have applied since it was reopened?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah. So since it reopened on January 11th, there are about 7,000 applications, or essentially an average of 841 per day.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you so much, Commissioner.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

To the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

We are joined by Senator Andrew Gounardes.

SENATOR GOUNARDES: Thank you, Senator Krueger.

Hello, Commissioner.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Hi.

SENATOR GOUNARDES: Great to see you in this role.

A couple of quick questions. First, a quick comment.

I'm not going to reask you about the Guidehouse contract that I know was already asked about. Just to say that, you know, this is the consequence of what happens when we give no-bid contracts to entities that we have no accountability over. And it really is a reflection on just how poor a procurement process is where we divest from the public sector and we don't develop these internal capacities ourselves. We have public agencies like yours that are able to do this work, and when we just give out this money without even asking or second-guessing

ourselves, it leads to problems like this.

And I'll echo what Assemblywoman Rosenthal said, that 13 percent out of $150 million is still a lot of people that could have had their rent paid because of no fault of their own. So I hope we can really think about that moving forward and that you'll be able to tackle that, you know, in your new commissionership.

I want to pivot a little bit on ERAP and piggyback off of the last question from the Assemblywoman. Is there is a sense of how many more people are out there that have not applied yet that would benefit from ERAP protection? Has the agency done any analysis, or what's our best guess for folks that we haven't touched yet?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I don't think that we actually have one.

So when we did the request to -- the Governor made the $1.6 billion additional request, we were essentially looking at the pace of applications to date and extrapolated from there. And I would say, you know, when

it first reopened, you know, right after the 11th, the first week or handful of days, it was a bit higher. It has come down somewhat since then in terms of the daily rate. But the best we could do with that is to simply take the anticipated number given the previous numbers.

SENATOR GOUNARDES: And so I guess the 1.6 billion number is reflective of what we have in outstanding liabilities based on what we currently know? Or does that project future --

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: It projects future as well.

SENATOR GOUNARDES: It does. Okay.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: My only -- I mean, listen, if it projects out a short bit -- I don't want to get too --

SENATOR GOUNARDES: Sure, of course.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: It's a little difficult to I think request of the Treasury a number that isn't backed up by, you know, a solid estimate. And so it's a little hard to do that. But if it goes out a

short bit, I think it's mostly looking at what we already know.

SENATOR GOUNARDES: Got it. Thank you.

And my last question is, what additional resources would you need as an agency or what process would you need us to help work on so we can match potential nonpayment cases in courts with the ERAP program or the LRAP program, to kind of be a more seamless process? You know, how are we doing on that right now, and what more could we be doing there to support your work in connecting those -- you know, the right hand to the left hand?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Well, there is a data share with OCA, so they can actually see who's submitted an ERAP application, for example. And so there's that back-and-forth that exists now.

And tenants who've made an ERAP application, if they were to be brought into court by their landlord, can produce those notices or produce what they got out of the

system as evidence of the same, even if the OCA couldn't find it. So for sure that back-and-forth happens now.

SENATOR GOUNARDES: Okay. Great. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblyman Anderson, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Thank you, Chairwoman.

Thank you, Commissioner, for answering our questions. I will try my best to be brief; however, I do have a number of questions. The first I'm going to start with is the childcare vouchers.

Many folks have applied for childcare vouchers that are distributed via OTDA on down here to HRA, or have applied for those vouchers. But I want to know what specific measures are taken to speed up the process in which those vouchers pay out to the daycare and childcare providers, because oftentimes

it does take quite a bit of time for those vouchers to pay out, which impedes the ability of working-class families to get back to work. That's the first question I have.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So let me just answer that, which is to say that it's actually not OTDA, it's OCFS.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Okay. So I'll make sure I direct that to Commissioner Poole and her team.

In terms of ERAP, I want a clear answer on this because I can't get a clear written answer on this. So I've heard from constituents and from colleagues that if someone applies for ERAP or -- yeah, ERAP, and they have been waiting for God knows how long for that to pay out but they're still accumulating rent, that if they apply for the one-shot deal they're being discouraged from applying for the one-shot deal through HRA because it will count negatively against their ERAP application.

Can you just put to bed whether or not that double negative is actually occurring?

And if you can point to any directives that you've given to your agency to ensure that if a tenant applies for ERAP and then turns around and applies for a one-shot deal because they've been waiting for ERAP for God knows how long, are they being negatively impacted via their case?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So the -- that's largely correct. I would make just a little adjustment to what you said.

They get the tenant protections, of course, because they applied to ERAP. So -- and I know it's very frustrating for landlords and tenants alike that applications are pending for -- you know, not paid, if you will, for months at a time, for the reasons I've already mentioned.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: I'm sorry, Commissioner, I don't have much time. So yes or no, are people being negatively impacted by this --

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I'm going to answer it. I heard you, Assemblymember.

So the -- if you have an ERAP

application, you can't actually get the public assistance. You'd have to withdraw your ERAP application -- the thing I wouldn't urge people to do at this moment, because of the tenant protections in the ERAP application.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: But I just want to clarify, though, Commissioner, your folks on the state level and on the city level, a different agency, are telling people to pull those applications. I just want to acknowledge that.

And my last question was about emergency housing choice vouchers for domestic violence victims. Did you guys ask for additional funding in the budget, or do you plan to ask for additional funding in the budget for emergency housing vouchers for domestic violence victims, given that domestic violence is on the rise --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes or no, because time has run out.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So emergency DV shelter is actually OCFS also,

if that's what you're referring to.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: No, the vouchers. The vouchers, Commissioner.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: The vouchers are available to the folks in DV shelter in the same way in which they are in the DHS shelter.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. We move to the Senate.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I think we're up to me. I have a bunch of sort of follow-up questions.

One, I believe the answer on the number of supportive housing units, based on what the housing commissioner said the other day, is anticipated to grow from 6,000 --

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: To 10,000, yes.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: -- to 10,000 over five years. So my question for you, are we planning in the budget to have adequate funds for the social services that must accompany successful supportive housing units?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yes. In ESSHI there is adequate resource to cover the services and operations for the additional units.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Following up on Senator May's question about the impact of the bonus model -- and I just want to reiterate it is your bailiwick, whether you think it is or not, because -- she gave the example of that $3,000 bump for one month might put a working but poor home care attendant out of eligibility for PA. I think the more common story would be the bonus money will kick that home care worker's entire household out of the SNAP program because of the one-month bump in pay.

That could be large numbers of people losing their entire benefits because one household member had a temporary bump. And of course in food stamps -- excuse me, SNAP, I'm old -- you know, if Aunt Jessica is living with the family, her wages impact everyone else's SNAP. If Grandma's working as a home care attendant and gets a one-time

bonus, her income bumps food stamps -- SNAP -- and potentially also household members' Medicaid.

So I really urge you to help the Governor's people understand -- I am not opposed to giving people more money, trust me, but we want to do it in a way that doesn't risk losing them more in federal benefits than we're actually giving them as a one-time bonus. And I think only your department is in a position to be able to explain the complications of how these programs all interact.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, I think -- I appreciate that, Senator. And when you started down this road I thought, Oh, now I get it, I get what Senator May was asking.

So first I thought she was asking me about the bonus itself, which doesn't come from us. But you're right, and I get it.

So for sure -- for sure this could be an issue. And I think we are happy to discuss about how best to address it. It may

be that, you know, in the budget negotiations there's an exemption made for those receiving bonuses. But I think an approach to addressing this, because we certainly don't want to harm an entire household over the long term because of this bonus. The whole point of this was to improve their economic security, improve their financial circumstance. And it would be very counterproductive if we then kicked them off of, for example, SNAP benefits, as you point out, for this reason.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Exactly. Thank you.

One of my colleagues was concerned about NYCHA not getting ERAP eligibility. You know, I don't necessarily lose sleep over that because of course we know if your income went down and you're a public housing tenant, they are supposed to recertify you at the lower income. So if you're at zero because of COVID, well, guess what, your rent is zero for those months also because it can only be 30 percent of your income.

So I'm more concerned about making sure that NYCHA knows what the rules of the road are. If somebody's income goes down, they have the right to be recertified at the lower income. And I would rather we use our very limited ERAP for people who don't have any option to lower their rent costs.

So I'm just putting that out there as perhaps a disagreement within the Legislature.

But something I am concerned about -- and you and I have talked a little bit about this already, about the use of HEAP and the new expanded HEAP to help pay all the back utility arrears. I am very careful that you don't make the mistake of taking away the HEAP from public housing tenants. It's a very small amount, but because public housing tenants don't have a separate utility bill in most cases, unless they continue to get a HEAP payment, they can lose up to $100 per person per month in SNAP because of the way that a SNAP budget is done.

And I won't bore us all, but I

actually helped get that into law maybe a hundred years ago, how we calculate that. So I really don't want to turn around and see we thought we were just taking a little bit of HEAP money away from each public housing recipient and instead we, pardon me, screwed them on SNAP. So --

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: No, no, there's no change there.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. Fine. Good. Good. You know, every action has a reaction.

And you heard about ERAP and people's concerns. I'd Shared some concerns with you yesterday about problems, and just emphasizing I know we don't have enough money now. We cannot be turning people away from applying. And you actually, I think, have over 600 million that have been approved but are not yet out the door because of some technical problems. And I know my office is desperately trying to help people fix them, and I told you this yesterday -- landlords are so excited when we call them and say "We

just need this from you and we can get it taken care of." And we really think that your system needs to figure out how to do better outreach to landlords or tenants who apparently don't know that you're missing something from them. Because God knows we want to get this money out for people, both the landlords and the tenants.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: If I may, Senator. So we've actually worked real hard on that, and of course are paid outreach for this program. So there were -- there have been 31,000-ish 180-day notices. So you didn't use the phrase, but I'll use it, so it's the 180-day notice.

So just for example, the tenant puts in an application, the landlord puts in -- he's supposed to match that, so there's a matching application. Oftentimes the tenant puts in one but then the landlord is missing something or another. They get this notice. Both parties see the notice, they get a notice that says, here, we're missing thus-and-such and you have 180 days to get it

to us.

In the last few months that number, that 31,000-ish, is now down to 23,000. So some 8,000 applications have been completed and are getting paid. So for sure it's having an impact, the outreach is having an impact to get those applications completed so that those numbers get paid. Because as you know, it's first in, first out. So we can't move on to future applications until the 180 days passes on the ones that are pending. You know, which is why when people see that it's pending or it's provisionally approved, it's sitting there waiting for something else.

And we are now pressing, we're working with community-based organizations, with the local districts, with landlord and tenant organizations to get those applications complete. And I think it's having some impact.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And just in follow-up to quite a few of my colleagues in both houses' points --

and we all know this -- our shelter allowance levels are too low to afford rent, our FHEPS levels are still too low, you can have vouchers and never find an apartment in New York City based on the complications. I'm very disturbed to read, just I think yesterday, an article saying that in New York City two-thirds of the families who apply for shelter are rejected.

I beg you to go look into that. I have the highest respect for the efforts the city has attempted to make during this extraordinarily difficult time of COVID and growing homelessness and impossible mismatches between income and rent costs. I'm very proud of the fact that I never fight a shelter that comes into my district, because I understand we need them, even if nobody wants to have to be there.

But something's wrong, Commissioner, if we're rejecting two out of three families who come to us for shelter. So I hope that you will work with the City of New York to figure out what the heck's going on there.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I know that you didn't pose that as a question. However, we have looked into it some already. I think, you know, without getting too far into the weeds, it's not exactly as presented in that article.

Here, where it was the case, you had a 10-day conditional stay while they investigated your actual need, and you had to produce documents and so forth to demonstrate your actual need for shelter as a family.

In the past, if they didn't produce whatever they needed to produce, they would be sent out of that shelter, they'd have to go back to PATH, to the entry point in the Bronx, to do it all over again, as you know.

Well, that's not what's happening now. What's happening since COVID is you stay. You stay in the shelter, you can do it from there.

And listen, for better and worse, it's been -- folks just haven't turned in the materials that DHS says they need to ensure that they are actually eligible. So they

reapply. So we see the rate of reapplication going up in place. They never left, they're still there.

The biggest drawback, of course, is that until they're found eligible, the clock doesn't start to run on the voucher, right, that would get them permanent housing. Which the story did -- that article did address.

So I think -- we're looking into it. I can tell you that it didn't go unnoticed.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. I have used up my time. And welcome back to the state. As we know, you have gone back-and-forth between the state and the city agencies multiple times. Looking forward to continuing to work with you.

Thank you, Helene.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblyman Burdick, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you, Chair Weinstein.

And thank you, Commissioner. I wanted to speak to you a moment about reentry housing.

I serve on the Correction Committee, and I also have two correctional facilities in my district. And I know that the Executive Budget does have a modest reentry housing initiative, but I'd like to get an idea of what the longer-term strategy is given the fact that, as you know, the Department of Corrections and the Legislature is moving ahead with programs that will provide for more to be released from our correctional facilities.

And the tragedy of it is that so many of them end up in homeless shelters, as I'm sure you know. In two consecutive budget hearings, Commissioner Annucci acknowledged that the vast majority end up in homeless shelters.

So tell me what the longer-term plan is, because this is obviously going to be continuing for a while.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, certainly there's an intersection here for OTDA and the local districts with Corrections.

I mean, the reentry housing is really in the Corrections budget, and it's I think largely driven on their side of the house. But we are more than happy to collaborate, work with Corrections, among others, on what to do about reentry housing.

You're not wrong --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: If I could just interrupt you there, because, you know, it's interesting because Commissioner Annucci kind of intimated that, well, you know, this isn't what we do, that's not really our mission, is to provide housing.

So, you know, I had suggested to him that among the agencies, whether it's HCR, whether it's you, there really needs to be some coordination. There needs to be --

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: We completely agree. We completely agree. You're absolutely right.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: And it doesn't seem to be happening. And I would just say that since the principal mission of your agency is to provide temporary housing -- or

at least one of the missions -- then I would think that somebody has to take this on and to say, Look, this is something that we acknowledge is part of our mission and part of what we should be doing.

And I would really appreciate the opportunity to discuss this offline among yourself and the other commissioners.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Absolutely. I'm in my third week of work, but this has --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: And congratulations, by the way.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you.

This has already come up as a discussion. I'm well aware that somewhere around 22 or 24 percent of single men in shelter in New York City were in a prison or a jail within the previous 30 days.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: I think it's actually higher, but in any event -- we won't quibble.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So we get that there's a real challenge, and it runs

across agencies. I'm happy to work with you and others on this.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Super. Thank you so much.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Senator, are you going to go to your second round?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: We have a second round just for our chair, Roxanne Persaud, three minutes.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you. Thank you. So Commissioner, quickly, I'm just going to go through these.

Going back to the COLA, we know there's a $500 million COLA. Could you tell us, how is your agency going to use that to ensure that all current contractors, regardless of whether they are listed in the statute, that they are covered with that? We want to ensure that the COLA is going to them. And then --

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Senator, if I may. So as I mentioned earlier, OTDA only has one small program that this affects. And it's -- you know, it's a modest

adjustment in that budget of $165,000. We only have a short handful of staff that this affects.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. Can you tell me also in terms of contracts -- I'm going to skip the contracts because it's going to get into the Guidehouse thing.

Can you tell me, will OTDA receive sufficient additional staffing and personnel resources to oversee the large ESSHI project and the program portfolio? Do you think so?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, I believe we have adequate staff to handle the adjustments in ESSHI and the housing budget, yup.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. And so going to the DV provisions in the budget, could you provide details on how the program will be administered based on the 2023 Executive proposal that maintains the $5 million in support of that pilot program that was from 2018 onward?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I'm sorry, I missed part of your -- I think my

connection skipped a bit here. This is on which now?

SENATOR PERSAUD: DV. So in 2018 Congress passed legislation reauthorizing the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act. And so we -- in the 2023 budget there's $5 million in support of the pilot program. Can you provide details on how this program will be administered? How does OC -- sorry. Can you provide details on how that will be administered?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Senator, I think you actually were about to say where it actually lives, which is OCFS.

SENATOR PERSAUD: I think I missed a line in my notes I'm writing. I'm going to get back to that question. Sorry.

Can you tell me, how does -- I'm going to go back to COLA again, because I want to make sure that we're understanding this. So, for example, can a SNAP outreach worker not be covered under the COLA but a NOEP worker is, a coordinator is? Can you tell us? Even though you said it's a small percentage of

people. But we're just trying to get a sense of what is happening. Because our understanding is that some people who are sitting in the same office, one person can be getting a COLA and the other one will not. Can you address that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So it is the NOEP program. It's the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Right.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: It's a 5.4 percent increase, for about $165,000. That's the only COLA adjustment that is living within the OTDA budget.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. So just to clarify, a SNAP outreach worker will not have it. Okay, thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblywoman Rajkumar.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN RAJKUMAR: Thank you. Good afternoon, Commissioner Tietz.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Hi.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN RAJKUMAR: Congratulations on your new role.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN RAJKUMAR: So my question is about the report that was released this week in the news outlet THE CITY. And I believe Chair Krueger referred to it earlier, and I would just like to hone in on it a bit more.

Unbelievably, it was reported that the rejection rate for New York City homeless families applying for shelters was over 75 percent in 2021. That's up from a 50 percent rejection rate in 2016. The major barrier to families securing a place in a shelter was the City Department of Homeless Services' burdensome requirements. Those requirements included requiring families to document their living situations for the past two years and proving that they do not have any alternative.

OTDA heard almost 1400 appeals of these DHS housing assistance denials last year. That's almost 500 more appeals than OTDA heard in 2020. And amazingly, in 38 percent of cases OTDA ruled that the DHS

decision was not correct.

So my question is, what specifically could OTDA do to help reform this application process so that homeless families get the housing they are entitled to without a lengthy appeal? I'm very interested in your thoughts. Why did OTDA hearing officers overturn so many of these DHS rejections? Can you give us some insight?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, so we've had some initial conversations with DHS following that article.

Here's what I would note. That in addition to what I described earlier about how they can now apply from where they are, they don't leave shelter -- as opposed to previous, where they would have been sent back out of a shelter, having been found ineligible for reasons of -- for, among other things, for reasons of not providing the evidence required and would have to go back to PATH.

Some of the other reasons here with regard to the OTDA and the decisions is

that -- a couple of things. So in the past some of these would have just been denied because the client didn't show for the hearing. Now those hearings largely happen remotely, so the show rate is much higher. I think for the agency, for DHS and its representation, in the past they would have stipulated more of these things and there wouldn't have been a ruling against the agency, it would have simply gone along -- the client would have made out their case and the agency would have said, Fine, you're right, and they would have been found eligible for shelter.

So we're digging deeper on this, but I think -- I guess I would just say I wouldn't take that article as the whole story here. And that some of this really relates to the change in which both the client applies and how hearings happen since COVID.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN RAJKUMAR: Okay. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Since there are no Senators with questions,

we will continue with the Assembly.

Assemblyman Bronson, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Commissioner, for being here today and for your testimony.

I want to talk a little bit about the Child Poverty Reduction Act, and I'm so thankful that Governor Hochul joined us and signed that into law. And I'm also encouraged that you included this measure in your written testimony.

As you know, this act sets a goal of reducing child poverty by 50 percent over the next 10 years and through the advisory council, of which you're the cochair, sets up a framework to establish benchmarks, transparency, and accountability.

Contrary to your written testimony, I actually strongly think that the budget is directly related to reducing child poverty -- and this act -- as a budget is a statement of priority based on investments being made. Recognizing the advisory council has not been fully appointed yet, my question is: As

commissioner, what funding measures -- tax credits or support for programs -- are contained in this budget that will help us to begin to reduce child poverty in the 2022-2023 budget year?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Well, I certainly described some of them. And I think with regards to the benefits level and the earned income disregard, it's certainly a start down this road.

But again, it's a start down this road. We never intended for this to be the whole story. And I think it's -- we're looking forward to the opportunity to work with the Legislature and other stakeholders -- that's the counties, the local districts, the providers, experts in the field -- as part of this effort to come up with a comprehensive strategy and plan going forward.

I don't -- I hear the comments with regard to what folks view as outdated or broken, and I assure you that we're going to have a whole conversation on this.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: That's great, Commissioner. I'm so thankful that you're looking forward to this process and really holding us to this goal so that we can achieve this. I strongly believe we can.

You know, it's so important in my district. In the City of Rochester, any given day -- any given day -- there are 2,000 children who are homeless in our Rochester City School District. And that's unacceptable. So we need to move forward in making sure that all of our agencies -- certainly yours and others -- are committed to reducing child poverty. We owe it to these children and the future generations. So thank you, Commissioner.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Assemblywoman Forrest, three minutes. There she is.

Just so members know, so you can keep an eye out and be prepared to speak, it will be Assemblywoman Hunter, Assemblyman Meeks, and then to close, Assemblywoman Rosenthal, for her second round of three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Thank you, Chair. I'm sorry, I had to stretch my legs.

All right. Thank you to the new commissioner. Good luck with the new job.

We have a growing crisis of homelessness, with over 92,000 homeless families in the state. I know that OTDA already contracts with an extremely robust outreach network that includes many well-funded nonprofits. But this doesn't address the crisis, because many people do not want to go to shelter.

Do you know -- well, do you agree that we need to fully fund rental assistance so that outreach teams can successfully move people off the street and into permanent housing?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So as I noted earlier, the Governor has announced, with Mayor Adams, the expansion of those outreach teams and the addition of clinical services, particularly mental health and substance use-related services for folks in the subway and on the street.

We work in close collaboration with those sister agencies and with the local district, with DHS, which contracts with BRC to serve folks in the subways. And so with that, we're very much involved in that expansion and have a significant collaboration role in this.

I think what folks should understand is that it's a long haul, oftentimes, from getting -- from, you know, repeat engagement with very challenging cases, very challenging individuals who have got a lot of problems. It's repeat engagement that will get them out of that circumstance and ultimately into permanent housing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Right. And so that's why we appreciate the work of these outreach teams that identify the people, the individuals in the community, and actively engage them over and over again.

So is there a plan -- I'm glad that you mentioned the city and the state working on this. But is there a plan to pass an expanded Housing Access Voucher Program in

this year's budget in order to do that, to support that work?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So I want to -- so the short answer is yes. Of course I described earlier the Governor's capital budget with regards to additional supportive housing, which I think is particularly relevant to this crowd.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Commissioner, I'm not talking about supportive housing, I'm talking about the HAVP, Housing Access Voucher Program.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: So HHAP is partly what I'm referring to here. So there's the support and services piece of supportive housing, and then there's the capital piece of supportive housing.

I'm just going to note again that I think the issue here is engagement with those folks to get them to a very low-barrier kind of stabilization temporary housing, and then ultimately into supportive housing if that's what makes sense for them.

That's not a short ride, as it were.

Many of these folks require repeat engagement again and again before they even are willing to leave the street or the subway. So -- but for sure, in the longer haul here, we're creating 800 to 900 new supportive housing units, some of which I would anticipate would go to these folks coming out of the subways and off the streets.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Thank you, Commissioner.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblywoman Hunter, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HUNTER: Yes, thank you.

Good afternoon. I have three questions.

How many nonpayment evictions are projected? And what is OTDA doing with localities for these displaced New Yorkers?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: I don't know that I actually have a number on evictions. I don't think that's something -- so much that we can track. I think we can certainly inquire and get back to you. It

may be a matter that's -- as between the local districts and the courts, we may have some sense of the number, and we can certainly follow up.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HUNTER: Okay. And you had mentioned that there are 7,000 pending applications since January 11th. Obviously I live in Onondaga County, so none of those are mine. But those are based on the fact that the court said you had to open up the portal, but there isn't any money to fund those applications.

So if somebody presents at eviction court with that application, even though we know that there isn't money to fund it, is that still eligible for someone to not be evicted?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HUNTER: Okay.

And relative to the Housing Access Voucher Program, I see a bill that Cymbrowitz has, we've made mention of it several times. Some of it is for people for shelter, you made mention of domestic violence. Is there

an opportunity -- because we need to look past the pandemic. And obviously this housing crisis has impacted many people. Many of the people in ERAP and in my county as well were not eligible for the program because of the median income that they had to have in relation to how much housing costs.

So a $50,000 in annual salary person in Syracuse wouldn't have been eligible, where maybe an $80,000, $90,000 salaried person in New York City would, based on the average housing cost. So trying to see will there be any mechanism to help the middle-income earners with these huge increases in rent that are coming and will only need to be helped by assistance from OTDA in some type of voucher program because they can't afford it? And it's just another form of eviction.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: It's a great question. And I'll say that I think, you know, for sure many of our programs are targeted at lower-income households.

You know, I'll note that in ERAP --

not ERAP, but in the tenant program that matches LRAP, right, so the 80 to 120 of AMI. So for arrears, that actually is fairly undersubscribed. I think only about 20 percent of that money has gone out the door. For someone who's got COVID-related arrears, that program is still available and still open. Which for sure, at 80 to 120 of area median income, is taking in middle-class households.

I think for the longer term we're open to, you know, discussing with the Legislature what makes sense in terms of future investments. But admittedly I think the $100 million supplement that the Governor has provided takes in folks who may be above public assistance-eligible at some point, but it -- I wouldn't necessarily describe that as reaching middle class in a way which probably most of us think about middle class.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HUNTER: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We move on to Assemblyman Meeks.

ASSEMBLYMAN MEEKS: Thank you,

Madam Chair.

Commissioner, you mentioned earlier and I was glad to hear discussion about the benefits cliff and that it's recognized. And you put a dollar amount on the benefits cliff. What are the chances of accompanying that with a timeline of sorts? So say, for instance, a person, you know, makes X amount more one month and then, you know, the benefits they're eligible for, they're no longer eligible for them. What's the timeline on that? Is it two months, three months, a year, what? Is there a timeline?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: There isn't.

ASSEMBLYMAN MEEKS: Okay. And, you know, that's something I would think we'd -- I think we should take into consideration, implementing a timeline.

For instance, if it happened in a month, that would be too soon for a person to actually save up some resources. We see that in Rochester, in Monroe County, instances where a person was receiving, you know, $600

a month towards their rent, and then the benefits cliff, they fall off, and they're no longer eligible for that 600 -- but they're only making, you know, $5 more an hour. It just doesn't add up.

So, you know, I think we need to consider a timeline as opposed to a dollar amount or put the -- couple the two together.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Again, I think as part of our entire sort of anti-poverty agenda effort and the overhaul of the public assistance benefits, the Governor has made clear that this -- what we've proposed here now in this budget is a starting point, not the end point. And that going forward, we are open to a far larger conversation as part of the Child Poverty Reduction Act Advisory Council's discussions and coming up with a strategy and plan. I anticipate that this will be a part of it.

ASSEMBLYMAN MEEKS: Great. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to our Social Services chair, Linda Rosenthal, for three minutes in a

second round.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Thank you. I guess this is your last three minutes on the hot seat this year.

I wanted to just follow up on a couple of things. Even though 80 percent of New York State's supportive housing program funding supports salaries of direct care workers, the program wasn't part of the list of OTDA and the other O agencies proposed to receive a 5.4 percent COLA increase. How can we include that in the 30-day amendments? because it's not really fair for that sector not to get the COLA.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Yeah, I appreciate your question and your concern.

You know, this is statutory. It's really not up to us. Certainly if the Legislature wishes to go in a different direction, we're happy to do whatever we're asked to do.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay, that's good to hear.

Also, so ERAP funds -- we've got

27 million, the Governor asked for more. At the end of the day, what happens to the tenants and landlords, particularly small landlords, who will not get paid? I fear there's going to be many, many evictions without those parties being paid.

What do you think about the state taking up the slack? Or how else do we get out of this crisis so people aren't living on the street adding to the homeless population? It's a crisis. And we want the federal government to step up, but what happens if they don't?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: It's a very good question, and one that concerns us greatly. The Governor has committed a lot of resources here and offered up, as I mentioned earlier, $2 billion for COVID-related expenses, which may be one resource to address this. I am reluctant to suggest that we should go there promptly, given that our request to the Treasury of $1.6 billion remains outstanding.

And so I think -- I do think that

this -- we should continue to press on our federal friends about getting as much federal resource as possible. But for the longer term, it's a very fair question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay. And -- well, thank you. I agree with you.

Also -- I have very little time -- back to the vacancy rate in supportive housing. We know that the city is requiring so much documentation, and that's part of the reason that it takes so long for people to actually move into their units. What can you do to help cut through the bureaucracy?

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: You have mentioned this to me previously. And I -- we've looked into it. We don't think there is a 10 percent vacancy rate. So we'd love to see where you're seeing that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Look, the city is expected, you know, to turn those units in pretty much 30 days, as best I understand it. So as a unit empties out, whatever improvements or repairs have to be

made, et cetera -- and there's a whole list of folks who are all set to go. Like there is -- as you know, there's more demand for supportive housing. They know who those folks are, and they run them to those units in order. I think they get to look at three, they have to pick one. The turnaround happens quickly. It is very much in the city's interest to turn those units as quickly as possible and not leave them vacant for long.

So we're happy to discuss if you've got some data for us to look at, I'm happy to look at it and then talk with them.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: All right, thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Commissioner Tietz, for being here with us today. And look forward to having continued discussions as we work on the final budget.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you so much.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: There are no more questioners.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TIETZ: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: And now we will have Greg Olsen, the acting director of the New York State Office for the Aging.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Hi. Can you hear me?

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes. Just wanted to mention -- just a reminder that you have 10 minutes to make an opening -- for remarks. Your testimony has been distributed to all the members, so feel free to summarize and not necessarily use all the 10 minutes. And then there will be questions from some of the members, the respective Aging chairs and other members.

So the floor is yours.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Well, that sounds great. I will summarize some, but I promise you I'll stay within the 10 minutes.

So again, good afternoon, Chairpersons Krueger, Weinstein, Chairpersons May and Kim, all the distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly standing committees.

Again, I am Greg Olsen, the acting director of the New York State Office for the Aging, and I'm really honored, as always, to testify on provisions of Governor Kathy Hochul's proposed budget that directly impact NYSOFA programs and services, along with additional budget proposals that will positively impact older New Yorkers and their families.

Governor Hochul and her administration's commitment to older New Yorkers is unprecedented, and I think you see that within this budget looked at holistically. The Governor's State of the State message and subsequent proposed Executive Budget contain many initiatives that are positive for older adults and their families. But the approach is much broader than one particular agency -- it's about making New York the healthiest state in the nation through a multi-agency, coordinated effort which focuses on improving physical and behavioral health, preventive health care strategies, embedding healthy aging and

livability principles into general government and local government operations, expanding age-friendly communities and age-friendly health systems, expanding access to services and training for older LGBTQ individuals, supporting informal caregivers and working caregivers, addressing disparities in access to care, and so much more.

Utilizing the Prevention Agenda from '19 to '24 as the umbrella, and instituting a Health Across All Policies approach, New York State agencies are incorporating health considerations into our planning, programs, and initiatives. As agencies, we're committed to working together and considering how all of our policies fulfill New York's pledge as the first age-friendly state in the nation. We are already meeting this pledge for New York's older population, and now we have the opportunity to further strengthen and coordinate this vital work through the Governor's proposed State Master Plan on Aging.

This master plan is consistent with

the goals and work that New York has been engaged in to improve communities for people of all ages and create healthy environments in which to grow up and grow old.

As you know, New York became the first age-friendly state in 2018 because of that foundation. And through much-needed investments, the Governor's '23 Executive Budget expands and strengthens this foundation with initiatives that will help individuals of all ages access needed services and lead healthy lives. We do this by maintaining all of our core services and many of the legislative adds from last year, investing almost $3 million in efforts to combat isolation, bridge the digital divide, encompass elder abuse prevention, baselining Holocaust survivors' dollars, continued improvements for our New York ADRC, which is called NY Connects, creating the master plan, as I mentioned, and strengthening the Long Term Care Ombudsman program.

To meet the growing needs for services in the pandemic, NYSOFA received more than

$149 million in federal stimulus funding that we immediately distributed to all counties. This funding has met a variety of needs, including, in addition to the 20-plus core services that are available throughout New York State on a daily basis, several key areas, including home-delivered meals, grab-and-go meals, shopping and supply delivery, prescription drug delivery, critical transportation to things such as dialysis and cancer treatments, combating social isolation, shifting service delivery to virtual programming where appropriate, elder abuse mitigation and scam prevention via enhanced education and outreach, helping individuals get vaccinated, both at vaccine sites and in the home, as well as getting boosted.

State-level executive orders, coupled with the federal disaster declaration, the MDD, have allowed NYSOFA to provide counties and their community-based partners with maximum flexibility in the delivery of these services, eliminating barriers that would

otherwise unduly impede responsive action to community needs during the pandemic. These flexibilities remain in place today while we work to safely reopen community outlets that were closed.

On a national level, our office's advocacy efforts assisted in securing policy and program changes that really impacted the entire nation, and additional resources to help older New Yorkers. We are also leading a national effort under our Older Americans Act Modernization proposal to better resource this network and to continue to provide flexibilities that will allow our counties to meet locally determined needs.

The demands of COVID-19 have also strengthened our existing core partnerships with many state agencies to help New Yorkers, such as our work with Ag & Markets on access to food, the Department of Labor on support for working caregivers, the Department of Health on all COVID-related health and safety issues, the Office of Mental Health on addressing social isolation and mental health

issues magnified by COVID-19, the Office of Addiction Services and Supports on prevention and treatment for alcohol and substance abuse, prescription safety and abuse and problem gambling, the Division of Veterans' Services, where 63 percent of the veterans are over the age of 60, and of course our partnership with OVS to expand our enhanced multidisciplinary team elder abuse mitigation model.

Throughout the pandemic NYSOFA developed and tested new programs and projects to assist older adults. The FY '23 Executive Budget provides critical funding to sustain and significantly expand these efforts. The Governor's budget provides the support necessary to continue our trailblazing initiatives like our award-winning animatronic pet project, which has proven to reduce loneliness, pain, depression and isolation, as well as our partnership with several tech platforms that are bringing virtual programs into the homes of older adults. This includes our

partnership with the Virtual Senior Center, GetSetUp, leveraging the therapeutic power of pets through our Pets Together platform, and our partnership with the New York State Council on the Arts to bring professional teaching artists into the homes of older adults.

NYSOFA has also begun partnering with GoGoGrandparent, a targeted rideshare service, to increase transportation options and economic opportunities for older adults.

We're launching a multicounty evidence-based intervention pilot that uses complex analytics to identify caregiver burnout, which is a leading cause of placement in a higher level of care.

Our partnership with the Developmental Disabilities Planning Council is working to better equip and train our network to serve older adults who are taking care of individuals with ID or DD.

We teamed up with the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services to bring FEMA resources to continue providing

nutrition throughout New York State. Our comprehensive assessment tool that we use now includes a screen for social isolation and technology capacity. We've partnered with the Department of Health and HANYS to better integrate clinical and community-based care to improve outcomes for older adults under the Age-Friendly Health System priority.

NYSOFA is also the nation's first state in the country to partner with the National Association of Home Builders to make their Certified Aging in Place Specialist, or CAPS, training available for our case managers. This certification will better prepare our staff to assess, recommend, and incorporate home safety features into care plans, helping individuals age in place and prevent injuries and falls.

Finally, through our partnership with the Health Department, we'll be expanding a very successful integrated care model that started in Monroe County that coordinates aging services with health services, and to strengthen our NY Connects program, both on

the data and reporting side as well as the state resource directory.

But again, this budget is about a lot more than one agency. For our lives, our older adults' lives, we touch more than one system, so we can't look at this budget in terms of just the State Office for the Aging. It really has to be examined holistically. Older adults like you and me touch every different system, and I've outlined just some of the key areas that have also been invested in. And hearing some of the other commissioners speak about all the overlap that occurs, whether it be in housing or transportation or in SNAP benefits, et cetera, the litany goes on and on. This is a really significantly positive budget.

We're always going to continue to work with anybody and everybody -- state agencies, local agencies, the private sector, your offices. This has always been about partnerships, leveraging different assets. We all can't do this alone; we have to, you know, connect the dots, tighten things up

where there are cross-systems issues that impact, so that we can treat people the way they need to be treated -- holistically and not siloed.

So as always, I always look forward to being in front of you. I thank you for your longstanding support of not only my office but all of your constituents and the partnership that we've maintained over the course of many, many years. And I look forward to any questions that you have of me.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Acting Director.

We go to Assemblyman Kim for 10 minutes, the chair of the Assembly's Aging Committee.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Just need to reset the clock.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Chairwoman. And thank you, Director Olsen. It's good to see you, and thank you for your testimony.

I want to start off with some line of

questions regarding the Unmet Need Audit that the State Comptroller had issued, and I want to give you an opportunity to address some of the concerns. But basically the audit is saying that the money that we allocated to meet the unmet need was inefficiently allocated by your agency.

But I want to first focus on this particular statement, which to me was the most meaningful line in that audit, which says: "In some cases, clients who cannot withstand the wait have had to resort to nursing home placement."

There are roughly 10,000 older adults on the waiting list for basic services. An implication of that line is that the more they wait, the more they're pushed to older adults.

So my first question is, to start off, Director Olsen, how much do taxpayers actually spend on each institutionalized older adult -- you know, long-term facility or nursing home?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, the

average nursing home rate, roughly, statewide is about $150,000 a year. And that's primarily financed by Medicaid.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: And in some cases, obviously, it goes way on, what, to 200,000-plus-dollars a year as well.

And how much do we roughly spend to provide care at home for older adults, in community care?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So in our network, to provide, you know, the basic package of services that somebody traditionally gets is, you know, you're going to get case management, because that's a critically important systems issue and advocate to make sure that people are getting what they need holistically; usually personal care Level 1 or 2; and probably a home-delivered meal.

Now, there's a variety of other things that somebody, depending on the assessment and the care plan, may receive. But if we just took that as kind of our starting point, it costs anywhere between $7,000 or $8,000 a

year, depending on where you are in the state. But it's under $10,000.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: And I also read somewhere that between 20 to 30 percent of institutionalized older adults actually don't need to be in those facilities if they had proper support in place. Is that an accurate depiction?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: You know, I don't know. So, you know, the way I'd answer that, Assemblyman -- and I appreciate the line of questioning -- is, you know, because of how our system works, which is we're able to trigger services long before somebody needs the type of skilled care you would get in a nursing home. Right?

We're able to organize not only a package of NYSOFA-funded programs and supports but, because of the way that we're structured, leverage so many other community partnerships, whether that be adult protective services or the court systems or working with law enforcement. And I want to be quick in terms of the time that you have.

You know, we're able to, again, prevent emergency room visits, hospitalizations and nursing home admissions because we're able to start earlier.

And I think, you know, the idea of focusing on prevention is something we've all talked about for decades and decades, which is finally starting to be embraced, not only at the federal level but also at the state level, that prevention strategies matter for people, their outcomes, where they want to live, and certainly has cost ramifications that are positive.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Right. But another way to frame this, the reason why I start off with the numbers is if it's costing $150,000 more, on average, to institutionalize an older adult versus spending 7, 9, up to 30,000 in New York City, sometimes, to have a community and home care in place -- another way of looking at it, there's much more money to be made on the other side of this equation in terms of the secondary, intermediary market spaces making more money. So the

natural market forces tend to push people into institutionalized facilities because there are more stakeholders out of our hands that are making more money.

So, I mean, the point of my line of questioning with that is that the auditing, going back to the auditing of the Comptroller -- instead of really looking at the systemic and market failures that clearly favor institutionalizing older adults, I mean, I feel the Comptroller is taking a cheap shot, a scapegoating of SOFA, which should be supported even more as the only agency, in my opinion, that's delivering preventative solutions in a very broken long-term-care system.

Do you have any thoughts to that assessment?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: You know, I do. And I so appreciate your comments. And I don't know who else, you know, read the audit, but many of you know your county offices for the aging. They certainly have worked for me for a long time.

You know, I've spent 30 years of my career serving your constituents, and hopefully will do that for a very long time. We have always had a very strong partnership because aging is not political. This is about helping people remain independent, valuing the population.

And so to even suggest, to me, that I myself, the staff for the agency that I've been entrusted to oversee on behalf of the Governor, and this network, starting with the AAAs and our 1200 contractors, that we didn't step up during the pandemic and provide services -- which is what the takeaway from this audit was -- is simply false. We have doubled our service capacity.

So what I'm going to ask you guys to do is, in addition to reading the audit, I'm going to refer you to my written response to the audit, because that's the facts. And it corrects the inaccurate findings of the audit. The data that you cited is not correct in terms of the number of folks that were awaiting services. That data set is

years and years old. And unfortunately, I think much of the time that I spent communicating did not wind up in the audit.

And it's disappointing, because it puts a cloud over what this day could be, which is really highlighting the incredible efforts of your counties, your providers and our office in doing the job that needed to be done. Because job number one was serving people, and that's exactly what we did.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: And I will just add that the danger of the Comptroller's audit of SOFA is the knee-jerk reaction that may come out of it. Which may follow to further take away the agency's funding streams and hand it over to third-party quasi-government contractors, what the Empire Center once called shadowy nonprofits.

And I hope that, as lawmakers, that that is not the reaction that we have, and we'll work with you to making sure that SOFA is more efficient and effective.

But speaking of these third-party contractors, like Health Research, Inc.,

HRI -- and I know we've spoken about this before, but does SOFA contract with HRI in any capacity?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: We don't contract with HRI, Assemblyman. We have, you know, fortunately gotten some really good staff that worked at HRI that now have joined my team several years ago. But no, we do not contract with HRI.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Are you aware of a September 2014 Department of Health-HRI RFP contract that was to study and prepare the state for emergencies like the pandemic?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: I am familiar with it because you had raised it with me last week, yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: And specifically, the RFP gave HRI federal money to prepare for hospital to nursing home surge in emergencies like the pandemic. But it's my understanding that other agencies that are focused on community care, like yourself, and home care, that not part of that discussion. Is that correct?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: You know, I can't respond to that, Assemblyman.

What I can respond to, because HRI is a -- you know, directly works with the Health Department, are the efforts that our agency is involved with, with DHSES and all the other state agencies, as well as our involvement at the county level in all the emergency operations planning that, you know, deal with this as well.

So, you know, we have a long track record in working at the state level and the local level and in partnership with others on emergency management and preparedness. But I can't speak to the HRI RFI {sic}, I'm sorry.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: That's okay. And, I guess, the line of my questions is that the right course of action would have been to empower and include SOFA in every step of the way in our state's emergency preparedness plan. But that's not what happened, and I hope there are some lessons learned so we don't repeat the same mistakes moving forward.

I'll just transition for my last one minute for the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. The executive did not include any dollars for this program, but we plan on supporting and giving some teeth to this program. I hope that your agency will work with us on putting in some real dollars to make sure that we have the proper oversight program over long-term facilities.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, I'm with you a hundred percent. I think that there's a couple of things. There was $2.2 million to hire 17 additional staff in the Health Department to be able to receive those types of complaints from facilities that really rise to that level. That's a real promising thing.

As you guys know, the Legislature passed five different bills last year impacting the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. So I'm actually really excited about the study. I think it's the right time and right place to do that so that we can really have a thoughtful, deliberative

process on how we empower and strengthen, you know, the response for the LTCOP program to be as successful as possible.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

And we go to Chair of Aging Rachel May, for 10 minutes.

SENATOR MAY: Thank you so much. And I'm just going to run with the ball that Chair Kim was starting with.

So first of all, going back to the ummet need, the waiting list for services, what is your estimate of what we should be pushing for? And I agree with Chair Kim that we can't let that Comptroller's report deflect us from the fact that we really need to meet the need for people to stay out of nursing homes wherever possible.

So what is your estimate now of the waiting lists and the people who -- or the amount of money that we should be asking for?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So on the

financial front, Senator -- and thank you for the question -- we have the money within our networks, from the five different stimulus packages, our basic federal allocation, the General Fund commitment to older adults, as well as the proposal to continue the 23 million in unmet funding.

Where we're seeing -- the unmet need numbers have gone significantly down, and that's what we all expected. Of course, you know, I know that you're carrying a home care bill. There are other proposals in the budget to try to, you know, attract, retain, increase salary, benefits, for direct care workers. That's the area that we are dealing with right now, is on the workforce front.

But, you know, we're not standing around and doing nothing. So I want to let you know like what we are doing. We have the ability, and have since 2014 -- and, you know, I have to implement tools that I have within, you know, my authority, which we are doing. We have the ability to negotiate higher rates to incentivize aides to assist

our clients. We have a partnership that we are strengthening with HCP that oversees the LHCSAs to do exactly that: Can we target particular areas where there just isn't an aide available to, again, provide the types of resources that would incentivize them to work with us.

You know, I asked my staff, my legal staff to review my powers and authority under federal and state law, because there's a lot of nuances to who makes decisions at the local level. We're different from other agencies, in that I don't have state staff out in the community. We contract with counties, counties contract out with 1200 organizations. I can't make them hire, I can't make them spend money. And I'm not suggesting that they're not doing that, but a lot of times decisions are made outside of the director of the county office for aging.

So we are looking at those tools. And if I need to get more involved in, you know, working with the county or directly contracting to get these services turned on,

then I'm prepared to do that. Because I cannot go home at night every day knowing that for the first time in our history we are resourced and then some of these things may not get turned on because of misunderstanding or not knowing that the funds are going to be there or that they're recurring.

And so those are the things that I'm prepared to begin to do.

SENATOR MAY: Okay. Thanks.

And then about the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. So I'm happy to hear that there's funding in the Health budget for receiving those complaints. We had to push very hard to get that avenue opened up so that the LTCOP complaints can go to the Health Department.

But we are also asking for $20 million for hiring more paid staff in LTCOP. Is that something that the ombudsman program can -- has the capacity to handle if we were able to get $20 million for paid staff?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Well, you know, we switched years ago, Senator. This

program used to be run by the county offices for the aging, and they would get about $13,000. Now, you cannot run a program on $13,000. So we consolidated, regionalized it, made sure we had, you know, paid full-time workers, et cetera, in the 15 regions.

So why I'm excited about this budget is, you know, as some of the other commissioners have said, it's the beginning point. I think this issue is so important that -- I know that the Governor has talked about it, has met with families, has met with Assemblyman Kim directly. There is legislation that's been passed.

So, you know, I am sure that this conversation is going to continue over the next -- you know, over the budget negotiations. But, you know, what any resources -- whether they be federal, in Build Back Better, where there's $400 billion for this. In my modernization plan there's money for LTCOP. In the Build Back Better there's 1.4 billion for the Older Americans

Act that would impact this.

However that winds up, you know, at the end of this whole process it would allow for additional resources and staff and oversight to make sure that there's a presence in facilities across the state.

SENATOR MAY: Okay, thank you.

Now let's talk about the COLA that is in the budget, 5.4 percent. My understanding is it only covers some of the programs, the EISEP, the CSE and WIN programs, but not the NORCs and not social adult day programs.

Is there a statutory reason for this? Do you understand what the --

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yes, I do. Let me explain, because I know that that's the way that it appears.

So it's almost $6 million. And the way that this is implemented, by what you have read, is CSE covers every single service that we provide, including social adult day. You know, EISEP covers a variety of services, not just in-home care. And WIN provides a variety of nutrition programs. So those

collectively really make up the network.

We have had conversations, and I'm pleased to report to you that we are going to be including the types of tasks within the NORC program that are consistent with the provisions in CSE. And then again, because of the additional revenues that we have, social adult day programs not only would be covered under this COLA, within our budget, because that's a fundable service through two of those three funding streams, but also the additional 149 million and the additional 48 million proposed to continue unmet need -- we think we'll be able to get there.

SENATOR MAY: Okay, thank you.

And let's talk about the home-delivered meals. The people who do the deliveries, are they just volunteers? Do they get paid? At what rate do they get paid? Does the COLA apply to them?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yes, the COLA absolutely applies to them. I mean, we've had a 100 percent increase in nutrition. That has been the biggest impact

of the pandemic.

So it's a mix and match. There are obviously paid staff. There are paid staff that prepare meals, there are paid drivers. And there are volunteers who help prepare meals and volunteers who help, you know, deliver meals, depending on where that you are.

But of course that is a main part of where we want to try to get resources. We operate the largest nutrition program for older adults in the nation. We're doing about $30 million a month.

In addition, as I mentioned, we partnered with DHSES to make sure that we had access to the same FEMA emergency nutrition money that New York City applied for. So that is ongoing. What that will do is not only bring a lot of federal resources in, but it will help stretch our existing dollars further because we can spend those FEMA resources first.

SENATOR MAY: Okay. And then the Master Plan for Aging, what is your plan for

that? What is the timeline, what would be the process, how can we make sure that this is not just something that sits on a shelf but is actually put into practice?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, well, I'm with you, Senator. I want to make sure we have a good outcome out of that.

As I mentioned to you last week, and for those who are listening, you know, we've been doing this type of work since 2006. This is really an opportunity to build on the Prevention Agenda, Health Across All Policies, Age-Friendly New York, age-friendly health systems, dementia-capable health systems, all the work on the economic development side with downtown revitalizations. And then many of the proposals that the Governor put in her budget that impact other agencies, from housing to increases in mental health and access, in transportation -- I mean, the litany goes on and on.

We need to coordinate that, because people again don't live in isolation, and

agencies shouldn't be operating in isolation of each other. This all matters to create healthy environments.

So we have put together a draft implementation plan that we're talking to the Governor's office now about. And then you know me, Senator -- this is going to be an all hands on deck. This is -- the more voices of different individuals with different experiences that can come together to make this plan work and build upon what we've been doing to make New York the greatest state -- not an exodus state, but a state people want to move into. Because I've lived here my whole life. I love this state. It's an awesome state -- that's the goal.

So stay tuned when -- we want to get out of the gate running as soon as possible so that we can start our work and, you know, the Governor put, you know, a 1.5 million, two-year commitment forward to help with that. And then we are working with a variety of foundations and other public and private partners. So I think this is going to be

really exciting.

SENATOR MAY: Great. Thank you so much. Great to see you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assemblymember Clark is next, I believe?

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes. Yes. I'm here, yes.

Just so people know, the order is Assemblymember Clark, then Mamdani, then Simpson, then Forrest.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Hello. Thank you, Director Olsen, for being here. I'm excited for the opportunity to chat with you about some people we all love the most, our older adults in New York State.

I'm going to just sort of jump on the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program a little bit more, given some of the numbers in New York State. We have the fourth-most number of folks living in long-term-care facilities in the country, yet we only rank 17th in state

funding for the Ombudsman Program. And if you look at it per bed, we're $7 per bed, which puts us at 39th in the state.

From what we've heard from advocates and those that work in this space, that the Ombudsman Program really -- the best practice, the most effective way to use it, is that there is an ombudsman visiting every facility in the state at least once a week. So I guess -- obviously I am in full support of a $20 million budget ask that we will be pushing for this year. But do you really see any way for the Ombudsman Program to be effective without it going to a more staff-based program instead of so heavily reliant on volunteers?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, thank you, Assemblymember. Appreciate the question. The answer is no. Which is why I am pushing this national Older Americans Act Modernization plan.

Our entire network, the way that we've been structured, has a lot of paid staff but is heavily reliant on volunteers. That's in

meal delivery, working in senior centers, our Health Insurance Information, Counseling and Assistance Program, our Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. That model worked in 1965; it does not work in 2022. So my plan calls for $2.7 billion, which would bring an additional 175 million to New York State to do exactly what you're talking about.

This is a very professional network that works with doctors, nurses, emergency room departments, rehab, nursing homes, hospitals -- and we need to have a staff that reflects that professionalism. I am so thankful for all the volunteers we have. We have over a million volunteers, you know, that are providing $13.8 billion worth of service. And we will always be trying to recruit them, but that is not a sustainable service delivery model.

And then when you go through the pandemic, as I know -- you're smiling and shaking your head. You know this as well as I do, what happened. The folks who are volunteers were the ones who are most

susceptible to COVID. Yet they risked their lives to do the work. And I can't thank them enough.

But, you know, we do. Which is why I'm excited about the study. I think this is an opportunity to do something --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: I'm sorry, I don't mean to cut you off. I believe that I could on with this forever, but I do want to just spin real quick to a very quick question, or put it on your radar. Lifespan did a pilot program which was called the Community Care Connections, and it used Medicaid dollars to have a caseworker work with primary care physicians to actually take care of what we consider the critical services our older adults need.

One of the ways that we could expand that through the state is to put more money in the critical service pot across the state and also allow it to be able to hire caseworkers and case managers to work with primary care physicians to actually get our seniors the services they need, to save

dollars from emergency room visits, healthcare and medical needs.

So putting it out there as an idea. Thanks.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Whoa, whoa. I want to answer because you're going to love my answer.

So first of all, Assemblyman, my --

(Zoom interference, overtalk.)

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yeah, we -- yeah, we've gone over the time. The Assemblywoman went over the time --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: We can follow up later.

(Overtalk.)

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: -- there's $75 million that we're going to expand that program.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: To the Senate.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Sorry about that.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: I see you have some more Senators, and we have a number of Assemblymembers.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: We do, thank you.

Senator Roxanne Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you, Director. A couple of questions I have are pertaining to food delivery, home deliveries.

First, we have a number of agencies and, you know, the reports are telling us about the waitlists for food delivery. Could you tell us how you're addressing that?

And then also, how are you addressing the -- meeting the dietary needs and the cultural needs in the food delivery for the seniors?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Okay, I don't mean to ask a question back at you, but I'm shocked to hear you say that. So where are you saying that there is any waitlist for home-delivered meals?

SENATOR PERSAUD: My district in New York City.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So New York City has had a broad FEMA grant since the beginning of the pandemic that anybody over 65 years old is categorically eligible for.

That is still running today. That was, as you know, overseen by the now-State Ops Director Kathryn Garcia.

New York City DFTA, who is our AAA that represents the five boroughs, received almost half of all the stimulus money and receives almost half of all the federal and state funding that goes out the door. So if there is anybody waiting for meals, they need to be connected to the organizer who's continuing the FEMA project, because that's 100 percent federal dollars that can meet the need.

In terms of RD standards, you know, those were waived during the pandemic but we still tried to maintain them. All of our meals and menus are RD-certified. They meet the highest national standards. It was only in the very beginning of the pandemic where we were trying to get, you know, meals out the door regardless. And, you know, we weren't always able to meet the highest standard at that time, but we've been back on that -- on that piece for a very, very long

time.

In terms of cultural meals, those are things we work very closely with our RDs, with our counties, because that is critically important for a lot of pockets around the state, to make sure that the meals that are being delivered do exactly what you say. They're not going to be used if they don't meet the taste and the way that meals are prepared for certain populations.

If that's not happening, please, you know, follow up with me.

SENATOR PERSAUD: I definitely will, because I still -- as of last week I had complaints about that, the need for -- particularly in a certain community, for kosher delivery and Bengali delivery and stuff like that. So I will definitely follow up with you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Wonderful.

SENATOR PERSAUD: And again, thank you very much.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Thank you, Assemblywoman {sic}.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go back --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I'm sorry, that was our Senator. Back to the Assemblywoman.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Back to the Assembly.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go back to the Assembly.

Assemblyman Mamdani.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you, Director Olsen. I'm just going to jump into it, in the interests of time.

Governor Hochul previously spoke of the need for wage increases for healthcare workers, yet there is no such increase within her budget proposals. While these workers are eligible for the one-time bonus that the Governor has put forward, I haven't seen any research that bonuses alone will solve New York's worst-in-the-nation home care shortage.

Does your agency have any data to

support the idea that a one-time bonus will address this shortage?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: I do not, Assemblyman. I thought, when I went through the State of the State and the proposed budget, that there were quite a few investments in the healthcare/long-term-care workforce, with real dollars, bonuses, and a Medicaid enhancement.

That's not my area of -- that's not what we do, but I do look through all the others just to again show the value of the budget looked at holistically.

I completely agree with what you guys have raised today. I think that's the value of these hearings, is that, you know, you do not want to provide -- even though the intent is right, you don't want to provide a bonus that's going to then knock people off of, you know, Medicaid or earned income tax credit, you know, SNAP, HEAP, other types of benefits. So I think that your raising that today, not only to me and to the other commissioners, will help get it into the mix.

because nobody's trying to do harm. I think like the last commissioner just mentioned, it's about trying to improve people's economic security. So your raising the benefit cliffs is critically important.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you. And I think just to assert -- my interest fundamentally is that any increase that we put forward should be a permanent one, because while a one-time increase is a good thing, frankly the need is at the level of permanent wage increases. And I hope to see that matched.

With my final question, Director Olsen, I wanted to just let you know that a few weeks ago Budget Director Robert Mujica said that, quote, Home care workers were taken care of with minimum wage.

What do you believe he meant by that statement, and would you agree with him?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: I did not hear that statement. I think -- I'm not quite sure where we are in the phase-in with the minimum wage. I do know what aides are

paid. I know -- again, we have a fairly large in-home program also for people who are just above the Medicaid rate. And the rate that we're paying PC 1 and 2 is around $25 an hour, so that's where the aides are getting $12, $13. And that certainly is not a wage that can help people maintain themselves without applying for other benefits, and it certainly doesn't assist people in trying to get into a business that's very, very difficult.

So I'm not really sure what he was speaking to, but I think the overall idea is that this is the largest-growth area of business in the entire country, to take care of, you know, not only older adults but younger people with disabilities, people that might have MS or early-onset Alzheimer's, and I think we all collectively have to figure out how to do it.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you, Director Olsen.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go back to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And five minutes for our ranker, Sue Serino.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you, Madam Chair. And it's great to see you, Director.

I'm just going to say for the record I'm disappointed to see Lifespan cut, and I hope you're going to advocate for its restoration.

I also have a number of questions for the Master Plan for Aging, but I'd like to follow-up with you afterwards, offline, just for the sake of time.

So I'll start. I see a small note in your testimony about NYSOFA partnering with GoGoGrandparent, a targeted ridesharing service, to increase the transportation options and economic opportunities for older adults. And I know you know for years I've been trying to highlight the transportation challenges that older New Yorkers face. And I carried the bill that would establish a pilot program where older New Yorkers could trade in their vehicles for transportation

credits.

I'm just wondering if you can talk about the GoGoGrandparent partnership.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: I certainly can, Senator, and thanks for that.

And your last point was the economically sustainable transportation project that we started years ago that wound up never taking off the ground, unfortunately. But yeah, so -- you know, and again I think all of these things we're talking about really address, I think, some of the misinformation in the audit. These are the types of things that we've been doing for the last two years.

So GoGoGrandparent originally started by training people specifically in the needs of older adults, and it was using Lyft and Uber. Since our partnership with them, now you can directly sign up with GoGoGrandparent to be a driver. So that's what I mean by the economic opportunity. You can actually have, not only with GoGoGrandparent, but GetSetUp -- individuals who are older can

join the gig economy and actually get paid for what they're doing.

So what we're doing now is we've developed a campaign that really has three phases. We're working with Becky Preve and the Association on Aging, with some of our counties, with NYSAC. We have capacity in quite a few counties, meaning there's a lot of drivers that are already part of GoGoGrandparent. So we're going to be targeting older adults in those areas that the service is available, targeting caregivers that this service is available -- because an older adult may say "I don't need the ride because my son gives me a ride four days a week," but the son would say no -- and that would be really helpful, and then build capacity in the rest of the state where we don't have drivers yet.

So we had already begun that partnership, and then the Governor proposed in my budget an additional $500,000 to do those three things. I am super-excited about this.

SENATOR SERINO: Good. That's great.

I'm going to go on to my next question because I don't want to run out of time. You know, while nursing home oversight does not fall under your administration's purview, the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program does. And as you know, the state directly and indirectly shut the program down during the pandemic, leaving an already vulnerable population without critical advocates.

So knowing this, do you believe that the state effectively prioritized the health and safety of older New Yorkers throughout the pandemic, and do you believe that the state should perform a full review of its pandemic response, especially as it relates to older New Yorkers, really to better understand what was done well and what wasn't, and to ensure we are better prepared to protect this population if and when we face a future pandemic crisis?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So, you know, to say it was a difficult situation for residents and families would be an

understatement. I guess I'll leave you with this, Senator: You never know where you're going until you know where you've been.

SENATOR SERINO: Right. Absolutely. And that's why I am a firm believer that we have to look back and delve into what went wrong and what went right. So thank you for that.

My next question, though, is very interested to see a $500,000 appropriation to develop the State Master Plan for Aging. Can you describe the process you'll undertake to complete the plan? Is it expected that additional funding would follow to then implement the plan? And is there a time frame established for this process?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So the $500,000 you talked about is for this year. There's also, in the financial plan, a million dollars for next year. We have foundations like the Hartford Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, SCAN, the Health Foundation of Western and Central New York. There's over 200 organizations.

So as I mentioned, we have developed a draft implementation plan that we have had conversations with the Governor's office on. You know, this is a multiyear effort, I would suspect, given all the pieces that are in there, including long-term-care reform. So one of the ideas I have is, you know, there was a bill passed to reimagine long-term care, I believe that was Senator May's bill. Those types of things all need to be folded into this.

But the master plan, Senator, which is what I like about the master plan in age-friendly, is it's not just about older people. There's a huge focus on that, and rightly so. This is birth to death, what do communities need to do, how do you pull all the various agencies and subagencies at the community level together to create environments that are healthy for people to grow up and grow old. And that's really the opportunity I think that we have, and really a signature piece for this Governor.

SENATOR SERINO: Great. Excellent.

Thank you. Thanks, Director.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblywoman Forrest.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Hi. Thank you so much for being here.

My question -- I thought Simpson was ahead of me. I didn't prepare my questions.

Chair, I need to pull up my question because I thought Simpson was going ahead of me. So just give me one second.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Okay, why don't we go to Assemblywoman González-Rojas then, and then we'll come back to you.

Jessica, are you there, González-Rojas?

(Overtalk.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: I'm sorry, I thought Phara was speaking --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Well, I found my question.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Phara's back on, okay. Okay, she's there.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Okay,

let Phara go and then you come back to me.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: All right. So thank you so much, Director.

My question really is regarding the home care workers. It's clear that New York is in the best financial shape that we've been in in decades. I mean, when we talk about a $5 billion surplus, that makes me excited. So now it seems like this is the moment to invest in the care workforce that keeps our communities and economies strong.

Especially when we look, during the pandemic, at women of color doing the essential work that keeps our communities moving, I think they definitely deserve not to be left behind, and in fact need to be at the forefront.

So wouldn't a real raise increase be much better than an investment like a one-time bonus?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, and I agree with you. I mean, workforce -- you guys have asked every person so far on the

workforce issue. It's an issue, from the nonprofit sector to long-term care to healthcare.

What I read in the budget was multiple ways to increase salaries for staff in healthcare, long-term care, et cetera, in addition to the bonus. So I am not clear -- because that is not under my authority -- that it's just a bonus. I saw many other things that are in there.

And I think, you know, if a bonus knocks people off of benefits, that's not a good outcome. And a one-time bonus does not really do anything to recruit and retain workers.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FORREST: Right. Right. And I would agree. As a nurse, I understand -- not only as a nurse who visited people at home and see that they're literally holding onto benefits to keep afloat, but on the other side, these are skilled-care workers. Like they learn something to provide the care to keep our most vulnerable populations home. And they deserve a fair

wage increase, and not just a one-time bonus, thank you, that really doesn't mean much at the end of the day.

But thank you so much for your comments. I return my time.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Sure. Thank you, Assemblywoman.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Senator Krueger, did you --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Yes, I have a few questions, and then I pass it on -- I'm sure Senator May has a second round after this.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: So 10 minutes for Senator Krueger.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I won't need 10 minutes.

But thank you very much, Greg. I just -- I think that both chairs did an excellent job laying out the bigger picture for your agency, so I urge you to be an even more assertive advocate for the population of older New Yorkers, who are waitlisted in many ways on many different programs.

And I just want to reiterate the point of Senator Persaud. I represent Manhattan. On the East Side of Manhattan we have formal waiting lists for Meals on Wheels. I got a call from Visiting Nurse Service yesterday; they are not able to get meals for vulnerable New Yorkers leaving hospital stays.

So I don't know who's telling you what, but I'm telling you this is not being addressed adequately at this point in time.

And kudos to Kathryn Garcia when she was working for the City of New York, doing a phenomenal job trying to feed more New Yorkers than I think has ever been done by any government in history. But things are not working right now. So --

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So, Senator --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: -- if you have the ability to track this -- yes.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Senator, why are folks not able to access the federal funding for this? So that's where I'm not clear. I don't understand -- if you have

somebody who is older, they're eligible for the FEMA-funded meals. Where's the disconnect?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: You actually have to tell me. We tracked back to the one group who supposedly evaluates your eligibility, says you're eligible, passes that along to somebody else, who says there's a waitlist to be added to getting you the food.

So I don't know whether it's a money issue, a staffing issue, a -- I don't know why. That's why I asked you as the commissioner.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So under the MDD, anybody 60 and over is eligible for, you know, DFTA meals -- the dollars we give to DFTA. And under FEMA it's 65 and over. There are no eligibility requirements.

So if that's a recommunication we need to have with DFTA, we certainly will. I've been expressing that message for two years now, that we have these flexibilities that you have to put in place because job number one is to serve people. So we will double

back on that.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Please do. Because maybe DFTA has an answer for you.

But I just want to assure Senator Persaud, and I suspect other legislators here at this hearing, that no, you're not imagining it, Roxanne, we really aren't able to get meals for seniors in many neighborhoods in New York City.

Second, I am also disturbed if in fact the Department of Budget, Division of Budget said the home care workers have been taken care of. Because we know we have a crisis in home care, right? We do know that, don't we, Commissioner?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yes, we do.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. So if we have a crisis, we need answers. And I suspect the answers involve adequate pay for people to be able to -- I understand in upstate New York it's even worse than in New York City, and that home care workers aren't even able to afford the vehicles they would need to get to and from the locations

that we need them in.

So tell me what more we're going to be doing in this year's budget to address that crisis.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Well, I think your raising this not only at this table -- but I'm sure you will as well at the Health table on the critical need -- is important.

I think for us, you know, what we're trying to do is continue to educate the counties and their contractors that -- the contract with LHCSAs -- that they have the ability to raise their own rates. We're not bound by Medicaid rates or MLTC rates; we can do that.

We've been working with counties directly to have them hire aides on the county payroll, which takes care of the transportation problem, because they can use cars. They have -- they're in the state retirement system, they're receiving a living wage with benefits.

We are also working with HCP that

represents the LHCSAs so that we can identify those areas where there are not aides available, and to work with them to try to recruit them through some of these tools that I talked about.

Under the Medicaid side, again, that's not what we do, unfortunately. I'm hoping that Build Back Better gets back on track; they're starting to talk about that again. There's dollars there. There's dollars in Build Back Better for our network, another $150 million. If the pool of Medicaid PC aides and home care goes up, that will have a trickle-down effect in better access for us as well. But it's a challenge.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. I cede back my other minutes. Thank you, Assemblywoman.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Thanks, Senator. Thanks for calling me Greg, too. I appreciate that.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblywoman González-Rojas.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you, Chair. Hello, Director Olsen.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Hello.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: I also want to underscore my concern for the home health workers. I feel like no one should be in a job that works so hard and is -- and needs benefits, right? I mean, if they're not losing benefits -- they shouldn't have to have these public benefits, they should be paid enough and have the benefits included on which they could live with dignity as they help serve our families.

And I'm someone who has used a home health aide when I broke my leg about 11 years ago, so I know the -- how vital their care is.

But since a lot of people talked about that, I'll move on to another issue that I care deeply about. We know that given the fiscal and eviction crisis that's been exacerbated by COVID, it's more important than ever to protect our older tenants. And I see $2 billion for eviction legal

representation. I'd love to share more about what -- how that would protect older immigrant adults with disabilities. And I ask that because I have a bill that would expand eligibility for the disability rental income exemption program, DRIE, to extend it to undocumented immigrants who are our elders and have disabilities. And I hope this is something the administration will get behind.

But in the meantime, I want to hear about how that $2 billion would be used. And specifically for undocumented immigrant --

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: So, Assemblywoman, that's a great question. I was as excited to see that as you were.

That is not under our budget. I believe that's under OTDA or OCFS. It's $2.2 billion not only for, you know, rental assistance but to basically replicate the legal service protection in -- that the city has had for a while, in upstate New York to provide legal representation for eviction.

But there's also a variety of other funding around the housing areas, the

eviction, rental assistance, et cetera. So I have the same question as you because I think that, you know, our next step for all the great things that are in the budget -- once, you know, we get to the finish line here, depending on what gets passed and what doesn't -- is to make sure that all of our counties and their providers know who the point of contact is for all of these things.

Because, you know, we don't operate this program, but we deal with evictions all the time. We work with Mark Streb and his coalition of, you know, housing preservation providers across the state. And these are the things we need to know, is when you're subject to something like this, where do you go so that you're not making 17 phone calls and there's nobody on the other end picking up the phone and you have an automated system and -- that's just not helpful for anybody.

So I don't -- I don't oversee that. I'm sorry I can't answer that in more detail.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you. And just to affirm what you just said,

like no older adult wants to navigate these complicated systems, particularly ones that may not speak English or, you know, are English-dominant. So thank you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Right.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We send it back to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Oh. Thank you.

I believe we have Senator Rachel May, the chair, for her second round.

SENATOR MAY: Right, yeah. Thank you.

So Greg, you fielded a lot of questions about home care, even though I know the home care workforce isn't under your auspices. But you have been successful in embedding in your budget something that ought to be obvious, which is that investments in helping seniors age at home result in savings to Medicaid. And you've actually had line items put in the budget that way.

Can you give us advice about how we can carry that reasoning over into the health budget so that we can argue that investments in raising wages for home care workers

actually have a rate of return that's probably higher than the investment within the budget?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, it's a great question, Senator. And, you know, having been around a really long time, what I learned -- you hope you get smarter over time, right? I learned that if you don't have data and metrics behind what you're talking about, anecdotes just don't work. We know how important these things are.

So what we did to initially win that 15 million -- and subsequently, you know, you have added to that, in partnership with your colleagues last year, and then it's been baselined. So we're looking at, you know, $76 million over a four-year period if this budget passes. We looked at what happens to people. If we're able to -- if you're not on Medicaid, which our folks are not -- our average person is an 83-year-old female who lives alone, low income, four chronic conditions, two ADL limitations and six IADL limitations. On paper, they could spend down

to Medicaid. But by providing all of these services that we provide, in conjunction with many other systems, we looked at what happened to people who weren't able to access them and found that almost 20 percent wind up on Medicaid, either in a nursing home or MLTC or community Medicaid. And it's not hard to do the math on that.

And in addition, the average person stays on our caseload for between four and seven years. So there's outyear savings to that, not to mention they don't have to spend down and lose those assets, and they stay where they want to stay, which is in their home and community.

SENATOR MAY: Great. And then my last question is about family caregivers who are part of this workforce that we don't talk about enough. Your office works to help family members do the work that they need to do, right? You do training and that sort of thing for family caregivers.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yes.

SENATOR MAY: I have carried a bill

for a family caregiver tax credit because it costs a lot of money for people to care for someone in their home.

So I -- we're running out of time, but I really want us to make sure that family caregivers are on our radar and we're thinking about how to help them.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yup. Caregivers are central to healthcare, long-term care, social services. They are providing the bulk of care in this nation and in this state, no question.

SENATOR MAY: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblyman Jones, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Hello, Commissioner, how are you? Or Director. How's it going?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Great, Assemblyman.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: I didn't know I was up right now, but that's good.

Have to emphasize -- you know, I know

it's been said numerous times here about our home care workers, desperately needed. I think there's two issues going on there, obviously pay and recruitment. Because, you know, maybe -- well, that will go hand in hand, so I have to put in, you know, my call for that as well. And I know many on this hearing want to work towards getting more fair wages for our most important -- or some of our most important workers that we have, taking care of our loved ones, letting people age in place. That's what we want for our family and neighbors and our loved ones. So anything we can do to help that process, I'm all for.

I know it's -- I don't know, I missed some of this, I was down in session and in conference. But, you know, I've had a great relationship with you and your office going back to my county days and working with our local office of the aging, and certainly do appreciate that.

But there was an audit that was put out there, and I know you responded to that,

Director. Do you care to elaborate a little more on that? I'm sure it's been asked, but I missed it myself.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, it has been. As I mentioned, Assemblyman, I appreciate your comments because, you know, you specifically, in the various roles that you've played, you know the work of our office, you know the challenges at the county level, but you know the yeoman's efforts that the county office for the aging in the two areas that you represent -- but prior to that, in Franklin County -- you know what they do.

All I can say is I'll refer you back to our written statement on the audit because that's factual. This unfortunately put a very negative cloud over what we do -- frankly, I believe inappropriately. I think my statement speaks for itself. We will be providing the Legislature, as I promised, a report this year. The reason that that was delayed was because, as you know, again -- and for those of you who have worked at the

county, when you start a new program it takes nine months to 12 months before you get through the process of getting the notice of grant award out, to getting the applications out, to having them sent back, to going through the county authorization process to spend, to doing a new procurement, reassessments, getting vendors lined up. You know, we don't switch the light on on a new program the day after the budget's passed.

So, you know, I think my statement speaks for itself. Highly disappointed in what it made our network look like, because that is nobody's experience with our network.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Thank you very much. Appreciate it. Look forward to having you in the North Country soon.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Great, thanks. Great to see you, Assemblyman.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblyman Burdick next.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you, Chair Weinstein. And I want to thank the chairs of the committees for the great work that

they've been doing.

And nice to meet you, Greg -- I take it you prefer that, so I'll do that.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: {Unintelligible}.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: One point again for the chairs, if I could indulge them. If there are documents that are distributed, if they could be shared with the other members here that would be great.

And in that regard you make reference, Greg, to the written statement on the audit, and maybe if you could provide that, that would be terrific. And if I could get contact information for follow-up for you, that would be wonderful.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Sure.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: The digital divide, are you in talks with any cable companies to make internet accessible, preferably free, via hotspots for seniors in senior facilities?

And I'll ask my second question, just a follow-up on the Long Term Care Ombudsman

Program. I recognize that you're looking to change the model and to look to federal dollars in the new program. But what are we doing in the interim?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yup.

So on the first one, it's great to meet you as well.

In addition to the response to our audit -- I'd be happy to send that -- I'm also finalizing our list of 2021 accomplishments, which I think will show abundantly clearly what we really do rather than, you know, what was potentially portrayed. That's a 64-page document, Assemblyman --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Yeah, that would be great. But, I'm sorry, the question --

(Overtalk.)

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: -- I have limited time. Go ahead.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yup. On the digital stuff, you know, the Governor announced a couple of weeks ago a commitment that -- for individuals at 200 percent or

below of poverty, the WiFi monthly rate will be $30. There's a billion dollars in the budget that we'll be able to access that will not only subsidize that $30 but can help pay for the purchase of equipment, tablets, phones, as well as training.

During the course of the pandemic, those were things we used our funding for and told the counties they could as well, to provide WiFi, to provide tablets -- and they did -- help with telehealth calls, et cetera. So this is going to be huge in terms of when we get full coverage for the state, there's actually a funding stream that keeps the cost down but also allows for the purchase of some of this equipment that's going to help people.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: And the interim, what you're doing on the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program until federal money comes in?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah. So again, I think I mentioned earlier there's some dollars for the Health Department to

hire new people to take complaints. We have $150,000 to expand our stipend program, which has been very successful. You know, we're doing multiple things at once. I've got an Older Americans Act Modernization, there's things in the Build Back Better. But most importantly, I think the Governor clearly recognizes how important this issue is, not only to her and her administration but to you as well, and many of the others out there.

And there is a proposal in the budget to, you know, engage people that are interested in this to strengthen the program, so I'm excited about that. And as I mentioned, there are several bills that were passed last year.

So, you know, having a deliberate process that really does the right thing the first time, I'm all for. And I think that's the process that's going to play itself out.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Now we move on -- actually, our final questioner is going to be Assemblyman Kim, second round, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Chairwoman.

Greg, first of all, plus one for my Chair May on the family caregiver tax credit. I carry the bill in the Assembly. Hopefully we can get something done in this budget.

Rightfully so, many of my colleagues have brought up the broken home care workforce and the workers. And unknowingly, I think, they're touching on some structural and systemic problems because home care -- Medicaid reimbursement for home care falls under the Department of Health, and institutionalized facilities, nursing homes fall under the Department of Health under Medicaid.

SOFA has social daycare, community care. But you mentioned that there's some non-Medicaid home care that you oversee under SOFA?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Oh, yeah.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Can we get some clarity on that?

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Sure.

Yeah. So we started our program in 1988.

So we serve about 15,000 older New Yorkers. We use the same infrastructure that Medicaid does -- licensed home care service agencies. And we have a variety of federal, state and local funding streams that fund that. You may know one of them as EISEP. But that is just one funding stream of many. So we have a pretty large in-home program.

In 2014 when MLTC came in, our rates used to be tied to the Medicaid rate. We couldn't exceed it. That no longer is the case. So our counties are able to work directly with their local LHCSAs, many of them are small programs, to raise those rates, enhance the hours, if needed, in order to incentivize, you know, aides that would then be able to serve our customers.

But yeah, we've been doing this for over 30 years.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Let me just reframe that. So you no longer are tied to intermediary managed care MLTC rates, you

have kind of gone back to a fee-for-service county contract direct model where you're able to have better rates and better reimbursements for the home care workers that are in the space that you manage. Is that oversimplified or is it --

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Yeah, from 1988 to 2014, when our program was tied to the same rate structure that Medicaid had before MLTC. Meaning we couldn't pay more than what Medicaid would. And that was really to try to balance the playing field.

Once MLTC came in, they started negotiating their own rates on behalf of the state for that service. We did the same. So we have the ability to exceed --

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: I'm sorry, I have like 20 seconds, Greg. But unfortunately the daycare centers are still tied -- they're like a distant cousin to home care. They're still tied to some Medicaid rates. And MLTCs, they often get left out of discussions of community care. So I hope that we can look at it and fix it and

restructure it under the SOFA model that's working for non-Medicaid home care workers.

Thank you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Okay, thanks, Assemblyman.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you, Greg Olsen. That is all in terms of all of the questioners. So we thank you for being here.

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: Thanks.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We look forward to working with you.

And we're going to call in the --

NYSOFA ACTING DIR. OLSEN: {Inaudible.}.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: -- next government witness, who is the New York State Division of Veterans' Services director, Reverend Viviana DeCohen.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Good afternoon, everyone.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: There you are. Okay. Director, you have 10 minutes. Feel free to not use it all and to summarize your

remarks, which we have already distributed to our members. And the floor is yours. And then there will be some -- the Senators and Assemblymembers will have some questions for you.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Thank you.

Good afternoon, Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. My name is Viviana DeCohen. I'm a Marine Corps veteran, and I have the distinct honor of being the director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services, or DVS. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Hochul's 2022-2023 Executive Budget as it relates to New York State Veterans' Services.

In December 2021, I joined DVS and found a truly inspiring and hardworking group of individuals dedicated to our mission of serving those who have served us. As a veteran myself, and having previously served as the commissioner of the Mount Vernon Veterans Service Agency, I have benefited not only as a constituent from the work DVS does,

but also as a teammate and partner.

Governor Hochul has made it clear in her administration -- and in her budget -- that we are ushering in a culture of respect, teamwork, and expansion in this great state. The veterans' services realm is no exception to this, and DVS is eager and excited to implement the many programs and services to provide the highest-quality care for New York's veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

Under Governor Hochul's leadership, New York remains a state that veterans and their families are proud to call home. DVS's economic impact, which goes straight into the hands of New York's veteran families, yields incredible results annually, with over $790 million in tax-free federal dollars for thousands of veterans and their families in 2021. These funds filter their way into every community across New York State to support not only the over 714,000 veterans of New York, but their entire community and businesses.

The work of this agency delivers concrete results and benefits for veterans and their families in the form of these federal funds and healthcare access. Throughout the past year, DVS has shown time and time again it is ready and able to provide the services our constituents need during these challenging and ever-changing times. DVS has addressed food insecurity, increased public access to veterans' benefits information through digital technology, and expanded peer-to-peer mentoring programs to assist --

{Zoom video frozen.}.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: You seem to have frozen, and we lost --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yup, we've lost her.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Can we -- there. She's coming back, hopefully.

Director, maybe try and speak without your video on. That often helps.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Stop the clock.

(Discussion off the record.)

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Liz, I'm going to leave it to you. I'm going to go walk over to the tech people over here and see what we can do.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay --

THE MODERATOR: Oh, she seems to have sound back.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: She's come back?

THE MODERATOR: I could be wrong, I'm sorry.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Okay, let me go check.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: If she comes back, just let her continue.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And everyone else, this might be a good few minutes to take a break to stretch your legs or eat a late lunch, quickly -- something.

(Pause.)

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We are trying to reach her by phone and see what we can do. Otherwise, we can go to move on to the panels, and when we reconnect -- let's just

give it a few minutes. A good time to stand, stretch your legs.

(Discussion off the record; brief recess.)

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: I'm here. Can you hear me?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes, thank you.

Okay, I'm sure you've had plenty of experience with things not going the right way all the time, so why don't you --

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Absolutely.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: You know, why don't we reset the clock to 10 minutes and just let you start from the beginning.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Sounds good, thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Okay, fingers crossed.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Thank you.

Good afternoon again to Chairs Senator Krueger and Weinstein and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. My name is Viviana DeCohen, a Marine Corps veteran,

and I have the distinct honor of being the director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services, or DVS. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Hochul's 2022-2023 Executive Budget as it relates to New York State Veterans' Services.

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information through digital technology, and expanded peer-to-peer mentoring programs to assist transitioning servicemembers. We are grateful for the support of the Legislature, Executive Chamber, and the tremendous work of the DVS staff, which have enabled us to rise to every occasion.

Food insecurity has been repeatedly cited as a concern for military-connected families. Despite the new challenges brought on by COVID-19, this season DVS distributed over $140,000 worth of FreshConnect checks, which allow veterans, servicemembers and their families to receive $20 food vouchers to use at farmer's markets and stands across the state. In the past seven years since the program's creation, DVS staff have distributed more than $600,000 in FreshConnect checks.

To further address this concern, DVS worked in collaboration with multiple public and private-sector partners to facilitate an unprecedented endeavor to distribute healthy and nourishing meals to veterans and their

families. To give perspective to the expansiveness of the food distribution efforts, since June 2020 approximately 800,000 nourishing meals have been distributed to veterans, servicemembers and military families confronting food insecurity in Western New York, the North Country, and New York City. We are fortunate to have the ability to continue these partnerships to address this vital concern in the communities we serve.

DVS has also worked to provide more points of access for our veterans to learn about their benefits. And we're proud to announce that on Veterans Day of 2021, just this past year, DVS joined with several partners in state government to dedicate New York State's first-ever digital Veterans Welcome Center kiosk. The Veterans Welcome Center kiosk provides veterans and military families with quick and easy access to information about benefits, programs, services and resources available to them. Located at the Capital Region Welcome Center

adjacent to the New York State Thruway in New Baltimore -- a spot that welcomes approximately 500,000 visitors annually -- this digital kiosk marks the first of several Veterans Welcome Center kiosks that DVS plans to place throughout New York State, and Governor Hochul's Executive Budget provides funding to support the expansion of this valuable resource.

Lastly, DVS has endeavored to find ways to best support transitioning servicemembers and make New York State a place they'd like to call home. DVS began this process by facilitating new partnerships between New York State and the Expiration of Term of Service -- ETS -- sponsorship program, a new federal effort focusing on training community mentors and connecting these mentors with servicemembers who are nearing their date of discharge from the military. Already more than 150 New York State residents have completed the training to serve as community mentors. We at DVS are excited about continuing this fruitful

partnership.

Governor Hochul's State of the State agenda and Executive Budget will provide DVS with the resources to build upon these successes and deliver more support than ever to New York's veterans and their families. And while we as a division do an immense amount of work to serve our veterans and their families, we could not do it without the tremendous support and work done by our local partners. It is why we are grateful Governor Hochul's proposed budget would increase county and city veteran service agencies' annual funding from a minimum of $10,000 apiece to a minimum of $25,000 apiece. This represents a 150 percent increase in the annual allocation from New York State to these agency that provide vital services in their areas of operation.

But the efforts don't stop there. Governor Hochul's agenda also provides for expanded support for servicemembers transitioning from military to civilian life, additional resources to help connect more

veterans to their benefits, and increased support for programs offering assistance to struggling veterans. And DVS itself is supported in the Governor's Executive Budget with increased staffing and funding, to ensure the agency continues providing the highest quality of services to veterans around the state.

DVS appreciates the continued support of Governor Hochul and her administration in addressing the needs faced by our veterans, servicemembers and their families. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Governor's Executive Budget with this committee, and on behalf of New York's veteran families, thank you for your continued support of the agency's mission. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We're going to go to our Veterans' Affairs chair, Assemblywoman Didi Barrett.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: Thank you, Director DeCohen. It's so wonderful to finally meet you, even virtually, and to have

you with us. You know, we have been without a director for way too long, and we're just thrilled to have you. And congratulations on your appointment.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: I have a few questions that I want to pose to you, but I do want to say at the outset we're really pleased -- it's the best budget in the four years that I've been the chair of Veterans' Services, and we really appreciate your advocacy and always the division's advocacy -- but also, of course, the Governor's recognition that veterans, from the outset, need to be supported and funded.

It always was this kind of, you know, bargaining chip where the Legislature would put back funding for veterans, and it just was so inappropriate and just such a frustrating experience.

So I'm really pleased that we've entered a new phase of cooperation, as you say, and very happy about the funding for

Dwyer. As you know, that doesn't go through your division, it goes through Office of Mental Health, but that's another topic to talk about. But her recognition that it should be statewide, as it should -- this is truly a program that saves lives and has made a difference in veterans and their families, and I'm really happy to see it be part of her Executive Budget.

So let me start with a couple of questions. The Executive Budget includes an increase in 17 FTEs. I think you mentioned that. Could you just share with us where those benefit advisors are going to be posted?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Yes, thank you for that question. I would also like to say thank you again for welcoming me aboard.

And I'd also like to thank all of you for supporting our deputy executive director, Joel Evans, who I think has done an outstanding job. You know, he is a veteran himself, so I think that he grabbed the bull by the horns and has continued to take this

to the level where it is today. You know, just wanted to be able to say that and say thank you.

Just to answer that question, the initiatives throughout the state are going to be in the area of outreach. This is something that I'm very passionate about because having served as the former commissioner of the Veterans Service Agency in Mount Vernon, I learned of the importance of not only bringing outside services in, but also taking the services outdoors. And it was through outreach that we were able to assist many of the veterans that this department, DVS, had given me the tools to be able to work with to be able to reach those not only that had technological prowess, but those that did not, by utilizing simple methods of going into communities and going into places that they would frequent, like our supermarkets. So that's going to be huge as far as the outreach.

You know, we need to get creative on reaching veterans that do not identify -- and

this was one of the expertise areas that I was able to make headway in Mount Vernon, in a place where 25 veterans were coming every other month, and now 100-plus are coming in there and receiving those services that, again, our partners, who did not hesitate to come into the field with me, are now making the home visits for our elderly -- because we often forget them -- and going to places that most people would not want to go. So outreach is huge. And we're very excited about that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: Great. Well, thank you, that sounds like a good use of those full-time employees.

I think you know that I sponsor, with my colleague Senator Brooks, who I think just joined us, legislation to elevate the division to a one-stop veterans department, to better serve our veterans and our military families. For example, I always use the example that a Vietnam veteran who's struggling with PTSD and substance abuse, and is homeless, must go to five different state

agencies to access services.

So a major incentive for this legislation was recognizing that we really need to better serve our veterans and military families. But in addition to that, we held a hearing in October where the testimony overwhelmingly supported this.

But more compelling to me, even so, has been the statistic that only 17 percent of the overall veterans' population in New York State are accessing these earned benefits. Is that statistic still current?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: No, actually the statistic is 24 -- 24 percent.

But I would like to give you some information, because this is how I am sitting in this seat today. You know, every day DVS establishes ourselves with the spirit of excellence, integrity, strength, but also leadership. And I have been the veterans commissioner in a one-person office, and the training from this body -- that taught me how to ensure that the veteran is being serviced from A to Z -- not only allowed me to

recreate and turn my office into the first-ever veterans' resource closet, that partners gave us brand-new clothing, food, hygiene products, but also allowed me to know that I had to bring the services outside in.

In other words, I brought in mental health counseling twice a month into my office, and the veterans were there. We even brought in the realtors who were savvy in the VA loans to assist our veterans. We brought in education, and it was DVS that I called, and those counselors came right to the office. I created a one-stop shop.

And I'm so glad to also share with you that in just the six weeks that I've been here, and going out to our various veteran services, they're doing the same thing. They've gotten it. They understand that we as veterans cannot go from place to place to place. Some of them are even setting up transportation services, as I did, to be able to transport our veterans back and forth.

You know, we did this in Mount Vernon and I'm so happy to tell you that I'm finding

that throughout the state -- I've already traveled, started traveling from New York City through Brooklyn, Albany, the various counties -- they're beginning to set up the same services. And so I'm so happy to be able to report that to you, because I know that you're so passionate about that. And it makes absolute sense.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: That's great. You're clearly already leading by example, and that's great to hear.

Let me ask you another question, because I have so few minutes here to talk. And hopefully we'll have a chance to meet together and talk, but also that you'll come to our committee meeting. I know people would love to meet you and hear from you.

But let me ask you about our -- we passed the first State Veterans Cemetery last year, and the Governor puts in the budget 4.9 million. But it wasn't included in the federal government's list of approved cemetery sites. So I'm wondering what your thinking is. Are you planning to go forward

with funding or other steps while the federal funding approval is pending? And what's your expected timeline on that?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Well, you know, last year our state-appointed committee selected the Sampson Veterans Memorial Cemetery, that some of you may be familiar with, in Seneca County as the location for our first State Veterans Cemetery.

DVS then applied to the NCA, the National Cemetery Administration, for the federal funding to establish that. The NCA grant funding had a list that was published in October of last year -- they had some funding cuts. The NCA could only fund the first 12 items. We remain today No. 14 on that list. So a grant has not been offered at this time. You know, the grant comes from them.

But the funding opportunity, that we're hoping will be available this year. Governor Hochul's Executive Budget includes appropriations to support the cemetery. So we're hoping -- you know, we're hopeful for

the funds at some point, but we'll have to reassess, you know, at that time. The current money in the budget is that -- just to support the cemetery.

But we are reapplying this year again for the grant in August. And right now, you know, we've already moved up to the list on No. 2. So we're very hopeful.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: Okay. Well, that's good to know. Thank you.

One more question, then. In 2019 the Restoration of Honor Act was signed into law, very proud to have sponsored that. How many veterans has the division assisted through this program?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: I'm sorry, you froze. Could you repeat the question?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: The restoration of honor, where we made it so that other-than-honorable-discharge veterans had access to New York State benefits, even though not necessarily federal benefits, through our Restoration of Honor Act. Are you familiar with that?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Yes. And actually, you know, when I was the commissioner we had more than a few people, especially we're going to find a lot of our senior veterans who have those issues because they had entered service when they were quite young and had a few errors.

Right now, you know, this program is doing wonderfully and we're happy in the direction where it's going. We were able to service quite a few. I believe the first few days that I was here, I was given information that we had honorably restored -- my first day on the job, I think I approved my first one, with 31 current. So that's a great thing.

And as we continue to get the information out to our veterans and assuring them that we are here to restore their honor and dignity -- so many people don't realize that for us as veterans, service never ends. you know: God, country, family and then community. So it's so important for us to be able to go back and capture those who may

have felt that they lost their dignity because of that stigma on their discharge papers. And so, we're very happy for where we're moving, and the direction. There's more to do, but we're right here to do it with you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Director.

Senator Krueger, do you have --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, I do. I have our chair of Veterans Affairs, Senator John Brooks.

SENATOR BROOKS: Good afternoon, everyone.

And I want to pick up where Didi was. I think we're really on an upswing with the veterans programs. I think it's critical to elevate the agency more and get the attention. I think in many ways we've gotten the message out to the veterans that we care, and these programs are expanding and growing, the Dwyer program and all the rest. I think the kiosk program is a great way to reach out.

I would really -- one thing I'd love to try to do is see if we couldn't get, say, a bimonthly newsletter to all the veterans of the state -- an electronic one, so we don't have a big expense -- so we could keep them up-to-date with what we're doing.

But I think the cemetery's great, I think we have to get the funding there, the last complete -- but it was shameful that the state was so far behind in doing that. I just think it's a great, great, great situation here.

The additional funding you're providing to the local agencies I think is critically important, that they can expand that stuff. One of the things we'd like to try to do on Long Island is to see if we couldn't take the daycare program, as it's referred to, at the Suffolk County facility of Stony Brook, and bring that kind of program maybe to the Nassau County Medical Center to have a program during the day. The Island is truly an island, but it's 120 miles long and the location in Stony Brook, from

Nassau County, is quite a trip.

So if we could expand that program. The folks at that agency have had some discussions with the folks at the VA that they might allow, if you will, some co-licensing there. I'd love to do that.

But I really want to say -- and I think both houses' committees, the folks involved in veterans services, their hearts are in it. I think the increased penetration is reflective of the fact that not only are we providing good programs and showing interest, but they're responding to those programs. So I think, you know, we've got to keep at it.

I'm really excited with you joining the program, and I just feel so positive of where we are. And I think in the last two, three years in particular, we've gotten a lot of great stuff done. I think Didi's done an outstanding job in her house getting stuff done. And I think, you know, veterans know they're respected by our state again. And I think we just have to keep on building that.

So I don't have a lot of questions for today. I wanted to say that I'm really pleased with what I saw in terms of the budget. I'm really pleased with what I just heard. And I'm really optimistic with where we can go, and I think to elevate your department is a critical, important step that we do that.

So I thank you, and Didi, I thank you for everything you're doing too.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Assemblyman Ashby for five minutes, ranker on Assembly Veterans' Affairs.

ASSEMBLYMAN ASHBY: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you, Didi. The work that you're doing is incredible, and I'm very grateful for the support and everything that you've done on behalf of our veterans.

And thank you, Director. It's great to meet you virtually, hopefully in person sometime soon. I've read a lot about you, and I'm so impressed with your story and the work that you've down downstate and for

veterans all over the place. And I agree wholeheartedly with you that the service really never ends. And I'm very grateful that you've continued to demonstrate that.

And I think Chair Brooks is right as well, in that I feel like we are on an upswing here, that there are several pieces of veterans legislation that seem to be gaining traction, and there's a lot of bipartisan support for them. And it's great to have you on board and a part of this team and really moving them forward.

I really appreciated your testimony. And I did have some questions, because I too am very happy with what's been included in the Governor's budget, but there are still some things that are excluded in it, in particular 20 programs that, for whatever reason, just seem to be left off the chart for whatever reason, seemingly every year.

And I was wondering if you were familiar with these programs. I know that you're new, kind of coming in, but I know that you have a lot of history with veterans

groups around the state, and if you've managed to contact, or if these groups have contacted you at all -- I'm sure you are tracking the 20 that have been left out: The SAGE veterans project, Clear Path for Veterans, New York State Defenders Association Veterans Defense Program. They provide a variety of services, whether it's legal, rehabilitation-type programs.

Have you heard from them, or have they reached out to you or have you been in contact with them?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: I'm going to ask you, if you don't mind -- because you froze for me, and I missed a portion of what you said after "programs." If you listed them, I did not -- I heard maybe two of them.

ASSEMBLYMAN ASHBY: I don't want to list all of them, because that would -- that's not a good use of my time. I can certainly -- I can send you the list. But some of the ones that have been out there for a while, Clear Path for veterans, which is out of Central New York, SAGE veterans

program, New York State Defenders Association's Veterans Defense Program, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley Veterans and Military Advocacy Project. Those are just a few. And they're included on a list that I'm sure you've seen.

Have you heard from them or have they reached out to you on anything?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Well, as you know, the budget is not final. I can look into some of these further. Some of them I actually am familiar with because we have utilized these services for our veterans. some of these services, we've been utilizing them since I was working with them as students, so I'm certainly familiar with them. I haven't heard from all of them, but I will certainly look into them.

I plan on being the boots on the ground, you know, working with our partners. Our outside partners have just been so tremendous. And, you know, thank you for speaking of the work downstate. I want you to know that in the year that we were able to

serve veterans, those 3,000 veterans -- we served them the one year -- were from the Bronx all the way to Rockland County. And so we had to utilize these partners for them, especially those that needed the legal issues -- you know, you mentioned Hudson Valley, who's very familiar, and some of the others that you touched upon.

These are integral partnerships that we've forged and that we look forward to continue to establishing our relationships, and strengthening, on behalf of our veterans.

ASSEMBLYMAN ASHBY: I'm happy to hear that.

And, you know, what we can do -- because I know that each year it seems to be an advocacy race and tremendous effort to kind of push these programs over the goal line. And whether they're being used as bargaining chips or for whatever reason -- I'm not sure. But I think on behalf of your office and your new leadership post, I think you can -- I think you can make a strong, concerted effort and, you know, find a

victory here.

And, you know, I know many, many of these organizations would greatly appreciate your effort and leadership on here. And I know that you will. Marines tend to be driven.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: (Laughing.) Thank you. Well, that's why they call me Mama V. The V is not for Viviana, it's for Victory.

ASSEMBLYMAN ASHBY: That's great. Thank you, Director.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Thank you, sir.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Senator Krueger, I don't see any --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Other Senators, no. Apparently we were very happy with this budget section.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: So why don't we go first to our ranker on Ways and Means, Assemblyman Ra, and then we will pick up with several other Assemblymembers.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you, Chair.

Acting Director, good to meet you

virtually here. Thank you for your service and thank you for what you do on behalf of our veterans. And, you know, I can feel the passion you have for serving our veterans coming across in this forum, so thank you.

I wanted to ask about -- the state had unveiled this -- its first veterans kiosk in the Capital Region in the new Welcome Center off of I-87 last fall. And my understanding is the Executive Budget is proposing an expansion of this program. Do we know at this point how many other kiosks there will be and where they're going to be placed?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Yes. First of all, I've seen the kiosk. I hope you've seen it. And we're very grateful for the $50,000 that is going to be moved towards these digital kiosks. There's one right now that you can visit at the Welcome Center at the Capital Region. If you've not seen it, it's an interactive service that the veterans will be able to access.

You know, we started with just one. The hope is to have them across New York

State at our major hubs -- the airports, our welcome centers, train stations. You know, I want this to be something that's going to be the norm, you know. Imagine veterans that are traveling or that have no time or have no desire to walk into a building for help -- that in the midst of traveling, that all they have to do is tap on it.

You know, user-friendly -- I tried it out myself, you know. And we can have the ability to upgrade it, you know, like the credit cards where you can just tap your VA ID on it, make changes to your address. The family members and veteran service dependents can get information, you know, on that.

You know, I want to give kudos again to this wonderful division, to Deputy Executive Director Joel Evans. You know, this came under his tenure. And this is going to be something that's very pivotal.

So, you know, we're very grateful for this $50,000 budget that our Governor is putting into this program for our veterans across New York State. We're very excited

about that.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: So with the little time I have left, do we -- have you been able to, you know, evaluate any type of statistics in terms of how much usage it has gotten so far at the one location?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Well, you know, we're still rolling out the kiosks and we're still gathering the information.

But I can tell you, while I was there, the veterans that I did bring with me, it was important -- you know, I'm a gerontologist. This time next year, hopefully you'll call me Dr. Mama V. So it was important for me that I brought some of our Vietnam -- and I brought with me a Korean veteran to the kiosk. There was absolutely no issues utilizing it. So it's user-friendly for everyone.

So, you know, we're still tracking the numbers, but I want to share that let's not just look at the quantitative measure, let's look at also -- and listen to the veterans on the phenomenological experience that they're

going to be gaining with this and what it's going to mean for them to be able to come from traveling hubs and have the assistance, even if they're traveling with their family, to be able to gain access, some of them for the very first time.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We're going to move on to -- for three minutes for each of the next Assemblymembers. That's for them to ask the question and for you, Director, to give your response.

So we go first to Assemblyman Mamdani.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you, Chair Weinstein.

Thank you, Director DeCohen. I'm just going to jump in. I wanted to follow up on Assemblyman Ashby's question. Earlier you stated that, quote, While we as a division do an immense amount of work to serve our veterans and their families, we could not do it without the tremendous support and work done by our local partners. And that, quote, Governor Hochul's Executive Budget will

provide DVS with the resources to build upon these successes and deliver more support than ever to New York's veterans and their families.

Yet when I take a look at her Executive Budget, I saw a proposal to eliminate 4.2 million in funding for various veterans' programs, including the ones that Assemblyman Ashby cited, as well as a $200,000 cut to Helmets to Hard Hats, a $25,000 cut to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, and a $2 million cut from various grants to municipalities and nonprofit organizations.

How does your statement fit with the Governor's proposed cuts?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: You know, there's a story, sir, of a gentleman that had two baskets in front of a multitude of people to serve, and inside those baskets one had two fish and the other had five loaves. And when the baskets were passed around -- and I'm talking about partnerships here, the same partnerships that came to my one-man office

that provided brand-new food and items of clothing in an urban and rural community where funds are little to none.

By the time those baskets came around and each partner had poured into those baskets, not only was there enough to feed the multitude, but there was an overflow.

We are so proud of this Governor, who for the first time in a dozen years gave an increase to small veteran agencies that I just came out of -- like the one I came out of in Mount Vernon, increasing the 10,000 to $25,000. Never before in 12 years had --

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Director DeCohen, I'm sorry to jump in, but just in the interests of time -- there's only a minute left -- how does it -- I understand that there's been an increase in funding in certain aspects of DVS. But how does -- for me what is very difficult to come to terms with is a cut to these specific services. Meanwhile, we have a multi-billion-dollar surplus and better-than-expected tax revenue. And it just doesn't -- one and one just

doesn't come to two in this scenario for me.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Well, you know, sir, this is not the final budget. But I'm going to leave that for you to discuss with the Governor in your budget negotiations.

And listen, we look forward to what we have coming. We're so grateful. We're so grateful.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you, Director DeCohen. And I think, just to end, I would say that the Governor's vision for the budget of this state should start at a point where veterans' services are not being defunded. And I hope that we can get there with the work that we do as a Legislature.

But thank you very much for your time.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Thank you, sir.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go now to Assemblymember Rajkumar.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN RAJKUMAR: Thank you, Director Reverend DeCohen, for your service to our country. And thank you also for your leadership for the veterans of our state.

I am a member of the Veterans' Affairs

Committee. I represent the Borough of Queens, home to the most veterans in New York City. I have two questions.

The first is about services for younger veterans from the recent Iraq and Afghanistan wars. What steps are we taking to address the needs of this younger veterans population? I recently introduced a bill in the Assembly to extend the public housing benefits offered to Vietnam veterans to veterans of the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So what else can be done to serve our younger, more recent veterans?

And second, I'd like to go back to the Barrett-Brooks legislation to elevate the Division of Veterans' Services to an Executive department, legislation that I have cosponsored. I know Chair Barrett asked you about it, and it's excellent to hear that you are already creating the one-stop shop through your own initiative. Currently veterans in New York State have to navigate multiple agencies to access benefits to which they are entitled.

Perhaps this helps explain why only 17 percent -- and I know you have corrected that figure to 24 percent today -- 24 percent of New York State veterans and their families receive VA disability or pension benefits, compared to 29 percent in Texas. And veterans who are disabled or are low-income in Florida receive $6.3 billion annually, whereas here in New York they receive less than half of that, at 2.6 billion.

So do you believe that elevating your division to an Executive department could provide veterans with the level of service they deserve and help them cut through the bureaucratic hurdles to access critical benefits? And if so, could you walk us through how that might look?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: I want to say that regardless of the nomenclature or who we're under, you know, our job is to do what we do with excellence every day, which is, again, establishing ourselves in the spirit of excellence, integrity, strength, you know, to ensure that those who served us will

receive the highest level of service.

Whatever your decision is from the Legislature, we are on board, we are ready to grab the bull by the horns each and every day to ensure that those who have served us will receive the highest care.

We're also so glad for the New York housing increase for affordable housing for the next three years for veterans and their families, and the wonderful new program that was rolled out, the Expiration of Term, or the ETS program, that's going to be able to link those who are coming home within six to 10 months, that for the first time -- I'm clapping -- we are going to be able to capture veterans -- unlike the opportunity that I had when I was discharged -- that prior to discharge there is going to be mentors, there are already 150 of them that are trained and ready to -- where the integration, the reintegration process is going to be easier amidst the course of accessing services for those who are coming home.

So yes, we are ready. The budget included additional staff. Governor Hochul was excellent in supporting us with that. I have to tell you, when she was Lieutenant Governor she was already supporting us, she had already supported me with the summer programs that we have. So we are charged, we are ready for those returning home, and we are right here servicing the ones that are here on a higher level. And we know that with your assistance -- and thank you for everything that you're doing, because it has been so appreciated and it has been ineffable, the service.

There's not too much that we can do. There's never enough. For every 20 programs you give me, I can think of a hundred more that need service. And for everything that's taken away, I can tell you the quality things that have been put into this budget. Quality, quality, quality for our veterans and their family members means so much.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We're going to move on to

Assemblywoman Buttenschon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Good afternoon. Thank you to our chairs as well as Director, thank you so much for your leadership as well as your service to this country.

I too support and cosponsor the bill that our chair carries upgrading the division, as I see it as imperative and will help in assisting you.

I also echo the concerns of my colleagues that they have addressed that you do not possibly have enough resources at this time to support all those great programs out there.

My colleagues discussed the state cemetery. I have a district that has spent years preparing, is located in Central New York and is minutes off the New York State Thruway. So I would be interested in you keeping me apprised of what will be moving forward.

And the question I hear from many of my American Legion posts and VFWs that are

struggling at this point -- I just wondered what your plans were to work with them, as many of our veterans utilize that as a first step to seeking help.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: For the -- as you know, for the Joseph Dwyer Program, which is such an important program, I've sent so many of our veterans to that program. It's been funded by OMH to be expanded statewide.

This is a wonderful opportunity where now the county has the ability to establish within it a chapter to focus on this successful program.

They're also -- just so you know, I went to visit one last week that's going the inside-outside approach with the reintegration of services that are right there on-site. And as we speak, they have clothing that's being delivered and racks that are being put up to be able to have services.

But also throughout the past few years, improving our collaborations, you know, with county and municipal veterans

service agencies as well as the not-for-profit organizations, has been a top priority. Our partnerships are important to us. We value them.

In 2021, you know, we trained and brought under our accreditation a total of 35 county and city veterans service agencies. And we're open to engaging in this process free of charge for any local government veterans service agency that would like to be accredited with us. We do not impose any cost or quotas for our partners, or any other strings attached for our local government entities or not-for-profit veterans service organizations, you know, that want to be accredited.

Most county veterans agencies in New York are accredited by the American Legion, you know, our partners. We've signed a memorandum of agreement with the American Legion of the Department of New York to offer the opportunity for any Legion-accredited veterans service officer to receive the agency's week-long annual training. I'm a

benefactor of that training.

You know, and we've opened up all of the online training to the local-government veterans service agencies in the state. Again, I'm a benefactor. I'm sitting here trained because of those services.

And in 2021 --

(Overtalk.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: I don't mean to interrupt you, but I know my time is running.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: -- routinely attended.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: And I appreciate that, as we do have, with the assistance of the chair, a Dwyer program in the county that I'm so excited about as it moves forward.

But my question just refers to the concerns that I'm hearing with our support networks in the Legions, as well as the VFWs, that are struggling at this point and looking for those collaborations. So I will further reach out and remind them of the

accreditation, but also would like to just bear in mind that they consider that their first stop for so many of them.

So thank you.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Well, you know, we were just with them on Monday, with one of the DAVs that just opened up, and we're doing an interview with the American Legion for a magazine this week. I happen to be a member of the American Legion, I am a Legionnaire for one of our posts. So I'm so happy to support them and do --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Thank you very much.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblyman Walczyk.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: Thanks, Madam Chair. Thank you, Director, for the time and for your service, of course.

Just a couple of quick ones. I'm wondering if the Governor put anything in this budget that has to do with assistance for veterans who served in or around burn

pits.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: I have no knowledge of that at this time.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: I'm sorry? You're coming in very quiet for me.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Oh, I'm sorry. I said unfortunately I have no knowledge of that at this particular time. But I'd be happy to get back to you with that.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: Okay, great.

Yeah, I think that's a pretty important issue, and I think most legislators understand the importance there and would be open to hearing your policy ideas as well on ways that we can assist those. I kind of see that as the next Agent Orange wave that -- you know, it took us a long time to take care of our Vietnam veterans, and I think we have the opportunity to do so for a lot of those returning from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Another sort of off-the-wall one that I want to bring up, actually, is the New York State Police recently talked to me about --

you know, they have a test coming up and they were talking to me about the standards for the academy. And I was just wondering if you would be interested or willing to reach out to the superintendent of the State Police and start a dialogue about the tattoo policy for our State Police. It's not in line with the Department of Defense or the Army's tattoo policy currently, and I think what's happening is we're inadvertently eliminating a lot of really great candidates that would be excellent state troopers just based on some of those things.

Is that something that you'd be willing to do?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Absolutely.

In fact, when I was a veteran mentor, you know, at the colleges, I used to work with the police and those who were on our front line to bring them into some of our veterans' meetings that we were having. Because, you know, listen, they serve as well. And so I have quite a few patrolmen and state troopers that are under Mama V's

belt as former students.

So, you know, I've always worked with our local police, absolutely.

ASSEMBLYMAN WALCZYK: That's great. I appreciate it.

And I will yield back the rest of my time. I just want to echo, Helmets to Hard Hats, Clear Path for Veterans, and a lot of the other programs that were brought up by Jake Ashby today -- really encourage the Governor to take a re-look at those, and as well as the leadership here.

Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Director.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

And thank you, Director. Obviously, thank you for your service, and we look forward to, now that you're with New York State, to good things that you can bring to our state that you brought to Mount Vernon. So we're all very excited and happy that you're here with us.

So there are no further -- oh, wait a second. Assemblyman -- now that I said

goodbye, Assemblyman Manktelow had raised his -- no, put down his hand. Okay, thank you. Thank you again.

So we're going to have -- oh. Did you want to speak, Assemblyman? Fine. Let's let Brian Manktelow in. Your hand went up and went down, so if you were there to speak -- there you are. Okay.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you, Madam Chair. And I apologize. I got on a little late.

Did we talk about veterans' courts at all?

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: We did.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: You did? Okay. I will touch base with you then later on about that. I'd like to share a few things with you, if you're open to that.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Yes, sir.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: All right. And thank you for your service.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: Thank you, Mama V. Wonderful to meet you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Listen, thank you, thank all of you for your invaluable and ineffable service to those who've served God, country, family, and still serving in our community. And I hope to highlight them as the volunteers that they are one day.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: And to you, your ongoing service and your service in the military, thank you.

DVS DIRECTOR DeCOHEN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BARRETT: Thank you.

Thank you, Liz. Thank you, Helene.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: This ends the governmental portion of the hearing. We now are going to go to the public portion of the hearing. These are people who have asked to speak on the Human Services budget.

And for the members' edification, we have people grouped together in panels. Generally, people in each panel are speaking on a similar subject so that it will be -- they'll all be together, and then any Assemblymember who so chooses to ask a

question.

Each member of the panel will have three minutes to speak. When the panel is finished, Assemblymembers if they wish to ask a question, will be called upon for three minutes to ask a question of the panel as a whole, not each individual member of the panel.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And I know Helene really meant to say members of the Senate or the Assembly who wish to ask questions.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Oh, right, I keep saying members. Yes, Senators and Assemblymembers.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: So our first panel, we have AARP, Beth Finkel, state director; Disabled in Action of Greater Syracuse, Sally Johnston, president; and New York Caring Majority, Kendra Scalia, Hudson Valley leader.

So if we can bring those people into the gallery -- I believe they are, they're all here. So why don't we go in that order,

and Beth Finkel, if you can begin.

MS. FINKEL: Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of you for being on, and I particularly want to think the leadership, Helene Weinstein and Liz Krueger, and I also want to call out Ron Kim and Rachel May for being incredible supporters, all four of you. It's most important for New York State's aging.

On behalf of AARP's 2.5 million members in New York State, I'm really happy to be here today to talk to you about how older adults have been more seriously impacted and burdened by the pandemic that we are continuing to go through. Ninety-five percent of the COVID deaths in New York have been among people 50 and older, and in this year's budget we really must confront the struggling of older New Yorkers and what they're feeling right now.

So here is a quick list -- I know you have my testimony -- 20 million for the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. You heard about this before; they are the frontline of

investigating nursing homes.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Sorry to interrupt -- I have to interrupt. Someone has their -- if people can mute themselves -- I think Didi Barrett. Thank you.

I'm sorry. You were getting a voice over --

MS. FINKEL: Can you go back for me? Because I never can talk fast enough.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: That's okay.

MS. FINKEL: I'm a fast New York talker, but --

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: You're back. I just didn't want to --

MS. FINKEL: We talked about the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, which is so important: 15,000 deaths in nursing homes, and people feeling like there was no one there to advocate and look after them because the long-term-care ombudsmen were basically volunteers who couldn't go into the settings.

We really feel we need the $20 million that was stated before. We're, I think, 39th

in the average of other states. In fact, California spends three times more per resident than New York does. They spend $22 per person; New York spends $7 per person.

We need to better support our home care workforce. We believe that older New Yorkers who need long-term care must be able to stay in their homes. That's what they want, it's less expensive.

But we have the biggest shortage of home care workers in the entire nation. We need to do something about that. So AARP supports May S5374 and Gottfried A6329 to help ensure that we have adequate pay for home care workers.

I want to address parts of what we see as the unmet need, and this has been talked about before. We really appreciate the investment that is being made in community and home-based support, but we also need to look at the Meals on Wheels. Thank you, Liz, for pointing that out earlier. We are asking for an additional $14.1 million for home-delivered meals.

AARP also requests an additional 6 million for SOFA to address the nearly 8,000 older New Yorkers that are still in need of ongoing case management. We need to have transparency where these waitlists are -- I think we just heard that in the testimony earlier. We need to understand where the shortages are and why they're there. And so that's why we support the legislation from Eichenstein, A2590, which will give us the transparency that we need, requiring county aging offices to keep records. We need the state to identify additional investments, and they can't do that unless they get the transparency of the data. It passed the Assembly. We need the Senate to pass it, and then we need the Governor to sign it.

We need financial relief for unpaid family caregivers. I really appreciate May and Kim talking about the Caregiver Tax Credit. That is so incredibly important.

The average family caregiver in New York is spending $8,200 personally out of

their own pocket to help keep a loved one at home. There are over 2.6 million family caregivers in New York State, and they are supplying 31 billion, with a B, to help keep people at home.

We need to make sure that keeps happening, because if all those people go into a nursing home -- you heard Greg Olsen say it's 150,000 a year, and Medicaid is paying for that. So we're all paying for that, okay?

And then, finally, we also want to see more money going into the tax credit bills, which is S620, May, and A6932, Kim. And then the additional support for kinship caregivers, that's non-parent family members -- aunts, uncles, grandparents -- who are raising nearly 200,000 children across New York State. They need more help.

If we don't give them that help, those kids are going to end up in foster care. And again, they're not going to be in their own loving homes with relatives that really love them, and also it's going to cost the state

so much more money.

Finally, we need to put money back into the fund for elder abuse, 125,000 in funding for Lifespan. And then one more shout-out to the Governor doing the Master Plan for Aging. We're thrilled with that, and I know Greg filled you in on that -- one of those pieces.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Now we move on to Sally Johnston from Syracuse.

THE MODERATOR: You're on.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes, we can hear you.

MS. JOHNSTON: Can you hear me okay?

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes.

MS. JOHNSTON: Good afternoon. Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak today.

My name is Sally Johnston. I'm with Disabled in Action, and I am speaking on behalf of myself, members of our organization, and thousands of people with disabilities and seniors in New York State.

And we are in support of the Fair Pay for Home Care that we desperately need. I am struggling, like everyone else, to keep a home care worker that only gets paid $13.20 an hour, and that's not a living wage for anyone. And we need that support of additional money to give these home care workers an increase.

I am 79 years old. I've been married for 52 years. I raised a son. I was born with a disability, by the way. I raised a son, I have three grandkids, and I want to remain in my home. But I need therapy for home care in order to let -- in order for that to happen.

You can't do a one-payment bonus. That's just not going to do it at all. These people need an increase -- you know, $13.20 an hour and you can go to Burger King or McDonald's and get $17, $18 an hour. You see how hard it is to get an aide?

I worked for over 40 years in human services in a managing position, and I don't think I ever interviewed as many people in my

work history as I have in the last two years. My husband died in 2016, and I had to spend down our small savings. And then in 2020, I had to go on Medicaid. And since then it has been a real nightmare just trying to keep home care workers to work for me.

I'm on a fixed income. I only have $800 a month to live on. And I try to -- I've got to pay my bills, get my groceries, and I try to supplement them to keep them with me, because it's that hard to get by.

So we really need our state elected officials to stand strong on this, to really speak out on this and tell -- to ensure that the Fair Pay for Home Care is in the state budget. We must do this in order to -- for people to survive.

I don't want to go to a nursing home. I know thousands of other people that don't want to go to nursing homes. The care is poor, and COVID runs rampant. We're capable of living in our homes, we want to live in our homes and be independent as long as we can.

I really, really, truly hope that you will consider my plea and that you will fight, all of the legislators will fight to make sure that this is in the state budget.

I thank you very much for this time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you for being with us today, Sally.

And now, Kendra Scalia.

MS. SCALIA: Good afternoon. My name is Kendra Scalia, and I'm a Hudson Valley leader with the New York Caring Majority, and a disabled woman using the Consumer-Directed Personal Assistance, CDPA, home care services.

Last year at this time I submitted testimony to this Legislature regarding the home care crisis that our state continues to ignore. I told you about my experience losing three personal assistants, or PAs, during the start of COVID and how I had just one PA working seven days per week. I expressed the importance of fair pay for home care workers to make it possible to recruit new workers to this field. And I also let

you all know that, quote, I live in constant fear that should something happen to my personal assistant, or should he find a better-paying job, my literal independence and freedom will be taken from me overnight.

I wish I could sit here today and tell you that I've hired workers, that I'm able to eat a hot meal every day, and that my fears of institutionalization are quieted. But this body failed to provide the bare minimum attention to slow down the home care workforce crisis last year, and so today my fears are being realized.

My one PA cut back his hours because he found that better-paying job. And not a single candidate in 18 months has accepted a job offer with me for $13.20 per hour. Parts of my independence have been lost as entire areas of my life I simply can't engage in any longer.

Because my one PA can only work four hours at night, I'm forced to go without the toilet all day long. I stay in the same position in my wheelchair for 20 hours at a

time. I sleep in my wheelchair five nights per week because I have no one to get me out of the bed in the morning.

The limited help I receive is packed with bare essentials of survival such that therapies and treatments are skipped more frequently than they are provided. Medical appointments are all but impossible to attend in person, and I've developed additional medical conditions that could have been wholly prevented were home care worker wages raised because home care is healthcare.

If you visited my home today, you would find plastic bins holding items like remote controls and Ziploc baggies of cashews and Cheerios. A dozen water bottles with straws line my kitchen table from one corner to the other, allowing me the ability to at least stay hydrated while I spend more than 80 percent of each day without the care that I need.

We need Fair Pay for Home Care in the budget. Governor Hochul missed this opportunity in the Executive Budget,

proposing just a one-time bonus that will not come close to solving the home care workforce shortage. The solution is fair pay for home care, and we're relying on you, our state legislators, to make this happen in the budget. Because when our workers are paid well, disabled and senior New Yorkers who rely on these skilled workers to live independently are able to fill these positions. We're able to receive the healthcare we need to be safe and stay healthy.

The time is now to address the crisis of long-term care. And I hope that next year I find myself back at this budget hearing to tell you all about the fabulous personal assistants I was able to hire after you passed Fair Pay for Home Care in this year's budget, how my health improved and I no longer need these additional medications, and how comfortable my body will feel when I'm finally able to lay it down to rest on my soft warm bed every night once again, just like all of you.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: I want to thank all of the panel for being here -- there will be a question or two -- and particularly the individuals who are receiving care and looking for care, because I think it's important that there is a face put on these issues of home care.

You know, on paper it sounds like one thing, but when you hear your personal stories, it certainly rings true. And there are a lot of members who are listening. They may not be speaking, but you're being heard by a large number of members from the Assembly and Senate.

So I wanted to go to Assemblyman Mamdami {sic} for three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you so much, Chair. It's actually Mamdani, with an N at the end. But thank you very much.

Thank you all for your testimonies.

Kendra, I just wanted to ask to follow up on your statement. Can you speak a little bit to whether you think that the one-time

bonus is sufficient? And if not, why does it need to be permanent wage increases? And what will the fallout be if it's not permanent wage increases?

MS. SCALIA: Thank you for the question.

Yeah, the one-time bonus is absolutely not sufficient. And the major reason for that is that a bonus for workers who are already in these positions does nothing to recruit new workers to this field. And that's what we need.

We have a severe workforce crisis. There's a severe shortage going on in this state. We need to incentivize new workers into this field in the hundreds of thousands to become home care workers.

So one-time bonuses are not going to keep the folks that I have around either. They need a permanent wage increase, and what that's going to look like should we not have a permanent wage increase for home care are more and more disabled and senior New Yorkers being pushed into institutional settings like

nursing homes at significantly higher rates to the state, a loss of independence and dignity to these individuals and, honestly, to just not provide folks with the services that they need, the healthcare that they need. Nursing homes are not providing healthcare at the most basic entry point to our healthcare system. It's home care that provides those services.

MS. JOHNSTON: Can I answer that?

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: At this time --

MS. JOHNSTON: Can I?

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Yes, please, Sally.

MS. JOHNSTON: I just want to say I'm very much in the same situation as many others. I can't get out of bed in the morning unless there's somebody there to help me get out of bed.

If there's no one there, my aide doesn't show up, then I have to scramble and try to figure out where I can get help or just lay there until I can get ahold of my son and maybe he can come and help me. And

that's not something either of us want. And it doesn't always work.

I would like to ask you, all of you Senators, what you would feel like if you suddenly developed an illness or a disability and you couldn't -- and you needed help getting out of bed, you needed help with going to the bathroom, you needed help with hydrating -- hydration and getting some food, nutrition into you. How would you feel if your aide didn't show or you couldn't pay an aide a reasonable hourly wage?

That bonus is nothing. These people need a real hourly raise in order for us all to survive. I'm on the edge of going into a nursing home also, and I don't want that to happen. I want to stay in my home.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you so much, Sally. And thank you, Kendra.

I fully agree with the both of you. This is the year for Fair Pay for Home Care. We need to have it happen now, and the consequences are too great to allow another year to pass while we propose a one-time

bonus.

Thank you so much for your courage, for your work. Thank you as well, Beth.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: So far it is just me.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: I see Senator Serino.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Oh, I'm sorry, Senator Serino. No, Senator Serino, I apologize.

Please go to Senator Serino.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And also Senator Mike Martucci showed up, excuse me.

All right, we're active. Yes.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And I just want to say to Kendra and Sally, oh, my God, your stories just really touched me. And I'm sure it's so good for people to hear what you're talking about. I cosponsored the Fair Pay for Home Care Act,

and it's just -- we need it today, more than ever.

As for me, I just recently had to take care of my mom and mother-in-law -- they both had failing health, and for the past month and a half I saw firsthand the lack of services, and I've been doing this for, what, eight years now? So thank you so much for sharing your stories. We do have to incentivize and make a living wage that's sustainable.

But I would like to go to Beth, if I could, to ask you to talk about the -- nice to see you. I want to say thank you so much for putting focus on the funding needed to bolster caregiving, as we're hearing these stories today, and we really need to fund and professionalize the ombudsman program.

You know, it's something I absolutely love. One thing that doesn't get as much attention is the middle-class Fair Family Caregiver tax credit, and that's something that AARP has been pushing for quite some time, and I know it would be a great benefit

to many families that we all serve. So can you just elaborate on what passing that tax credit would mean for New York families?

MS. FINKEL: Yeah, it would -- so basically, as I said before, the average family caregiver pays out in New York $8200 a year out of their own pocket. And that might be because they're helping to pay for chore services, they might be paying for medicine, they might be paying for supplies, they might be doing renovations on the home to make them more remodeled and -- it's a myriad of -- they might be paying for respite services, et cetera, or caregiving.

And what we're -- what we're seeing is that this money would then be able to -- this tax credit would be for people who have up to $75,000 a year in income, so it's very middle class -- and thank you, Senator, for pointing that out. And that's the whole point, is that we have to help the middle class because they're really not getting enough help and if we don't, then what are they going to do? They are the

backbone of our long-term-care system. So this would allow them a tax credit of $3500 a year, which is -- which would be wonderful.

And by the way, it's a pilot program. We can see how it works and then we can go from there on it. So I think this would be really great -- good government. Thank you for saying that.

SENATOR SERINO: Absolutely, Beth. You know, and that 3,500 means so much to middle-class families or anybody right now with the rising cost of everything. It really will be very helpful.

So thank you so much for your advocacy. And once again, thanks to Sally and Kendra for really telling your heartfelt stories. Thank you. We all needed to hear that today. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Back to the Assembly.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblywoman Rosenthal.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Hi. Thank you. Hi, Beth. Good to see you, and thank

you for your testimony and your proposal.

You know, the state gives away a lot of tax credits, for example, to developers to build mostly luxury housing. That's a place we could use a tax credit -- move it from there to your proposal.

To Sally, I want to keep seeing you on the screen with that bookcase behind you. I don't want to see you in a different setting -- and Kendra, while you're blurred -- but I want to see you in your home.

So let me ask you, what did you feel when the budget director said all care workers were taken care of with the minimum wage? What did that make you feel and think about what the state thinks of home care workers?

MS. SCALIA: When I first heard that, I was really dismayed and disappointed and angry because it sends a clear message that he does not understand the state of long-term care in New York State. And if he does, he is wholly ignoring the cries of the

disability and senior communities as well as our providers who have been talking and elevating this issue for a number of years now.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Thank you.

Sally?

MS. JOHNSTON: I felt the same way. I couldn't believe it. You know, how can you get somebody like this to understand what it's really like to have a disability and to be stuck, to have no care, you know, to just maybe lay in bed and defecate all over yourself because somebody didn't come, and you've got to wait and wait and wait until someone does come.

I just don't understand where he's coming from, and I didn't like it at all. It was just so unfair and unthoughtful.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: You know, I agree with you. And I don't know how anyone can listen to your stories and say "You're wrong." And so I think perhaps we need to summon or have a meeting with Sally and Kendra and someone from the administration so

they -- you can tell them directly your story and your wide experience and years-long experience struggling to hire people who can assist you in maintaining your lives the way you want to.

So this is an official call-out to the administration: Please have someone meet with Kendra and Sally -- and I don't know if they want to add anyone to this -- so you can feel and see them, hear them, and do something about it.

We need Fair Pay for Home Care, and it's not just a phrase. It is a necessity. And I will continue to work to advance this cause. Thank you.

MS. JOHNSTON: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

To the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, we have Senator Mike Martucci.

SENATOR MARTUCCI: Thank you, Chairwoman. Great to see you, as always.

My question is for Kendra. Kendra, like Senator Serino and so many others on

this call, I too am very proud to be a cosponsor of Fair Pay for Home Care. One of the things that I've heard has been a struggle is obviously not only finding someone to serve regularly in a role, but sort of what happens if, over the last year with things like quarantine and illness and sickness, if your regular caregivers are not available, are there any substitute folks? Or is there sort of like no substitute pool? What does that look like?

MS. SCALIA: Yeah, when there are no home care workers to come, there's no one. So unless you have family, friends, or neighbors who are willing to leave their job for the day, go without pay for the day, and spend their time doing really tough, physical work -- this is not companionship work, this is a physical, labor-intensive job -- you don't have anyone.

And the sad state is that many, many disabled and senior New Yorkers do not have that network. They don't have those neighbors and family members around them who

are able or willing to do this work for them.

So to answer your question, there is no support. There is no network to fall back on. When a home care worker calls out sick, there is no one to replace them when other home care workers are saying, I can't come in, it's too risky because of the pandemic.

SENATOR MARTUCCI: Understood, Kendra.

And thank you for your perspective and being here and continuing your advocacy on this. What I want you to know, certainly, is -- as well as several others that are part of this hearing -- I look forward to doing everything I can to support this initiative, see it done in our budget. It's long, long overdue.

Thank you, Chairwoman Krueger.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much, Senator.

Back to you, Assemblywoman.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Do you have -- did you want to speak, Senator Krueger?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I just wanted to -- actually, I wanted to do exactly what

Linda Rosenthal already did, which was to highlight that we give out a huge number of tax credits for seriously questionable activities. We spend $1.6 billion on tax credits for the fossil fuel industry at the same time as we're trying to get everybody off of fossil fuels, and we spend -- Helene and I sat through all the hearings -- we spend billions and billions on mega-economic-development deals that we're never sure whether they created a job at all.

And yet here we have a huge number of New Yorkers who need to have a reasonable wage for home care in order to be able to live their lives in dignity and stay in their homes. They are proven jobs with economic wins. When people who are low-income earn a little bit more money and can go to work, they immediately spend that money in their local economy, as opposed to some of these megadeals that never deliver anything for anybody's communities.

So I do believe not only that it is time or beyond time for us to address these

issues, but that we actually have money that we can redirect to take care of these needs.

So I want to thank both women for coming and telling their stories, and Beth Finkel from AARP, who is a long-time friend and advocate on behalf of older New Yorkers.

Thank you very much, Helene.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Ditto to Senator Krueger. And to answer Senator Martucci, when your home attendant doesn't come, my sister and I are the ones who are taking care of my mom. It's something that so many of us legislators ourselves are dealing with on a daily basis.

So I want to thank this panel and then move on to Panel B. We're -- you will notice as the speakers -- as the panel goes on, it's mostly going to be on the daycare issue.

Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, Crystal Charles, policy analyst; Early Care & Learning Council, Jessica Klos Shapiro, director of policy and community education; The Children's Agenda, Pete

Nabozny, director of policy; All Our Kin, Steve Morales, New York policy director; ECE On The Move, Gladys Jones, CEO/founder; New York Association for the Education of Young Children, Katie Albitz, public policy and advocacy coordinator; and Day Care Council of New York, Gregory Brender, director of public policy.

The advantage of being virtual is we can have a lot of people on the same subject together. We couldn't fit you around the table, but we can fit you on our computer screens.

So just a reminder to the panel, each of you has up to three minutes to make a presentation. We have all of your written testimony; it's been circulated to all of the members who are present here. After all of the panel speaks, any member who wishes to ask a question of the panel will have three minutes to ask a question of the panel, not each individual panelist.

So with that, if we can go in the order that I called people and start with the

Schuyler Center, Crystal Charles.

MS. CHARLES: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. I'm policy analyst at the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy.

This year the Schuyler Center celebrates our 150th anniversary as a nonprofit organization dedicated to policy analysis and advocacy in support of public systems that meet the needs of disenfranchised populations and people living in poverty.

We are entering the third year of the pandemic. New York children and families need robust support as they recover from the severe impacts on their well-being. New York State enacted the Child Poverty Reduction Act in 2021, committing the state to reducing child poverty by 50 percent in the coming decade with attention to racial equity. In order to achieve this goal, we must systemically evaluate state budget decisions for their impact on child poverty.

To that end, we support the Children

and Families Reinvestment Act proposed by Assemblymember Hevesi and Senator Brisport, supported by over 50 Assembly and Senate members and many of our fellow advocates. The act would infuse chronically underfunded child welfare programs with new funds and move New York to a universal childcare system.

This is an important year for child welfare funding in New York State. The child welfare funding statute, which funds preventive services that help keep families together in times of crisis, would expire this year without the reauthorization for five more years of funding proposed in the Executive Budget. However, the Executive Budget does not restore the state share of funding for preventive services to the 65 percent written in statute.

New York's childcare landscape is in dire straits. For families, childcare is their largest monthly bill -- that is, if they can find and afford childcare in their area. For childcare providers, the sector is

on the edge of collapse, with stabilization payments set to end early this year, low wages, and many providers having to reduce staff or shut down during the pandemic.

In order to reach universal childcare in New York, robust funding -- $5 billion -- is needed for family subsidies, workforce supports, and provider reimbursement rates. We urge the Legislature to repair over a decade of underfunding child welfare programs with new funds, including restoring child welfare preventive services funding to the 65 percent state share and fully funding universal childcare in the final state budget.

Thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Now, Early Care & Learning Council.

MS. KLOS SHAPIRO: Good afternoon. My name is Jessica Klos Shapiro. I'm the director of policy and community education for Early Care & Learning Council.

ECLC and our network of 35 Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, or CCR&Rs,

provide direct assistance and support to parents, childcare providers and employers in all 62 counties.

While the childcare system itself is fractured, underresourced, and overwhelmed, they all focus on the critical support that CCR&Rs provide to families, providers, and communities to bolster the success of young children.

The ECLC and our network has experienced, knowledgeable, and dedicated professional development staff who provide training, best practices, and support to childcare providers. The network is connected to the local providers, knowledgeable about the communities they serve and the obstacles facing families.

CCR&Rs are a key component to the complex childcare delivery system. And over the last two years, they have continued to step up to serve their communities on the front line. They distributed PPE and cleaning supplies, went into programs to work with educators to set up their classrooms to

accommodate changing regulations, and created new trainings on how to navigate challenges with the social distancing in the classroom and remote learning for children.

CCR&R also administered various grants in partnership with OCFS, such as the Essential Worker Scholarship and the CARES grants, which totaled nearly $185 million. As Commissioner Poole stated this morning, the network and ECLC recently delivered technical assistance for childcare providers to gain access to $901 million in stabilization grants. Fifteen thousand childcare programs were helped.

At points the adaptability of the CCR&R network was in the pivotal role that we played in helping childcare programs succeed. It does not come without a struggle, though. If qualified staff have the skills to do training and stabilization grant administration, they require competitive wages.

CCR&Rs are largely funded by state contracts, contracts that have been

flat-funded for many years. The increases that do come are often sporadic, and therefore it becomes hard to staff up for a project quickly. Planned-for and sustained funded is needed. An hourly rate for a CCR&R employee statewide can range from $15 an hour upstate to the low 20s in the suburbs of New York City. Childcare is a strongly female-dominated occupation, and that is no different in the CCR&R. So if we want to reach real pay equity, professionalize the necessary work of a CCR&R, it needs to be compensated.

In this year's Executive Budget proposal it has an increased role for CCR&Rs. If this is envisioned as a navigator role, we need to fund this so it can be done in a systematic, cohesive way.

We are also a member of the Empire State Campaign for Childcare, so we are in favor of Child Care for All by 2025.

So we thank you for the opportunity to provide comments today.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Now, The Children's Agenda.

MR. NABOZNY: Hi. Thank you. My name is Pete Nabozny. I'm director of policy at The Children's Agenda, which is located in Rochester, New York.

We just turned 18 this year, so we are a bit younger than Schuyler, but -- and as a, I guess, a young adult, we're not quite ready to do it all on our own, so it's good to see so many friendly faces around this panel.

We're here also in support of the Empire State Campaign for Childcare's budget recommendation of $5 billion this year. That's what's needed to really transform the childcare system in New York, not just to help us recover from the pandemic but to build a better childcare system for families of children throughout this state.

I'm just going to touch on a couple of things quickly. First of all, we have a real lack of high-quality childcare throughout the state. The recent request for applications from OCFS revealed that 62 percent of census tracts in the state qualify as childcare

deserts. The pandemic only made things worse.

Across this pandemic we have lost about 10,000 regulated slots across the state. Those losses are primarily found in Family and Group Family Child Care settings, which are generally more affordable for a lot of families. They're also more likely to be located in our state's urban areas, and are much more likely to be owned by women and women of color than childcare centers.

And since it is important to kind of call out the disparate impact of those losses over the course of the year, childcare is also really unaffordable for families. If a family is making $75,000 a year and they have $15,000 in infant childcare costs -- which is what it costs across the state, higher in some parts, lower in others -- that is just impossible for them to afford, given mortgages, rent payments and other things like that.

So a lot of those families that are just above our income threshholds really

can't participate in that market. That is driving people out.

And even among those who do qualify, there's very little information available about the childcare subsidy system across the state. So many families don't know that they qualify.

And the way this is navigated is so byzantine that people get excluded just through the bureaucracy. We need to change that.

And finally, childcare workers are dramatically underpaid. Where I live in Rochester, they make at the third percentile of all the different job types in our region. So the average childcare worker here makes about $26,000 a year. That's about as low-paying as any job, and that is not recognizing the incredibly critical work that they do nurturing and developing young people.

So what do we need? We need $5 billion this year, really, to push on three major areas. One is to expand access

to every New Yorker who seeks childcare. The second piece is to improve worker compensation to recognize the importance of the work these folks do and to reward that through greater support from the state. And third, we need to raise rates so that the childcare business is a sustainable business model. And this $5 billion proposal would achieve that.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We move on to All Our Kin.

MR. MORALES: Thank you, honorable Senators, members of the Assembly. My name is Steven Morales. I'm the New York policy director at All Our Kin.

All Our Kin is a national nonprofit organization that trains, supports, and sustains home-based family childcare educators, including nearly 300 family childcare educators in the Bronx. We're also proud members of Empire State Campaign for Childcare.

And I'm here today to talk to you

about the need to invest $5 billion in state funding in childcare, including licensed home-based family childcare in the upcoming budget.

Parents across the state rely on licensed home-based family childcare for high-quality, flexible, culturally responsive care. In my written testimony I have included statistics about family childcare, but the need to fund childcare goes beyond statistics. So I want to use my time now to share some stories that I have heard from family childcare educators which I think speak to the urgency of making these investments at the state level.

First, Beatriz, who owns a group family childcare program in the Bronx, told me that there are families in her program who have either failed to qualify for subsidies or who have spent months waiting to receive a voucher. So Beatriz has several times had to make the gut-wrenching decision to take money out of her own pocket in order to provide free care to these families because she was

not going to turn away a family who could not afford to pay.

No educator should have to decide between her own livelihood and serving a family in her community. We need to fund universal childcare so that no family or educator in New York is ever faced with this type of decision again.

Another educator I have spoken to, Isaura, she owns and leads Little Giant's Group Family Day Care in Williamsbridge, and she talked about, despite having a full program, that she's unable to pay her staff the wages they deserve.

Isaura spoke of staff members who, despite their love for children, decided to take jobs in retail or fast food so they could earn higher wages and benefits. Isaura wants to be able to offer healthcare and retirement benefits to her employees, including to her own aging mother, who works in her program, but she simply financially is unable to do so with the rates that she currently receives from the state.

No childcare educator should have to choose between poverty and leaving their profession. Unfortunately, these stories are not unique. This is a crisis that is devastating our entire childcare sector and threatening our state's economy.

We all know the cliche that our budget is a reflection of our values, and we cannot afford to wait for federal action. I urge you to show that New York State values our youngest children, and the educators who teach and care for them, by investing $5 billion in free and available childcare for every family who wants it, and in raising compensation for educators so they can sustain their businesses, receive ample take-home pay and benefits, and provide high-quality care for the long term.

Thank you for the opportunity to share today.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Next, ECE On The Move.

MS. JONES: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I was going to

do this rehearsed testimony, but being here today I have to say this. The connection of children, seniors, and disability -- it is very sad to me. That we all are in the same boat, it is very sad.

My name is Gladys Jones, and along with my fellow providers I founded ECE On The Move three years ago to address the system of policy needs of family childcare providers in New York city. I am an early childhood educator in a residential setting in Staten Island and have worked in this capacity in my community on behalf of low-income children and their families for 18 years.

ECE On The Move is a provider-led and provider-serving organization that seeks to address the systemic barriers and challenges facing family childcare providers. We have over 600 provider members in New York City. In addition to organizing providers and parents, ECE On The Move supports providers in understanding system requirements and interacting with city and state

childcare-related agencies.

My testimony is informed by these voices and experiences of the workforce and the families who they serve. The realities we face are dire. Providers are largely living in poverty. The priority of ECE On The Move is to ensure that childcare providers and the families who rely on their services are well-served by public systems, earn living wages, and prioritize business and social support services.

We are in a crisis. And without immediate action, many childcare providers will cease to operate, eliminating services that working families rely on. These services underpin an economy where working parents can fully participate. We are far from that today and face a future with even less childcare availability. We will be extinct.

This task ahead for New York is to stabilize this shaky sector while reducing childcare costs. I am on the same page as Empire State Child Care's campaign -- I won't

quote the -- what we need, but I am here with them, and we are in trouble.

I'm very emotional. I thought I was going to be happy to be here, but it made me sad to hear all this today. I see -- I give up my time to someone else.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We're happy that you're here to be able to share your experience, of yourself and other providers.

Next, the New York Association for the Education of Young Children.

MS. ALBITZ: Hi. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Katie Albitz, and I'm the public policy and advocacy coordinator for the New York Association for the Education of Young Children.

As a statewide organization with over 3,000 members in the field of early education and care, we work on behalf of the essential workforce that has been the backbone of New York's economy by supporting all other essential workers through the course of the

pandemic.

As we hope to demonstrate through the summary of our testimony, six months of stabilization funds are not enough to correct for a dysfunctional childcare system facing decades of underfunding and neglect. We join with our coalition partners in the Empire State Campaign for Child Care to ask for an investment of $5 billion in this year's budget to put New York on a path, a clear path, to achieving universal childcare.

I cannot emphasize enough that the $75 million proposed in the Governor's budget is not sufficient to improve the wages of childcare providers in our state. Yesterday the Washington, D.C., city council voted to allocate $75 million to improve the wages of the zero-to-two workforce in a city of 700,000. This is the same amount the Governor has allocated for a state of 19 million.

The reality of low pay as a childcare provider is something I speak to from experience. As a toddler teacher I earn

minimum wage while playing, soothing tears, changing diapers, cleaning, and developing lesson plans with 10 children under two and a half years old.

I relied on my father's health insurance and then on Medicaid. I could not afford a car or my student loans. There is no path to a living wage. Every day people like me are leaving the work they love because they have no way to make ends meet. Every year that goes by without meaningful investment in a commitment to wholly transforming our system is one that weakens what is left of New York's childcare and takes advantage of the dedication of early childhood educators.

For the remainder of my time, I will share the words of childcare providers who are unable to be here today because they are currently taking care of children right now across our state.

Tiffany Diaz, from the Bronx, shared with us that stabilization grants, which are now over, meant "survival of my program,

survival of the childcare industry, survival for my staff, survival for my family."

An anonymous family childcare provider told us that stabilization funds meant she won't become homeless.

A provider in Croton-on-Hudson told me that stabilization funds mean that she can try to offer her staff an ethical wage for the first time ever. Her staff had to go to food pantries during the pandemic.

Danielle Wright, a director in Auburn, shared that her local McDonald's is starting staffs at $18.50 an hour, and they can't compete.

A family childcare provider told us that she is able to pay down her debt with stabilization funds because many providers kept their programs afloat by using personal debt and the stabilization allowed them to pay that debt back. Now she can focus on children and not that debt.

Another family childcare provider shared with us that these funds give her hope that they will be okay and that they will

survive this economic tragedy, but now those stabilization funds are over.

What happens next is even more important, and it is absolutely essential that the State Legislature invest $5 billion this year.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

The final presenter on this panel, Day Care Council of New York.

MR. BRENDER: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify, and for all of your work both listening to folks and questioning the commissioners and really fighting for childcare.

My name is Gregory Brender. I'm the director of public policy at the Day Care Council of New York. We are the membership organization of early childhood providers in New York City. Our member organizations provide services in all five boroughs through a variety of means, many of them with contracts with the New York City Department of Education -- which, as you know, are

partially state-funded.

We are, as my other fellow panelists all said, part of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care. As providers of early childhood education, Day Care Council members engage families at the crucial earliest stages of children's development. The first years of a child's life are the only opportunity to provide them with the social-emotional development and early skills development that supports them throughout their education and throughout their lives.

As such, Day Care Council and its network of community early childhood educators have long recognized that access to strong and stable early childhood education programs have profound effects on their later learning and academic achievement.

Moreover, high-quality childcare is indisputably essential for New York's economy. As Governor Hochul has stated, childcare is the backbone of our economy. And this transformative investment is critical to building our economic recovery.

Childcare makes it possible for working parents to return to work, keeping businesses open, fueling the economy's growth and the state's recovery.

We believe that New York leaders can and must include transformational proposals and funding in this year's enacted budget. Now is the time for New York to commit to $5 billion to move towards universal childcare within four years.

There are three main components of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care's budget ask that we support. The first is that New York provides universal guaranteed access to childcare of a family's choice for all children, regardless of parental work status or income or immigration status, in Year 1.

That New York immediately raises workforce wages by extending stabilization grants and creating an early childhood workforce compensation fund until payment rates have increased.

And that New York transitions to a payment rate model that is based on a cost

estimation model that accounts for geography, quality, and assumes all childcare staff are paid in parity with elementary school teachers.

The Day Care Council of New York and our partners in the Empire State Campaign for Child Care strongly support the Universal Child Care Act from Senator Brisport and Assemblymember Hevesi, S7595/A8623, which is built around the core principles for universal childcare adopted by ESCC: No means testing; truly universal access, including for immigrant families, children with disabilities, children from underserved communities; without barriers such as work and other activity requirements; care for children throughout the continuum, birth through 13; and strong work support.

We are thrilled that so many of New York's legislative leaders are advancing and supporting visionary proposals to dramatically expand access to childcare in New York. We believe that the Universal Child Care Act could be further enhanced with

components of the Early Learning Child Care Act from Senator Ramos and Assemblymember Clark, such as including mandates and setting up minimum salaries for early childhood educators, and a strong role for CCR&Rs and other nonprofits to bring together providers.

This year's enacted budget must include a $5 billion investment in childcare to put New York on a short path to universal childcare.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify, and sorry that it looks like I ran over. Thanks.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: That's fine. I want to thank all the panelists.

Now we will go to some of our colleagues for questions, three minutes each.

Assemblyman Hevesi first.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to that panel. You guys -- let me just -- I'm so grateful to you.

Let me just tell you what I heard so I can compare notes with my colleagues as we go

into this budget negotiation. That there are low wages; that the workforce is fractured and overwhelmed; that the stabilization grants are running out; that the contracts were flat-funded for years; that there's sporadic funding; that there's no pay equity; that there's a lack of high-quality care; that 62 percent of the tracts are deserts; that we've lost 10,000 regulated slots in family settings in urban areas that are mostly owned by women of color; that families don't know if they qualify; dramatically underpaid, people have to decide between their livelihood and caring; families fail to qualify or months waiting to receive a voucher; unable to pay staff wages; we're losing people to retail and fast food; we have workforces with no healthcare; we don't have healthcare benefits or any other benefits for the mother who is in the program; we have to choose between poverty and their profession; we have dire realities; we have providers living in poverty; we're in a crisis, many will cease to exist; we will

be extinct; we are in trouble; working parents can't work; we have dysfunction, decades of underfunding and neglect.

If we don't act, we're going to weaken what is left of childcare providers. We have staff at food pantries who are on poverty wages. We have personal debt to pay down, and we use personal debt to stay open. There's no path to a living wage. The stabilization grants meant someone couldn't become homeless. The reality of low pay is brutal -- I'm adding brutal. And minimum wage while handling 10 kids.

That's pretty much what I've heard and what I would like my colleagues to focus on as we go into budget negotiations.

Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to my colleagues on the panel.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

To Senator Krueger.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Chair Hevesi can take my notes for me whenever he wishes. Thank you very much, Chair.

And I am going to turn it over to our

chair, Jabari Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair. And hopefully maybe we can get another -- we can get Andy's extra minute for the panelists.

So I have three questions. My heart is actually breaking from your testimonies, but I wanted to get to Crystal first, and your testimony.

You said with monthly payments set to end for most providers in early 2022, the need for a new source of sustained funding to meet the true costs of providing high-quality childcare is urgent. My question to you is, does the Executive Budget seem sufficient to you, or does it worry you?

Second, to Pete, the Executive Budget predicts it can add approximately 100,000 children to be eligible for childcare by increasing the criteria from 200 percent of the FPL to 225 percent. Do you think those estimates are accurate or not, and why?

And third, Gladys, I'm just curious; if New York State continues on its current

path, what does that mean for you and for the people you know who work as childcare workers?

Thank you.

MS. CHARLES: Thanks. So the Executive Budget investment in childcare is nowhere near enough for what's needed to help stabilize the sector and support the workforce and the other pillars, such as the family subsidies.

Each section of people who are part of the childcare sector -- the families, the workforce, and the employees -- are all struggling right now, especially during the pandemic. And the investment from the Executive Budget is only a small piece of what is actually needed.

As my colleagues mentioned, you know, $5 billion is much closer to what is needed to help this sector move forward. Thank you.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

Pete?

MR. NABOZNY: Yes, so the Executive Budget included the mention that it would

cover 100,000 new children. That would assume that all 100,000 of these children would be enrolled in the childcare slots, and we know that is not possible under state law today.

For example, any household where all parents are not in the workforce, if one parent stays home, that family is not eligible. That is about a quarter of that 100,000 families right there.

You have other families who their children are enrolled in Head Start, families that choose to have that child with grandma or grandpa, or a variety of other factors -- people who work overnights and they kind of trade off the childcare.

So no, it wouldn't cover anywhere close to that number. The number would be much closer to 25,000 to 30,000 children at most.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

Gladys?

MS. JONES: I'm trying to remember what you asked me. I do know.

What would it mean? I mean, it's hard for me to even answer that at times because the nation is in a crisis. You see what's happening, everyone sees what's happening. And so I will answer that. We will no longer be here, especially in New York City. This is one of the -- family childcare is one of the most used modalities of care, in New York City, anyway.

And also I need to have a goal, and what this taught me is that I need to stand up and look for a goal. And I think right now the only thing that is here for us is universal childcare.

I have to have something. I have to have hope, I have to have something. And I believe that is our hope, to have universal childcare, so I won't have to be here feeling like I have to be begging to survive.

But it's not for me, it's for my children, for my grandchildren. I want them to be in a system that is going to work. So I hope we can come together and listen, because it's really bad. The economy is

going to fail, as we know. And so y'all know, y'all are policy people. You know.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We're going to go to Assemblywoman Clark now, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Hello. Thank you all for presenting today. I'm not quite sure -- I have a couple of questions, so I guess a few people could answer.

But I just want to triple emphasize, Gladys, what you said about listening to both the crisis we have here in childcare but even with our seniors and older Americans and our New Yorkers living with disabilities. Our care economy is in the biggest crisis we've ever seen, and it is the fundamental block to what we all care about every single day and what keeps our economy moving, what keeps our families moving, what keeps everything moving.

And if we don't do something, this is just going to crumble. And it is going to be so devastating. So you are so correct, unfortunately.

What I also heard was that stabilization grants were such a success, but they are running out or have run out already. And yet even though they were successful, we still had 2,000 providers close their doors statewide, as we heard from the commissioner this morning. So imagine what's going to happen now. So we know that this is an equation that doesn't work.

One of the questions I have, first and foremost, is -- maybe Pete, you could answer, or the Schuyler Center -- is we can't fix one without the other. We can't get more people eligible for subsidies on a subsidy that doesn't pay our providers enough nor pays our workforce enough. So we have to fix everything at once.

So maybe you could just emphasize why it's so critical that this huge investment of money -- and we know the federal dollars are not enough, even if they come back in in Build Back Better. So maybe touch on that.

And then, second, to our home-based providers, I'd love to hear your thoughts

about, as we talk about UPK expansion and EPK expansion, we can't close our home provider doors either. That is a choice families want. So how can we make sure that that fits into whatever we create as universal childcare to say that there's options beyond just a school-based UPK program?

Because in upstate, transportation, work times, all these different things don't always fit. Not to mention what someone here earlier suggested, was that families choose home-based providers because of -- whether it's a cultural connection or just a desire to have a smaller place, or something in their neighborhood.

So those are my two questions.

MR. NABOZNY: Sure. So I'll jump in first.

So I think the -- I mean, you hit the nail on the head. You have to do it at the same time. You have to expand access, ensure that more families or all families can get support affording care, and you need to raise rates, move away from the market-rate-based

methodology, set it at some kind of true cost of care so that you can raise worker pay without putting that cost on families who aren't covered under the system.

And that's really the challenge in childcare, is that you can't do one without the other. We'd all love to see childcare workers get paid a lot more. I certainly would for my children's workers. But it's hard to place that cost on families that are having a hard time affording care. So you have to cover everyone and raise the pay at the same time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

I think we'll -- so we'll go to the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator George Borrello.

SENATOR BORRELLO: Thank you, Madam Chair, appreciate it.

Let me just start off quickly by saying that, you know, childcare is something that I've been very supportive of, I've worked with Assemblyman Hevesi and Senator

Brisport. You know, I actually sit on the board of a not-for-profit childcare center myself, and I know how difficult it is.

And as a business owner, I know how challenging it is for people to just want to have the dignity of having a job but not being able to have childcare. And not even necessarily even affording childcare. We live in childcare deserts, particularly in rural parts of upstate New York.

So I just want to ask, I guess, a general question to Jessica Klos Shapiro and anyone else who wants to jump in. You know, what do you need from us in order to support those providers? And also how do we bridge the gap between businesses that need that childcare for their employees and the providers, you know, that can hopefully be there to support them?

MS. KLOS SHAPIRO: Okay, Senator.

So I think one of the things we've seen with the stabilization grant is that we are working with them right now to try to use the funding in a planful way to support them,

where we're doing some trainingS to make sure that this influx sustains them.

So I think with additional dollars we definitely could add positions to the CCR&Rs where we could have a business support specialist and have ongoing supports and training where we could really train childcare providers to actually run their small businesses as businesses.

I think one of the things is people go into childcare because they want to be nurturers and educators of children, not because they're businesspeople. And I think that that is something that we as CCR&Rs can provide if we are adequately funded to do so.

SENATOR BORRELLO: First of all, I will tell you that is a huge issue. Just because you are good at something doesn't mean you are good at running the business, and that is an issue in the support there.

We talked a little bit about the tax credits. And I think we all agree that we are concerned about the questionable return on those investments. What about the idea of

a tax credit for businesses that would look to locate a childcare center within their facility or fund a facility?

MS. KLOS SHAPIRO: I think that's definitely a good idea within their facility, but I think it's also looking within the community. Because I think there is that issue of choice.

I think not all parents want to necessarily put their child in a center-based facility within a business. So it's looking at a mix. It's looking at locating within a community, maybe close to the business. It's -- so I think right now, with this deserts funding, we're really going to see developing the communities in ways where -- a credit to possibly the sustainability of the community, in a sense, where we look to see if the childcare is on a bus line, if it's accessible in a way.

So just the locations are really the most important, whether it's in the business but it's also somewhere that's easily accessible for parents.

SENATOR BORRELLO: Thank you.

And just quickly, I'm going to say, you know, this is clearly not a partisan issue, and I think we've got a good -- wide bipartisan support. So we're all here to help. Thank you.

MS. KLOS SHAPIRO: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Assemblyman Bronson.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, panelists. Very powerful testimony today.

I'm going to pose my questions to The Children's Agenda and the Schuyler Center and first thank each of you for being lead agencies or organizations fighting for the Child Poverty Reduction Act. And I noticed in the written testimony that you both touched on it.

Schuyler Center, my question to you is if you could expand a little bit on lessons learned from the Great Recession and the really devastating impact on our families after that, and what we should be doing as we

move forward, not only in this budget or forward. And then to Pete at The Children's Agenda, you too, if you could just talk about the childcare component and how that will help us move forward on reducing child poverty in the state.

So Schuyler first, if you would.

MS. CHARLES: Yes, definitely.

So after the Great Recession it took approximately 10 years for the poverty rates to recover to pre-Great Recession levels. And, you know, since the pandemic we've seen a similar impact on poverty. Some of that has been alleviated because of the different stimulus packages that have come in from the federal government.

But for New York State specifically, it shouldn't take us 10 years to recover from a temporary event. And the Child Poverty Reduction Act is something that helps us be more intentional, and it sets that target for us to reach for. And it takes all of us to implement policies that will reduce the poverty rate in New York State.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you, Crystal.

And Pete, a little bit about childcare and how that will help us reduce child poverty here in New York State.

MR. NABOZNY: Yes, thank you, Assemblymember.

So in the -- I think it was 2012, 2013, there was a study done at the federal level, I think by the Urban Institute, that looked at the -- there's a really strong -- to cut to the chase, there's a really strong relationship between increases in affordability -- for every 10 percent that childcare becomes more affordable, a 10 percent reduction in the cost to families -- and a corresponding increase in maternal employment.

And we know that most child poverty in New York State is related to -- well, a lot of it is single moms with young children. And so getting childcare to be more affordable for families has a direct impact on reducing child poverty, and it has to be

part of any plan that we put together in the future to cut child poverty in half in 10 years.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you. And thank you to all the panelists for the good work you are doing out there in our neighborhoods.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Seeing no further Senators, I am going to go to Assemblywoman Lunsford.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you very much to all the panelists, especially those of you who are providing direct care. We see you and we hear you, and we are fighting to make things better.

I am going to direct my questions also to The Children's Agenda, which is getting a lot of heat because of how much Monroe County is represented here on the Children and Families Committee. But I would like to talk a little about the conflict between expanding universal pre-K and our childcare centers.

There is obviously a big push to ensure that as many kids get access to pre-K

as possible, but that is causing a financial issue in our daycares. If you could speak to that a little bit, and if you have any suggestions for how to rectify some of that conflict.

I'm going to start with Pete, and then people can move out from there if they have other things to say.

MR. NABOZNY: Sure, yeah. I mean, I think that's one of the key issues that has driven a lot of the business challenges that childcare providers have faced over the past decade, is the fact that childcare, sort of, you know, the -- it makes its money, from a business sense, on slightly older children and it loses it on younger children.

So if the older children are in a UPK classroom where, you know, it's free to that family, it makes it very hard for a childcare provider to charge parents what it would cost to actually provide the infant and toddler care. As well as those kids who are in pre-K are not in pre-K all the time. That's 180 days a year, and they still need care at

other times -- evenings, after school, school breaks, things like that.

So we've got to -- there's definitely some things that we can do. Part of it is more public investment into the childcare sector, treating it more like how we treat education, with appropriate funding.

There's also things -- school districts are required to allocate 10 percent of their UPK slots to community-based partners. You could increase that to really shore up these community-based organizations, these childcare centers.

You could also help family childcare providers become certified as UPK providers, which other states like Maryland have done, to sort of bring -- some families want their pre-K experience in that kind of setting. And so we should recognize and honor that and help providers get to that point.

So there's a lot of other things that could be done, but it does fundamentally come down to some policy changes, but a lot of it is funding.

And I'll turn it over to whichever one of my panelist colleagues wants to add to that.

MR. MORALES: Can I just add in on that from the family childcare perspective?

So, one, Pete 100 percent is right. We need to find ways to meaningfully let family childcare participate in all of the public systems.

I also just want to mention, you know, we have a tendency in the policy world to be talking about early childhood and pre-K as separate things, when in reality that is a continuum. So even the setup of the system right now is such that, you know, there is no switch that goes off at 4 years old that means a child now needs care. They need it throughout that entire time. So we need to be supporting it throughout that entire time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you very much.

MS. JONES: Can I say something real quick?

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes.

PANELIST: You're muted, Gladys.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes. Yeah. Quickly, we still have another member. Yes.

MS. JONES: You need to let the workforce speak for themselves and also families speak for themselves. Let us talk.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We have another Assembly -- still no -- right, no one else from the Senate. We have another Assemblymember, Assemblyman Mamdani.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Thank you so much, Chair Weinstein.

Thank you everyone for your testimony. I was just wondering -- and this is open to anyone on the panel -- if you can speak to how means testing, like income eligibility or work requirements, prevents families from getting childcare. Thank you.

(Pause.)

MR. MORALES: Gladys, you don't have any stories?

MS. ALBITZ: I'm happy to take it.

So means testing is fundamentally

something that makes it difficult both for low-income families and every family. It is harder to access the childcare they need when we have means testing because, first of all, that adds many layers of bureaucracy. Second of all, when families do not speak English as their first language, that adds an additional barrier.

So having to constantly prove that you're working, having to prove that your income is, you know, little enough but not too much, making sure that, you know, we have 12-month eligibility -- but what happens after that?

Making sure that all children have access to the early childhood education and care that they deserve in high-quality settings -- middle-class families cannot afford this if we're actually paying childcare providers what they deserve. So means testing ends up harming all of us.

MR. BRENDER: And I would add the combination of both means testing and work requirements makes approving a family for

childcare a herculean task both for -- I'm in New York City, so for the city -- but for the counties and then for individual providers. And it really leads to families waiting way too long.

And these are families who are looking to get childcare to go to work. These are families who want to get their children educated and not miss months of education because there's a backlog at a local social service district.

So you probably gathered we all have moral reasons that we want to see means testing done away with. Early childhood should be a right. But even just implementing it becomes an incredible problem for families and for providers.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: So would it be correct to say, then, that the answer here is not the expansion of eligibility to a certain percentage of the federal poverty line, but rather the implementation of a universal childcare system?

MR. BRENDER: Yes.

MS. ALBITZ: Yes. Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAMDANI: Okay. Thank you so much. I just wanted to clarify that.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for your work.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We have no further questioners. I want to just thank all of you for the work you are doing on behalf of families in New York State.

And at this point we will call the next panel. This is Panel C. And we have New York Statewide Senior Action Council, Gail Myers, deputy directer; Project Guardianship, Kimberly George, president and CEO; LiveOn New York, Briana Paden-Williams, communications and policy associate; Supportive Housing Network, Laura Mascuch, executive director; Association on Aging in New York, Rebecca Preve, executive director; and SAGE-Advocacy and Services for LGBTQ+ Elders, MJ Okma, senior manager for advocacy and government relations.

So if people can go in that order,

starting with our friend Gail.

MS. MYERS: Thanks for having me. And I appreciate -- so much to say in so little time.

Our testimony will focus on transparency and accountability and improving benefits, expansion of programs. And I will start out with our contracts that are funded by the state.

New York StateWide Senior Action Council learns about problems in the aging and healthcare delivery system from two contracts, our help lines that we operate through the New York State Office for Aging budget funding that you put into the Aid for Localities budget -- thank you.

The first is our Patients' Rights Hotline and Advocacy Project. We've run this since 1987. And we educate and empower patients to uphold their healthcare consumer rights. As you can be sure, we've spent a lot of time on nursing home visitation in the past year and nursing home quality of care, among other things.

I call your attention to page 3 in our testimony, which gives you a history of our budget funding. The bottom line is the Executive has funded this at 31,500. The Legislature has added 200,000 as a legislative appropriation in the past. We need you to do that again, otherwise our services are at very big risk for what is a vital program to help people.

The second contract that we have is the Managed Care Consumer Assistance Program. And we have had flat funding in the Governor's budget, so we're starting out with the same level as last year. We have had increased need, and there is increased need to help people who are eligible for services to get enrolled. So we'd like to ask you to add another $200,000 as a legislative add to that. We want to increase our capacity to reach more underserved and hard-to-reach older residents and to get them enrolled.

I just want to also note that while we are subcontractors of the New York State Office for Aging -- or a contractor -- we

have not been earmarked for any human services agency COLA, and so we're coming to you to ask you for some additional support.

In focusing on the services offered by the Office for Aging, I just want to stress that there -- and when we talk about it, there's a difference between unmet need and waiting lists. And we ask you to really examine both and to get to the existing barriers to EISEP home care services.

Regarding home care, we support the Fair Pay for Home Care Act. Regarding the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, we'd like to see an increase in the budget to improve the staffing but tie that to a report that shows how the staffing was increased.

We are advocating for improvements to the EPIC program that would also allow people under the age of 65 to use the benefit and to remove the onerous new EPIC application. Thgere's a bill, S4603/A5422, that we bring to your attention.

We are asking for an expansion of the Medicare Savings Program. Right now it's up

to 135 percent of the federal poverty level. We'd like to see that go up to 200 percent and get more people benefits, including a federally funded benefit for Part D extra help.

And then the last is we salute the Governor for including the Medicaid expansion in her budget so that seniors and persons with disabilities are not restricted to a lower level of income eligibility. And she removes the asset test as well. That's a good thing. We'd ask you to address what could be a devastating window between now and January 1st when her bill, should you accept it, goes into effect. And that's in Part N.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Now we go to Early Care & Learning Council. (Pause.) I'm sorry, Kimberly George, Project Guardianship?

There you are. Okay.

MS. GEORGE: Hi, yes. Sorry. You said a different name, so I was waiting.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Yes.

MS. GEORGE: Hi. Thank you, Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, and all of the honorable members of the Legislature for hearing from me today. I am Kimberly George, president of Project Guardianship, which was founded by the Vera Institute of Justice 17 years ago.

As we are all well aware, our population is aging and we do not have enough systems in place that treat older adults as valuable members of our society. Add to that the fact that older adults are facing greater poverty in retirement than previous generations, and older adults with disabilities and cognitive disorders, such as Alzheimer's and dementia, are living longer.

Unfortunately, there is a growing subset of adults who are poor, alone -- which means they have no one to be their power of attorney or healthcare proxy -- who need help making decisions in managing their affairs. For this population, guardianship is necessary to prevent neglect and abuse and to provide the dignity that people deserve at

every stage of their life.

I must distinguish for you between two types of guardianship in New York. There are two statutes. One, Article 17-A, is for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities aging out of parental control. This is intended to allow family members to make decisions for that person after the age of 18.

What I am focusing on is Article 81 guardianship, which is for adults who have had an event or circumstances in their life that makes it so they can no longer -- they no longer have the ability to take care of every aspect of their life. Under Article 81, the burden of proof that a person needs a guardian is much higher than 17-A. The guardianship also must be the tool of last resort, and the powers of the guardian must specifically be tailored to the person's needs for support.

New York's current Article 81 system includes a patchwork approach to who will serve as guardian. There are family and

friends, often referred to as lay guardians. And when there is no family or friend to serve as private guardian, usually an attorney can be paid out of the person's resources. So if a person has no family or friends that are able to do the job, and no money to pay a private guardian, it can be difficult to find a qualified guardian. This is especially true if the person's case is complex, requiring time and expertise to untangle issues such as housing instability, untreated mental illness, and property theft.

Nonprofit agency providers are trying hard to fill a big gap, but there is no designated funding stream in New York State's budget for these services. These nonprofits, including Project Guardianship, struggle to cobble together the funds needed to meet the high demand for our services.

As such, New York leaves unprotected a population of largely low-income aging adults and people with disabilities without skilled guardians. This population is at risk for losing their homes, unnecessary

institutionalizations, repeated hospitalizations, increased poverty, isolation, and exploitation.

Project Guardianship believes that $10 million will be needed on an annual basis to meet the growing need for nonprofit guardianship providers. Understanding that this would be a new program, and given that the appointments need to go through a timely court process, we are requesting $4 million in this year's budget as a starting point.

And I thank you for your time and consideration of our request.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: So we can go on to LiveOn New York.

MS. PADEN-WILLIAMS: Hello. My name is Brianna Paden-Williams. I am the communications and policy associate at LiveOn New York. Thank you to both the Senate and the Assembly for the opportunity to testify today.

LiveOn New York's members include more than a hundred community-based nonprofits that provide core services that allow all

New Yorkers to thrive in our community as we all age.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the human services sector has stepped up to ensure that the most vulnerable New Yorkers, including older adults, have access to critical services to aging communities. For over two years, providers confronted a pandemic that put older adults at the greatest risk -- not only to the virus, but also to the negative health impacts of extended periods of social isolation while staying at home to avoid infection.

In response to these threats, providers worked to change their service models virtually overnight, shifting to reaching clients via phone, setting up Zoom calls, and really just continuing to be a resource to older adults throughout New York.

We appreciate the recent aging-related commitments by Governor Hochul and the Executive Budget to support the human services sector in older New Yorkers. Nonetheless, we also recognize that work

still needs to be done to better support older New Yorkers. While the older adult population continues to be the fastest-growing demographic, making up nearly 16 percent of the state's population, the program that supports older New Yorkers remains chronically underfunded.

Representative of this underfunding, the overall state budget grew by 3.1 percent in the Executive Budget, while the NYSOFA budget lagged behind overall growth at 1.8 percent, despite the population it serves making up a larger and larger share of the overall population.

To begin to address the inequities impacting older adults and providers, at LiveOn New York we recommend the following budget recommendations:

We're asking for 14.1 million to support NYSOFA-funded home-delivered meals. We've seen throughout the pandemic that there has been an increased need, an increased demand for home-delivered meals, with providers now serving more older adults than

ever, and thousands of new clients being added to the service since March.

In addition, we're asking for 5 million to create a resident advisor program in affordable senior housing. A deepening investment in affordable senior housing with services is critical in future years, not only to improve the quality of life of older New Yorkers and to address rising senior homelessness, but as an overall cost-saving measure against increased Medicaid and Medicare spending.

And so a $5 million investment in FY '23, totaling 25 million over five years, will create a new resident advisor program to ensure older adults can safely age with access to light-touch, nonmedical services.

In addition, like everyone else has mentioned, we're also asking for a cost-of-living adjustment for all human service workers. While we appreciate the recent investment of the 5 million, we must ensure that no one is left behind. So implementing a COLA across the board that is

inclusive of all human services will truly help achieve pay equity.

In addition, to fully fund Fair Pay for Home Care in order to establish a base wage for home care workers, to create jobs for New Yorkers, to support older adults and people living with disabilities, and to really rebuild our economy by paying home care workers a just wage.

Lastly, we're asking for increased funding to address the waiting lists for NYSOFA services. That truly remains a chronic issue as New York's counties and nonprofit providers continue to experience waiting lists for services.

And so with that, as we look ahead, LiveOn New York is ready to work with the state to continue to move the human services sector forward to really ensure that all New Yorkers can thrive in community with access to equitable community-based services.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We can go to Supportive Housing Network.

MS. MASCUCH: Thank you to the Senate and Assembly chairs for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Laura Mascuch. I'm the executive director of the Supportive Housing Network of New York. We are a statewide membership organization of over 200 nonprofits that own and operate up to 55,000 units.

Supportive housing represents a critical tool to ending homelessness, offering permanent housing solutions with wraparound social services for people who have experienced homelessness and have the greatest barriers to obtaining and maintaining housing.

New York State is in the sixth year of the state's housing plan to develop 20,000 units over 15 years. We have over 6200 units in construction or built. This is an incredible community achievement.

We are very pleased that

Governor Hochul continues the supportive housing commitment by proposing to fund 1.5 billion for the development of the next 7,000 units and preserving an additional 3,000 as part of the five-year plan.

As part of this commitment, the Executive Budget also includes -- and the Network strongly supports -- 128 million in funding for the Homeless Housing and Assistance Program, which provides capital grants to nonprofits to construct and preserve supportive housing. To date, we have built over 18,000 units.

The Network also supports the Governor's funding of the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative at 110 million. ESSHI is the services funding that is married with the capital.

But while we continue needed housing development, it is incredibly important to preserve the housing we have. I would like to draw your attention to the New York State Supportive Housing Program, that is in need of additional resources. NYSSHP is a program

that pays for critical on-site services that make it possible to house multi-disabled and vulnerable individuals and families in permanent affordable apartments. But before ESSHI was developed, it was the main and only operating funding source for supportive housing rest-of-state.

The current NYSSHP budget is funded at 39.8 million. The Exec does add 2.8 million. And although we support this increase, we feel that much more is needed. Nearly 10,000 NYSSHP units depend almost totally on subsidies that have remained nearly unchanged for 20 years -- approximately 2500 to 3500 per unit. In comparison, ESSHI is four times that rate.

The Network strongly urges the final budget to include an additional 100 million for NYSSHP to adjust the current rates to 12,500, mirroring ESSHI.

In addition, as you heard today, this program was left out of the Executive's proposal to provide a 5.4 percent cost of living adjustment. With more than 80 percent

of NYSSHP funding supporting salaries of direct care workers, this program should also receive the 5.4 percent COLA. The Network strongly urges the final budget to include the additional 2.2 million for the COLA.

We also urge the Legislature to modify the COLA statute language to include this program moving forward, and for the COLA to be extended, as it is currently slated to expire on March 31st, 2022.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

And we have the Association on Aging in New York.

MS. PREVE: You do. Good afternoon, and thank you to all Senate and Assembly members.

My name is Becky Preve, and I'm the executive director of the Association on Aging in New York. My membership consists of the 59 Offices for the Aging that are doing the direct services that have been talked about today.

I'm really thrilled to be here on behalf of my members and optimistic with the proposed budget and the continued investment in aging services. The past two years have been extremely difficult for our network, as we have experienced an increase in the demand for our services that has almost doubled the number of people that we are serving.

Additionally, we've had to change our traditional service structure, transition to remote services, and were thrust into new services, including vaccinations and education regarding the pandemic in the older population.

Although the budget includes increases in funding and allows for innovative new programs, there are certain areas that desperately need attention in order for older New Yorkers to age in place and avoid costly nurse home placements. We have heard all day today and in previous hearings about the need for Fair Pay for Home Care and the horrific real-life implications of what not receiving care means to people just like Kendra and

Sally, who testified today.

Our home care program supports older New Yorkers that are above income for Medicaid services, but we utilize the exact same licensed home care providers as the Medicaid population. And because our traditional authorizations for older people above income for Medicaid are lower than the Medicaid system, we're deferred services from licensed home-care agencies because of this.

Our current waiting list is over 90 percent due to the lack of direct service professionals and not due to funding. We were very fortunate to receive $149 million in federal stimulus dollars, but we are unable to turn services on for the most vulnerable segment of our population strictly due to not having any direct workforce to support them.

Our services are predicated on keeping people in homes and communities and saving the state Medicaid dollars, and our traditional client, who is an 83-year-old female who lives alone, is low-income, has

four or more chronic conditions, and needs help with things such as taking a bath or going to the bathroom, are really predicated on making sure that we have a robust workforce to support them.

The aggregate cost of the aging services network is under $10,000 per year for individuals that would qualify for much higher levels of care at a cost of about $130,000 to $150,000 per year.

I also want to draw attention to advocacy items that have been mentioned here today. We fully support a $14.1 million increase for the Home-Delivered Meal Program. This is due to the overall increased costs of inflation as well as the food cost, and as well as losing most of our volunteers who delivered the meals due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We're also asking for a $6 million investment into our robust case management system to serve the 8,000 people currently waiting for case management services throughout the state, and we're asking for a

restoration of funding for Lifespan of Greater Rochester, for their elder abuse funding and mitigation efforts, of $125,000.

And lastly, we fully support the $20 million investment into the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, which historically has been underfunded and has not served individuals that we need to serve.

I thank you all for your time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

And now, SAGE.

MR. OKMA: Good afternoon. My name is MJ Okma. I'm the new senior manager of advocacy and government relations at SAGE.

SAGE has been serving LGBTQ+ elders and HIV older New Yorkers for over four decades, providing comprehensive social services and community building programming through our network of six older adult centers in New York City, affiliates in Bayshore, Hudson Valley, Syracuse and Rochester, as well as programs to engage older LGBTQ+ New Yorkers across the state, include SAGEVets.

Services for elders are more crucial than ever, as the population of New Yorkers aged 60 and older is growing five times faster than those under 18, with LGBTQ+ elders making up a significant part of this rapidly growing population.

Because of thin support networks, LGBTQ+ older people rely more heavily on community service providers for care. Yet they're often distrustful of providers after a long history of compounding discrimination. For many of these elders in New York, SAGE is their lifeline.

It is because of them that I'm here today to respectfully ask for the restoration of our funding in the state fiscal year '23 budget, including a restoration of 300,000 to support LGBTQ+ residents and community members in and around New York state's first LGBTQ+-welcoming affordable elder housing development, the restoration of 150,000 from the Office of Temporary Disability Assistance to increase our multilingual programming and services, and a restoration of 260,000 for

SAGEVets.

With the support of the New York Legislature, SAGE has been able to evolve and expand to best address the widespread disparities facing LGBTQ+ New Yorkers. In response to the ongoing pandemic, SAGE has provided hundreds of virtual programs in support services and thousands of phone calls each week to combat social isolation.

Following clearance from the State Department of Aging, SAGE has also been able to further redesign our program and services delivery to provide a variety of in-person, virtual and hybrid options. SAGE also made history in our state in 2020 and 2021 when we opened New York's first LGBTQ+-welcoming affordable elder housing developments located in Brooklyn and the Bronx providing site services to residents and surrounding community members, including programming, wellness checks, grocery delivery, and coordinated care with other providers.

We have also expanded our multilingual programming into Spanish, Mandarin, and

Cantonese.

Utilizing state funding and the momentum from the passage of the Restoration of Honors Act, our SAGEVets program continues to expand our reach, helping older LGBTQ+ veterans to navigate the VA and get the benefits which they deserve, aiding their overall health and wellness, and providing referrals to counsel for discharge status updates.

SAGEVets provides this life-changing support while saving New York significant amounts of funding by ensuring veterans access all of their federal benefits instead of relying solely on state programs to address their housing and health care needs. SAGE respectfully requests the restoration of our funding to continue this vital work.

Thank you so much for your support and providing me with this opportunity. More details can be found in my submitted written testimony.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you all for presenting.

We now have a number of members from the Assembly and Senate who have questions.

So first we go -- and just a reminder to the Assemblymembers and Senators that you have three minutes to ask a question of the panel or a specific member of the panel, but not each member.

So we first go to our Aging chair, Assemblyman Ron Kim.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Chairwoman. And thank you all for your testimonies today.

My first question is to Gail. Can you just expand a little bit about the differences between unmet needs versus the waiting list?

MS. MYERS: Sure. So unmet needs are the people who haven't called yet. They are the people who have not been put on a waiting list. And we saw the huge number of people who really did need services but didn't come into the network until this year. We got calls for our patients' rights helpline from people, you know, from all over the state, as

one example. But you heard it about food, you heard it about services.

So unmet need is the projection of the percentage of the population that one would expect to need supports through the offices for aging services, which is a greater number than the people who -- many who are on waiting lists already. And you can't just turn that spigot on, even though the agency did such great work last year and the year before to pivot and turn and try to deliver great services.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Gail. That was very good, thank you.

The next question is for Kimberly. There is -- I know this doesn't apply to Project Guardianship, but there have been some headlines around guardianship. And I want to give an opportunity to dispel some of those elements around exploitation of people under guardianship, and so maybe it's an opportunity to talk about what are some of the safeguards for your clients and recourse if there is some sort of exploitative

behavior.

MS. GEORGE: Yes, thank you, I really appreciate that question. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address it.

You know, there's a lot of things going on here. One is just that cases of bad guardianship is what makes the media. There are a lot, a lot of good people doing a lot of really hard work on behalf of other people serving as guardians without much compensation, and so that doesn't get highlighted.

Oftentimes guardianship is the result of abuse that has happened, and research shows that elder abuse is more often -- much more often happens by family members and under power of attorneys than by guardians.

Lastly, we believe that a nonprofit model is a great way to prevent abuse by guardians.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Got it. Thank you.

Becky, very quickly, what is the driving reason for the waiting list again? I wasn't clear. You were --

MS. PREVE: Absolutely. So over 90 percent of the waiting list is for personal care services, because we did receive the federal dollars so we could turn on meals, et cetera. But it's explicitly due to not having any direct care professionals to actually turn these services on for.

So it's not a money issue, it is a capacity and resource issue.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: To the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Excuse me. Couldn't get the mute off.

First to Senator Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is just for MJ from SAGE. You have a center in my district, and you do incredible work.

I'm just curious, if you don't receive adequate funding from the State Legislature this year, how will that impact the work you do?

MR. OKMA: Thank you so much, Senator,

for the question and your support of SAGE's work.

We really have a lot of momentum this year, being able to, you know, expand our multilingual programming, which has been really, really quintessential for the new housing developments, as we're seeing a large amount of community members who are monolingual and can't access our services in English. So this funding really, really helps us provide that and continues our access and outreach to the communities.

We're seeing a lot more demand specifically around homeless LGBTQ+ elders as we kind of create these new centers across New York City. There is an increased demand, and this funding really makes sure that we not only maintain our levels of services but are able to expand our outreach to make sure that we're reaching more.

More specifically, we've really expanded our transgender and gender nonbinary outreach and program development, and state funding is very, very important to that.

SENATOR BRISPORT: I really appreciate it, and I hope we can do everything we can for SAGE in this year's budget.

I will cede the rest of my time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We'll go to Assemblywoman Rosenthal, the chair of Social Services, with three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Thank you all for your great testimony. It was really concise and well-written, and I really appreciated it all. And you're exposing the real needs the people across the state have and that our state has a responsibility to meet. We really have a lot to do in this budget to set it right.

I wanted to ask Laura about vacancies in supportive housing. And thank you for all your great work. Since I have become the chair, it's been great to work and reach our -- hopefully reach our common goals together.

In terms of the supportive housing, there has been discussion about the

10 percent vacancy, and I spoke to -- I asked Commissioner Tietz about that, and he said there were a lot of paperwork issues and said that units are turned around within 30 days, they're not vacant for very long.

From your point of view, what is the cause of these vacancies? And how widespread are they, and how can we fix that? People on the street need a home now, not in 30 days.

MS. MASCUCH: Right. Thank you, Chair Rosenthal. Thank you for your support, it's been amazing.

You are absolutely correct. We have an approximately 10 percent vacancy rate, which is leading to about 2,000 to 2500 units. And we also have new units coming online from both the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative as well as New York -- NYC 15/15. So that's great.

But what that means is that really the previous city administration did not grow the capacity of the placement unit. So -- and then, through COVID, there were hiring freezes. And then people retired and people

are burnt out and they -- you know, they really are very much down in staff right now. So we're working very closely with the administration around the staffing issues and the need.

We're working with our nonprofits to identify their vacancies, and we're working with the city to really streamline the process. So we're hoping that this is part of the mayor's 100-Day Plan and we get these units filled.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Okay, that sounds very reasonable, actually.

And we also have to give a COLA to those workers who were left out, and we hear -- we've heard all day about Fair Pay for Home Care and for the people who were left out of the COLA. And so I'm sure the Assembly will do its best to try to make everybody on the same level, even though they are all not making enough money for the jobs we ask them to do and that they want to do.

So thank you so much.

MS. MASCUCH: Absolutely.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. We go to Assemblyman Jones.

No, wait, you have Senators, I'm sorry.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: That's okay.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: The Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: That's okay.

Senator Sue Serino.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I just would like to say thank you to everybody on the panel. Your testimonies are amazing, and I really appreciate all of the work that each and every one of you do.

But my first question is for the executive director of the Association on Aging. Becky, nice to see you. And I am sure that you heard earlier today members were asking Director Olsen about the Comptroller's audit. I was kind of taken aback by the findings, because I know that our local offices of the aging really go above and beyond, they're on the frontlines, and I've seen at least in my community how

they really were working 24/7.

So were you surprised by the audit's findings?

MS. PREVE: Thank you, Senator, and it is great to see you. And thanks for your ongoing support.

I can speak on behalf of the membership. I represent the counties that were actually interviewed for the Comptroller's report, and we absolutely disagree with the findings in the audit report.

I think it's helpful to understand that there's intricacies to how this funding works and what the counties and localities have to go through to implement dollars.

And so some of the findings included that money was left on the table. That is completely not true. It did take us some time, once the state issued the Notice of Grant awards, for counties to go to their board of legislators, pass the resolution, then you have to reassess clients to see if their services remain the same from their

first assessment -- did they pass away, did they go to a nursing home. All of the allocations were expended for Year 1 of the unmet needs funding.

I think it's also important to note that when the audit took place, it was on Year 1 of that funding, which took us an extended period of time to get through the process to get implemented.

It additionally cited a few issues that we wholeheartedly disagree with. One was that no on-site monitoring was done by New York State Office for the Aging at the localities. To me, it is absolutely insane to criticize an organization for not going for site visits in communities that were so harshly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We lost almost all of our volunteers. We lost staff. Offices were fully remote. And the number-one need for New Yorkers was to get them fed, keep them healthy, and keep them safe -- and that's what these counties did.

In conjunction with that, I can speak

personally that the commissioner -- Director Olsen and I met with our counties twice per month and then had one-on-one technical assistance calls with all counties to make sure that they could expend those dollars. That was in addition to program, fiscal, and nutrition support calls.

And therefore, you know, I think that because -- if you're not really well versed in the intricacies of what our funding mechanism looks like, you could see those barriers.

But we wholeheartedly disagree, and all of the counties that were interviewed shared with me that they were extremely disappointed. I had one director who was in tears, because all we have done in this network for the past two years is to try to keep people alive, and that's what we've done.

SENATOR SERINO: Yeah, thank you so much for explaining all of that, too, Becky.

And this is a question for everybody about elder abuse. You know, I'm really

concerned to see that Lifespan was cut. And we all know that elder abuse did not stop when the pandemic started, but it's not being reported, and that is so concerning.

So I was just wondering, does this budget invest enough in elder abuse prevention services?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And I'm sorry, we don't have time for you to get all the answers. We ran out of time already.

SENATOR SERINO: Okay, thank you, Chair.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: But everybody feel free to get back to Senator Serino after your panel is over to share your view about that as well. Because it certainly is a real issue, Senator Serino.

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Assemblyman Jones.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Hi, everyone. Thank you for all that you do. And I would guess this question is towards Becky.

First, I want to reiterate how much we need to support our home care workers. We need our older adults to age in place. We need to provide those services. We need to get them a living wage so they can do that, take care of our loved ones, keep them in their homes in our neighborhoods.

A couple of questions, actually. Could you tell me how we are actually saving Medicaid dollars in doing that, in keeping -- you know, in getting those services, getting those home care workers into those homes, how we're saving Medicaid dollars? And also, if your numbers have increased in the past couple of years, I want to see and I want to hear how you've done that.

But -- and this is a question for -- I mean, this is a loaded question, but we need to get our home care workers a reimbursable rate so that they can make a living, so that they can take care of our most vulnerable population, so that they can stay in their homes and where they are in their neighborhoods where their families want them,

where they want to be. How do we do that?

We've been talking all day about this, on how we keep people there. I know it's getting more money and getting a better reimbursable rate to our home care workers, DSPs, all of that, but -- please answer those questions.

MS. PREVE: Thank you, Assemblyman Jones, and thank you for your ongoing support.

You know, it's a loaded question. What I can tell you is exactly what I spoke to in my testimony. Our average client receiving home care services would require a skilled nursing facility placement if there were no services available in the community. So they qualify on paper to go to a higher level of care.

We're able to provide them wraparound services, from personal emergency response systems to home healthcare workers providing the care to keep them in homes and communities. The reason that is so important for Medicaid savings is that we are serving

the portion of the population that makes just above the Medicaid benchmark, but they can't afford to privately pay for the service. So the minute that individual transitions to a skilled nursing facility, they spend down to Medicaid and the state share on Medicaid is significantly high.

So we know it's a cost savings for us to keep people in homes and communities. We have also partnered with the entire disability and Medicaid community on Fair Pay for Home Care for exactly that reason. Medicaid is the major payer, but we're serving older people, people with disabilities, et cetera, and our goal is to keep them in homes and communities.

And I will share with you this has been an issue since the 1980s when it was first publicized in the New York Times. The Assembly hosted two hearings on this issue years ago that went on for 12 hours plus. So we've been talking about this in aging and disability and all payer sources for decades, and its time to finally get a solution before

people start dying. And I think --

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Why aren't we doing that? What is taking -- first of all, it keeps people in their homes. Second of all, it would save the state money if we reinvested -- or if we invested this on the front end instead of paying for it on the back end. I don't understand why we're not doing it.

But thank you so much for all the work that all of you are doing.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, Assemblymember.

Next we go to Senator Martucci.

SENATOR MARTUCCI: Thank you, Chair.

My question is for all the panelists. I wanted to use my three minutes to allow you to respond to a question that both Senator Serino and I have, but she did not have time to get to, which was the funding in the budget for elder abuse.

So my question to anyone who is here who can testify to this would be: Do you feel like the funding that is proposed in the

Executive Budget is sufficient? And if not, what should this Legislature be taking under consideration with respect to that issue?

MS. PREVE: I can speak to that.

I can tell you that we absolutely need a $125,000 investment for Lifespan of Greater Rochester. This is traditionally a legislative add-on for Lifespan, and I can tell you, as referenced earlier, we have seen an explosion in elder abuse, fraud, scams, abuse, and neglect. Caregivers have increasing issues with alcohol and substances, et cetera. The pandemic has made people ripe for exploitation, and $125,000 for Lifespan to continue their work in this space is imperative.

It also draws down additional dollars through the Office of Victim Services. And they work very diligently to get victims restitution for what they have lost. So we think it's imperative that that be added back into the budget.

MS. MYERS: We don't do direct service regarding elder abuse. We do a lot of

referrals when someone calls us to other services.

But what we are looking at is a piece that the Governor has proposed that would allow the Department of Financial Services to set up a system where they will help people paying their bills so that they are not as subject to trusting someone that perhaps they shouldn't trust. So as that develops, we'll be taking a look at that and to seeing what resources need to get plugged into there.

But like everything else, this is an example of unmet need. There are so many people that are abused emotionally, financially, physically, and they are not reported and they are not self-reporting, and we need to do more as a state. Thank you.

SENATOR MARTUCCI: Thank you all so much for your answers.

Thank you, Chairwoman.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you both.

To Assemblyman Bronson.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you,

Chair. And thank you, panelists, for your sharing with us this important information.

My question is going to go to SAGE and MJ. You talked a little bit about the need for services. You know, I think it would be beneficial to my colleagues to hear how the LGBTQ+ elder community is really perceived to some degree as being invisible, and they're disconnected from services. Why is that? And in particular, why is it for our trans and gender-nonconforming individuals?

And then the secondary question I have for you -- it's great that Brooklyn and Bronx have elder-affordable housing. We're starting something similar in Rochester. But how can we scale that up? So help us understand this issue for our LGBTQ+ community.

MR. OKMA: Yeah, definitely. Thank you so much for that question, Assemblymember.

LGBTQ+ elders face really steadily unique disparities that are not faced by other members of the population. There's

been a lot of studies done on this. I'd point folks to check out AARP has an amazing report called "Disrupting Disparities" that kind of goes over this. But there's big mental and physical health disparities, a lack of competent and inclusive care.

Many specifically of our transgender elders fear that they have to go into the closet or they have to, you know, return to families who might not be accepting or force them, you know, to go by a name, pronouns, or wear clothing that doesn't align with who they are.

So there's unique, you know -- we talked about elder abuse before. There's really unique examples, you know, of that specifically in the LGBTQ+ community. They also face economic insecurity, you know, for -- you know, compounding discrimination their whole life. You know, having fewer financial resources, limited housing options.

And, you know, isolation and being disconnected from services, which is something I spoke a little bit about in my

testimony. You know, that they have less of a family support system, they might not have children who can take care of them. So they rely more on community care providers, but those providers aren't competent in providing this work. It can be more damaging, so it leads to a lot of distrust and a lot of social isolation and isolation from services. Which makes this work really important.

I recently started at SAGE about two months ago. I can't speak to the exact way to scale our housing development, but I can definitely get you connected with folks who work in our housing and residence department to kind of have these conversations about how we can bring something similar to your district and elsewhere in the state.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you so much, MJ. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I just have a couple of things, Helene, to close out for the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Sure.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I want to thank you all for your work.

Gail, you propose that the DFS take over the bill paying. I'm not sure that would ever work, but I want to suggest to you something that I know not-for-profits in New York City sometimes do. They go out and they get bonded staff and they handle paying the bills for seniors or people with physical or mental disabilities. And it doesn't require a whole guardianship, but it actually is working very well with several groups in my own district. So I would urge everyone to take a look at that.

And Kimberly, I also had concerns about the guardianship program. Now, I think probably in most cases it's working when it's through not-for-profits, but I've also seen exploitation of seniors in my own community.

And so what can we do to make sure we're building in that extra layer of protection so that we don't find ourselves with cases where you actually have to go to judges, as I have, and demand that they assign new guardians or remove that person

from the control of a not-for-profit where you see that their money is being spent down without their approval for no justifiable reason?

MS. GEORGE: One thing is that we need more monitoring and oversight of the guardians that are appointed. I'm not sure of the details of the exploitation that you've seen -- like is it lay guardians, private guardians, agency guardians?

But there's certainly -- you know, guardians are required to submit annual reports on every financial transaction. But there's not a -- there's not a great enforcement mechanism, and it can take years for those reports to even be reviewed when they are submitted and returned.

So definitely more court resources for the oversight, and I think more training and support for family and friend guardians on what they can and cannot do. You know, just like with powers of attorneys, there are concepts about, like, oh, you know, in advanced inheritance and things like that.

And there just needs to be more resources for family that are serving as guardians.

But certainly, you know, if there is exploitation, there needs to be a better -- a more -- an easier way for that to get back to the judges and for -- you know, successor guardianships take a long time.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, they do. And it does take -- you're right. I'm not sure anybody ever looks at those reports, and so it is a real concern.

And when I talk about exploitation, the guardian has a credit card for the person, won't let them have it, won't buy the food for that person, and yet money is being spent on that credit card on a regular basis for things that never show up in that person's apartment. That's an example.

MS. GEORGE: That's a very serious breach of their fiduciary duties, yeah.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Exactly. Thank you. Thank you all for your work.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Thank you for your work.

And just to piggyback on what Senator Krueger said, a number of years ago we changed the -- I sponsored the legislation where we changed the definition of domestic violence to include economic abuse, because we found -- which also exists, a similar situation, and is an elder -- whether they call it elder abuse, domestic violence, where the party in control does things in the name of the victim economically to harm them.

And, you know, it's important that we do prosecute the bad guys and not taint all guardians. And maybe one day we'll have community guardians, which is really where we should be moving. We have a pilot program in Brooklyn that seems to work pretty well. But it needs to expand, it's very limited.

Thank you all for being here.

And now we're going to call Panel D, which focuses on youth. And Panel D is New York State Network for Youth Success, Trudy Morgan, policy director; New York State YouthBuild Coalition, Bonnie Landi, president; North Rivers Family of Services,

William Gettman, CEO; Prevent Child Abuse New York, Timothy Hathaway, executive director; New York State Kincare Coalition, Ryan Johnson, chair; Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, Kathleen Brady-Stepien, president and CEO; and Center for Court Innovation, Katherine Wurmfeld, director of family court programs and gender and family justice programs.

So if we can go in that order, starting with Trudy Morgan.

And just a reminder, just a -- before you speak, let me just remind everybody -- we'll put the clock back to three minutes before you speak. I just want to remind everybody that you each have up to three minutes to speak. And when the panel is finished, members may have some questions for you.

And just to remind everyone that we have your submitted testimony, it's been circulated to all of the members who are here and those who weren't able to join us today at these budget hearings who are members of

these committees. So feel free to summarize your testimony; we do have all of your written testimony already circulated.

And with that, now, Trudy Morgan, you can go.

MS. MORGAN: Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Trudy Morgan, and I'm the policy director at the New York State Network for Youth Success.

Our goal as a statewide network is to build an effective and integrated statewide system of high-quality, expanded learning opportunities in New York. After-school, summer, and expanded learning programs in New York have risen to the moment. Despite program disruptions caused by COVID-19, these programs have adapted to support caregivers for more resilience, provide protective factors, and address traumas and adversity.

For many New York families, after-school goes beyond after school. That's why this, the after-school field, has experienced dire needs, especially amid COVID-19, including unprecedented staff

shortages, low per-student reimbursement rates, and other structural challenges.

Further, for every child in an after-school program in New York, four are waiting to get in. Critical investments for after-school are long overdue. More than ever you must strengthen, enhance, transform, and leverage after-school programs to empower youth success. Our full priorities are outlined in my written testimony, and in the interests of time I would like to highlight four of our asks today.

Firstly, we ask the state to restore the $5 million cut to the Advantage After School Program and baseline funding throughout the award term. Persistent reductions in the Executive Budget undercut the Advantage Program and put at least 2,500 kids at risk of losing current after-school access.

We also ask the state to provide $169 million to align the current per-student rate of state after-school programs -- that is Advantage, Empire State After-School, and

the Extended School Day/School Violence Prevention programs -- with a true base cost rate of $4,300. This would require a change in budget language for the Empire State After-School Program, which currently has a per-student rate set in statute.

Also, please direct a new line item of $250,000 this year to the New York State Network for Youth Success to strengthen statewide capacity building for after-school programs. The state recognizes the network as a critical partner in after-school and school-age childcare issues, and based on this funding the state would enable the network to sustain the wide scope of technical assistance and support it currently provides.

Finally, please maintain the proposed $100 million in the RECOVS Learning and Mental Health Grants and require school districts receiving the funds to demonstrate mutual collaboration with at least one community-based partner.

After-school, summer, and expanded

learning programs address needs that are crucial to the recovery, stability, and support of students and their families. After-school works in New York to empower youth success, and we are counting on our state legislators and the Governor to increase much-needed investment at this time.

Thank you for your time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

So now can we go to New York State YouthBuild Coalition.

MS. LANDI: Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify about the YouthBuild programs in New York State.

YouthBuild is a comprehensive youth training program, and it serves 16-to-24-year-olds, the most at-risk youth in the state. Programs are located in communities on Long Island, the five boroughs of New York City, both sides of the Hudson River from Newburgh to Albany, and west from Schenectady to Buffalo.

All of them are structured under the same comprehensive youth training model.

That model provides education, one-on-one case management, leadership development, hands-on work experience training, employment readiness, and job placement. Components guide the youth in a more positive direction and get them ready for placement in jobs and post-secondary higher education.

In addition to the core training components, YouthBuild programs also have included mental health intervention, adult mentoring, and gun and community violence intervention. In that regard, YouthBuild programs have taken a proactive approach because of the recent drastic rise in gun and community violence. And we have already included strategies from several initiatives, programs designed to help youth develop a gun violence strategy.

The Governor's Executive Budget proposal for '22-'23 calls for the development of apprenticeships, gun violence prevention programs, and an expansion of workforce training for youth. We would like to recommend that the state not reinvent the

wheel but adequately fund the state's YouthBuild programs that already provide all of those trainings.

We can point to data that clearly indicates the effectiveness of the comprehensive training provided by YouthBuild programs, specifically data that indicates recidivism rates at 8 percent compared to 68.9 percent for court-involved participants. And programs experience a 75 to 80 percent completion rate, where nationally they're at a 51.8 percent completion rate.

Another tangible item and successful achievement of YouthBuild programs is the provision of affordable homes for low-income homebuyers, a tangible result of our required housing construction skills training.

The New York State YouthBuild Coalition appreciates the recent engagement we have experienced over the past several years with various funding amounts from the State Legislature and participation in the workforce development demonstration project grant, which is scheduled to end in

August '23.

However, the YouthBuild programs can assist in preventing the most vulnerable youth from being more vulnerable in New York State. We have a successful training program. And as such, we would respectfully request the following:

One, pass the New York State YouthBuild Act and fund it at $10 million. This will provide consistent, sustainable funding for New York programs. Without consistent funding, programs will probably close and communities will lose this valuable resource for their youth. The New York State YouthBuild Act has been a bill in the Legislature for the past 10 years. Each year the Senate passes their version of the bill, but it languishes in the Assembly. Let's finally get the act passed in both houses and fully funded.

Two, provide additional funding to YouthBuild programs for continuation of the workforce development project -- removing it as a demonstration project and sustaining it

as a workforce development program that has proven successful with the outcomes for the youth that it served.

We would finally like to point to and note that the design of the training model for YouthBuild programs has been successful as a youth training model since 1978 when it was launched right here in New York State, 43 years ago. Let's finally recognize the value of YouthBuild programs training and fund it and invest in the funding stream that would make it more viable.

Let YouthBuild be a part of the solution for youth training of young people in New York State.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you. And now, Northern Rivers Family of Services.

MR. GETTMAN: Thank you. My name is Bill Gettman, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

First off, I want to thank all the members of the Legislature for your service, because you make a difference in the state and your voice is critical to passing a

budget that's good for all New Yorkers.

Northern Rivers is a provider. We provide services -- mental health, child welfare, adoption, mental health community-based services, and residential care -- to about 18,000 kids and families every year.

One thing I can tell you firsthand. During the pandemic, every one of our staff left their homes to come care for others. And I can also tell you that the 400 foster parents we have took in kids during the pandemic. They are the real heroes, and we need to support them in this budget.

As my testimony indicates, we support the Governor's 5.4 percent COLA recommendation in the $500 million. However, we have to make the permanent extension of the CPI-based COLA part of the budget bill. We cannot let this bill pass without the extension of the COLA in the future.

We also need to include adult and children health home workers, because they also took care of kids and families during

the pandemic.

Last, in terms of workforce, we need to extend the bonus provisions that are in the mental health and the OPW budget to frontline child welfare workers. And of course we need scholarships and forgiveness and professional development.

As you all know, foster parents are the backbone of the child welfare system, and the budget provides an increase to their monthly per diem rate. I have to dispute, though, Commissioner Poole -- since I was there when the block grant was formed -- this was never intended to be an unfunded mandate. The money that's going to increase foster parent payments needs to be in the Foster Care Block Grant, or it will just be a cut to child welfare services. And that will result in less preventive services and other valuable services.

And that takes me to the point that Chair Hevesi talked about, is we need to restore the child welfare preventive program from 62 percent to 65 percent. That was the

basis of the statute originally, and the intent to remove it to 62 percent was only driven by fiscal realities. We don't need to do that anymore.

And last, let me talk about the need to reform the scope of practice. As Assemblymember Bronson articulated earlier today, we will have devastation if we don't extend the diagnosis waiver and, more importantly, pass a bill that makes sense. Our agency alone has a waitlist of over 1,000 in our clinics, and we have several hundred families waiting for community-based mental health services. Those numbers will double if we don't pass the scope of practice reform here.

And, of course, not-for-profit infrastructure was included in the Governor's budget of $50 million. We support that so that we can make sure we have good places to serve kids and families.

Thank you very much for your leadership and -- (muted).

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We go to Prevent Child Abuse New York.

MR. HATHAWAY: Thank you.

Good afternoon. I am Tim Hathaway, the executive director with Prevent Child Abuse New York. We are a workforce development and policy advocacy organization spanning the State of New York.

If we really, truly hope to effect change and reduce the number of children that are impacted by child abuse, we have a clear path in front of us and it is the path of creating economic security for all of our citizens across the state.

We want to be careful always to not equate poverty with child abuse. We do want to recognize that abuse impacts all socioeconomic classes. But we know that when we see reductions in large-scale poverty, we see reductions in child maltreatment, child neglect.

I also want to applaud -- there was some earlier testimony, questions regarding the Casey work around -- kind of a comparison between what New York State does around

primary prevention work, as opposed to a state like Alabama, and recognizing that there is a gap and that New York State can do better on primary prevention.

And with that, I will draw attention to our testimony -- we're not going to read the whole thing today -- but a couple of highlights related to that.

First and foremost, around the issue of prevention -- again, call out the great leadership from Assemblymember Hevesi on the Children and Families Reinvestment Act. Mr. Gettman just addressed some of that. There is a third leg in that piece that really talks about primary prevention and the importance of supporting family resource centers, helping grow efforts across the state at screening and parenting education work like PPP. So we encourage investment in that area.

We also want to just commend the home visiting investment that has been put forward in the state budget, $11 million to support Healthy Families New York serving 1600 more

families.

We also request an additional investment of $2 million in ParentChild+ to maintain existing services, and an additional 2 million for a total of 4 million in ParentChild+ to extend professional development work there.

Housing, we want to talk about -- again, excellent, wonderful news about the $25 billion investment around housing, because we know that good housing protects children, reduces neglect. And we are excited about the idea of a continued eviction moratorium. That's an important piece for us.

Childcare has been discussed quite at length today. I do want to point out that we need to keep the school-aged after school care money in the budget. The $5 million that has been cut for Advantage After School needs to stay in the budget. It's a critical piece to child abuse prevention.

Thank you very much for your time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

And now we move on to New York State Kincare Coalition.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you.

Good evening, Chairpersons Weinstein and Krueger and honorable members of the Legislature. My name is Ryan Johnson. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the kinship community today. I'm the associate director of the New York State Kinship Navigator and chair of the New York State Kincare Coalition, which was established to serve as the voice of kinship caregivers and professionals in New York.

The term "kinship care" refers to family members -- who are often grandparents and other close relatives -- or family friends who take on the full-time care of children when they're not able to be cared for by their parents.

We in fact have two child welfare systems in New York: One, the public-facing child welfare system that you've heard so much about today, from many advocates and state agency leaders. But we also have a

hidden child welfare system, one in which grandparents and other relatives are asked to take traumatized children by our child welfare system, but without court oversight, with extremely limited resources, and often without a path to permanency.

In New York there are an estimated 195,000 children being raised by kinship caregivers. Most of these children, about 188,000 of them, are being raised outside of foster care and therefore have limited access to resources. I am here today on behalf of those caregivers who have been asked to step up in times of crisis to raise children that they were not expecting to raise and who need support.

Funding for kinship service has been unstable. Dozens of programs around the state have opened and then abruptly closed their doors to kinship caregivers, due to the loss of funding or to the uncertainty in the stability of the funds that they receive. As a result, kinship caregivers are less likely to access available resources like public

assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, and other needed benefits.

Since 2016, the Legislature has funded kinship services at a total of $2.5 million. This funds 14 local kinship care case management programs and a statewide information education and referral resource, the Kinship Navigator.

I'm here to ask that the Legislature choose to prioritize these families and, at minimum, restore the funds for services which have been underfunded in the Executive Budget. These programs are here to help kinship families navigate a complex system of benefits and services that they are eligible for and help stabilize families for a fraction of the cost of what it would cost to have them in foster care.

The need to unify the kinship system of care under one umbrella has never been greater. As New York transitions into the implementation of the Families First Act, it's been estimated that kinship caregiving will increase as a result of fewer children

going into foster care.

Having services available to families that meet the needs they present with will be increasingly important in order to ensure that children who have been diverted from foster care stay out of foster care and can remain safely in the homes of kinship caregivers.

Creating a unified statewide kinship navigator by consolidating the current programs under one entity with a presence regionally throughout the state will help streamline services for caregivers and ensure that they have access to information and case management, legal, and respite services.

We request the Legislature invest in these families by passing the Unified Kinship System of Care bill and funding the kinship service system at $10 million.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: So next we have the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies.

MS. BRADY-STEPIEN: Good evening.

My name is Kathleen Brady-Stepien. I'm the president and CEO of COFCCA, the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies. We are a statewide membership association, and we have as our members the more than 100 community-based child welfare nonprofit organizations around the state.

Our highest priority is supporting the human services and child welfare workforce. They have been incredible heroes throughout the pandemic, going above and beyond to meet families' needs. They are essential workers that have, every day, gone to work securing food, PPE and other basic needs for families, as well as keeping families safely together through prevention services and caring for children and youth in foster care.

We were very pleased to see the Governor's proposed 5.4 percent human services COLA. And we note that the statute is expiring at the end of March, so we want to work together with the Legislature to make sure that there continues to be an annual imperative for the Executive and the state to

invest in raising these workers' salaries up to keep up with inflation.

We also want to work together with you to raise salaries more significantly for our workforce and to build career pathways. Workers in child welfare programs have not gotten any targeted federal aid like other human services workers have, and we need a commitment from the state to raise wages in a meaningful way so that we don't continue the high turnover and vacancy rates that we see in these programs.

We strongly support the increased foster parent rates. Foster parents are so incredibly deserving of more support from the state, and we are truly glad to see that they are going to get these long-overdue increases.

There are two important points on that. Number one, we encourage the state to put additional money in the Foster Care Block Grant to pay for these increases so they don't land as an unfunded cost for counties.

Number two, we need to ensure that

MSRA rates are released on time, July 1st, so that foster parents don't see delays in getting these increases.

And finally, we were very disappointed to see that the Executive Budget did not restore a 65 percent reimbursement for counties on prevention services. By all accounts, the state is in a strong financial position, and it is time to restore these cuts that came about during austerity budgeting in the past.

New York's child welfare financing structure has been shown to work in massively reducing the foster care census. Let's help to continue the positive direction of reducing the foster care census by restoring this investment back to the statutorily required 65 percent.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

And we go to the last member of this panel, Center for Court Innovation.

MS. WURMFELD: Good afternoon,

everybody. I'm Kate Wurmfeld, director of family court programs at the Center for Court Innovation, and I want to talk to you today about the Strong Starts Court Initiative, which is a family-court-based project of the center for Court Innovation.

It is a two-generational approach focusing on infants and toddlers, birth to three years of age, who are subjects of child protection cases, where courts, families, and the agencies are provided with more frequent and consistent information through monthly convenings that improve outcomes for children and families.

It's based on a national model from ZERO TO THREE. Several states have now adopted it as a statewide strategy; New York State has yet to do that.

So we focus on these very young children because they are the largest cohort of children entering care. There are more than 16,000 children, birth to three, who are known to the New York State family courts. They are also at a critical stage of

development where exposure to adversity -- significant adversity, including system-imposed harm -- has lifelong implications.

So we also know that these infants and toddlers are entering a child welfare system that is overstretched at every level and has no established expertise in infant mental health or early childhood development. So Strong Starts brings that expertise to the courts and the child welfare system, including expertise in the kinds of interventions that best shift the balance between risk and protective factors.

And here is just briefly how it works. A dedicated judge in each county is paired with a specialist in infant mental health. Cases received intensive outreach and clinical assessments by a clinical social worker, so that parents stay engaged with their children and their cases and families are referred for meaningful services that improve parents' capacity for safe and nurturing care and promote children's

learning and development.

There is also an expedited court calendar in which families' entire court teams of attorneys, caseworkers, and clinical service providers meet on a monthly basis to share information, address barriers to service provision and case progress, and solve problems. This significantly reduces the usual adversarial stance that obscures problems that need to be addressed and that contribute to court inefficiencies, since the judge and all parties convene with the family once a month, compared to the unpredictable adjournment schedule in typical cases.

Strong Starts has been operating out of the Bronx since 2015 as a pilot, and is now in all five counties in New York City and in Westchester County as well. A recent program evaluation shows that Strong Starts is preventing removals and moves in care, reducing recidivism, and judges and attorneys are using what they've learned in their other cases.

Strong Starts is well-positioned to

expand capacity in New York City and replicate the model for implementation throughout New York State. And while Court Administration has set the goal for expansion, it doesn't have the means to do this. And we are entirely funded by private foundations at this point, except for a grant from the New York State Council on Children and Families, which is our first non-New York City-based program that that supports.

So we're urging government to consider the assets that Strong Starts brings to a system that is supposed to help families and to provide access to this infant-focused expertise and this collaborative effort and strength-based approach on behalf of our youngest children, and to form a public-private partnership that will allow us to replicate this model throughout the court process throughout the state.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

So now we're going to go to questions from the Assembly and Senate.

Members will go first who are -- our ranker on Ways and Means, Assemblyman Ra, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you, Chair.

Good evening, everybody. I wanted to just continue with Kathleen regarding the 62 percent versus 65 percent and (A) if you know what that means in terms of real dollars that the state is pushing onto, you know, counties instead of paying it themselves; and (B) over this, you know, really decade now, what that has meant in terms of local investment in the system.

MS. BRADY-STEPIEN: Thank you, Assemblyman Ra, and thank you as always for your support.

So the change to 65 percent we think would be about $30 million. That would help the counties to invest more in prevention services.

And I want to tie it to something else that has been talked about today, which is the increased foster parent rates and the fact that the state is not also -- the

Executive has not put forward additional money in the Foster Care Block Grant. What that means is that the counties are going to have to pick this up. Commissioner Poole identified earlier that that's $80 million, is the cost.

And so the counties are going to have to spend more to pay these increased rates, which are long overdue, for our foster parents. And that means they'll have less available funding on prevention services at the local level.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Great. And, you know, I really just think that this budget year -- like you said, and like so many have said, there is lot of money out there, and a lot of opportunities to undo some of the -- you know, some of the things that were frankly targeted by the previous administration and couldn't really get fully restored.

So thank you for your advocacy, and hopefully this is one of the things that I think that a relatively small investment,

relative to the size of our budget, could make a big difference. Thank you.

MS. BRADY-STEPIEN: Thank you so much. We agree.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: To the Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

We are going to start with Senator Pete Harckham.

SENATOR HARCKHAM: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good evening, everybody. Thank you all so much for your testimony.

I chair the Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, and one of the things that we know is that one of the large drivers of substance use disorder is early childhood and adolescent trauma.

What can we in New York State do to better address early childhood and adolescent trauma before we get to the point of self-medication?

MR. GETTMAN: I will start with that, Senator. Thank you.

One thing we have to do is invest in our workforce that we can put into our childcare centers and our early headstart programs and into our schools. We need a workforce that is sensitive in trauma-informed care, culturally sensitive, and also has the credentials and professional support so they can treat families in a variety of settings. And that gets to Assemblymember Bronson's bill about licensure and also gets to compensation.

So I will toss it over to my friend Tim; I'm sure he has some ideas on that.

MR. HATHAWAY: Yes, thank you very much.

You know, I think this is pretty central to solving some of this. We have to invest in workforce. We've got to be talking -- and there's some work around increasing supports for mandated reporters, changing that from mandated reporters to mandated supporters, people who are in the community, prepared, well-prepared to serve families and not push them to an adversarial

role in this work.

So workforce, workforce, workforce is the investment.

SENATOR HARCKHAM: Thank you.

Anyone else?

MS. MORGAN: Please, I --

SENATOR HARCKHAM: Yes, please. We've got another minute.

MS. MORGAN: Yes. I will quickly add that we know that after-school, summer, and expanded learning programs was a preventative strategy because it provided protective factors that help young people avoid the risk of substance abuse and misuse.

And we're actually glad to see in the last budget that after-school was included as an allowable expense for the Cannabis Act. And so we hope that there will be the increased investments with the act to help expand after-school programs so that they are able to provide those preventative supports.

SENATOR HARCKHAM: Thank you.

Anyone else?

MS. WURMFELD: And I would just --

yes, I would just quickly add that substance use is a huge risk factor that comes up on the cases that we deal with at Strong Starts.

The whole -- the main thrust of the program is to interrupt those intergenerational cycles of system involvement. Many of the parents we serve were in foster care themselves, are system-involved themselves, which of course we know leads to the substance use issues.

So that's something that we're really dealing with at the court level so that the court becomes a port of entry for supportive services instead of a punitive process that further involves parents in the child welfare system.

SENATOR HARCKHAM: Terrific. Thank you all very much.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assemblymember.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go to Assemblyman Bronson.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you,

Chair.

And my questions are going to go to Kathleen Brady-Stepien with COFCCA and Bill Gettman at Northern Rivers, regarding standardizing the licensure requirements and modernizing the scope of practice for our mental health practitioners and how that's related to the workforce problem that has existed for a long time but has only been exacerbated because of COVID. And now I'm hearing that there are community-based organizations that are closing their intake because they can't manage the numbers and there's waitlists.

Could each of you explain why it's vitally important because -- vitally important for us to get this measure passed, hopefully in the enacted budget -- why that's necessary for your workforce and necessary for the people you serve.

MS. BRADY-STEPIEN: Thank you, Assemblyman Bronson, so much for your leadership on this issue.

It is critical that we include your

bill in the enacted budget. We are coming up on a ticking time clock of June for the expiration of this exemption.

You know, we have workforce shortages all across the board of mental health professionals. What you said is exactly right. We have programs that are closing intake, not because they don't want to serve their communities but because they have a shortage of appropriately licensed and credentialed mental health professionals.

And so we definitely want to support you in making sure that this gets done in this year's budget so that we can make sure we have enough mental health professionals to support New York's families all across the state.

And I will toss it to my friend Bill Gettman.

MR. GETTMAN: Thank you, Kathleen.

The only thing I disagree with Kathleen on -- it's not a ticking time clock, it's a ticking time bomb.

We have programs that can't expand.

We have this -- Senator Harckham talked about the need to get into schools, which means we need more trained and sophisticated counselors, mental health professionals, et cetera.

And the other thing I want to emphasize is the schools -- like Rochester, Syracuse, Baruch -- they have changed their curriculum and modernized it in a way that's even better than many social work schools right now. And I don't want to pick a fight here, but the profession has changed to meet the needs.

We have growing demand. We have a 35 percent turnover rate. So we're going to lose a third of our workforce. We're not going to have a pipeline. Clinics will close. School-based programs, while we're going to want them, will never be able to open in our school districts despite federal money that could pay for them. It's just an unmitigated disaster.

I mean, I can't overemphasize the impact on families, kids, the elderly --

everybody is going to be impacted by this. And our answer is going to be because we can't agree on how to diagnose appropriately? We've been talking about this for 20 years. Let's -- I agree with you, Assemblyman. Let's get it done in the budget.

ASSEMBLYMAN BRONSON: Thank you both. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We go back to the Senate. I see your hand.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes. Thank you. We have Senator Sue Serino. Are you there, Sue?

SENATOR SERINO: Thank you, Chairwoman. And I had questions for COFCCA, but Assemblyman -- oh, yup. Can you hear me? My connection --

(Zoom dropped.)

SENATOR SERINO: Sorry. Chairwoman, can you hear me?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I can hear you, yes.

SENATOR SERINO: No, no, no. Oh,

good. I'm so sorry. My connection for some reason is squirrelly.

I had questions for COFCCA, but Assemblyman Bronson covered them. So my question is going to be for YouthBuild, for Bonnie Landi.

And I just want to say to Bonnie -- like I have Nubian Directions in my district and that I can tell you, I've seen their success firsthand. They're amazing. Those kids engage with me every time I go and meet with them. But I want to tell you that I think you are dead on in your testimony that not reinventing the wheel. You know, investing in YouthBuild is just like a smart move.

But with everything going on that you mentioned in your testimony, do you think that now might be a good time to even like expand the number of programs throughout the state?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: You're on -- take your mute off.

MS. LANDI: Absolutely, Senator. I

totally agree with what you just said.

We would love to see YouthBuild programs expand in New York State. I can tell you that I am regularly connected with agencies in areas -- Sullivan County, Columbia County, many other counties that need a YouthBuild program, want a YouthBuild program, but the funding isn't there.

So if we can get the act passed and get it fully funded and do the things that this program does -- it's a youth training model that has been around in New York State for eons now. Let's get it expanded. Let's get it moving where it needs to go.

Our youth are very vulnerable to all the gun violence, all the gang proliferation. This is what we need to do. We need to expand these programs, programs like YouthBuild that have an extensive, successful training model.

SENATOR SERINO: Yup, it's a true success story. So thank you so much for all of your good work.

Thank you, Chairwoman.

MS. LANDI: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

And to close out the questions for this panel, we have the chair of our Children and Families Committee, Andrew Hevesi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Chair Weinstein and Chair Krueger for all the time you've allowed us to get to these important points today, and for sitting through all of these hearings. I don't know how you guys do it, and the staff too. Thank you very much.

I'm not going to use all this time. I want to thank all of my colleagues for asking their questions and also all of the advocates. I'm am not going to ask you any questions, I'm just going to provide a little takeaway.

We've heard all of the specifics. We have all of it, everything you mentioned. But let me just leave with a couple of points that jumped out to me. Number one, I think there is broad agreement that we're losing

too many kids to trauma, that too many kids are being doomed and defined by their trauma every day.

I also heard today colleagues from both sides of the aisle pushing for the same thing, and even colleagues within different spectrums within the same party all pushing for the same thing. It's heartening. You're getting the sense that everybody is seeing this the right way.

And I want to thank Bonnie, who I have not yet talked to. But Bonnie, I think we need to talk. You hit it, and I've been missing this one: Invest in things that work. That's what we're doing in all of this. These things work. Foster parents work. Kinship parents. Ryan, we're going to keep pushing so that kinship parents are taken care of, you have my commitment on that. And then the workforces.

And here's what I'm going to end with, and I hope I finally hit this. This is my final takeaway. That to do this right, we need to follow the brain and trauma science

which requires that we support the people who are the caring adults that give our kids the emotional support and the problem-solving skills they need.

Because it's now up to us, because the reality is it's tough out there for kids these days. They're getting attacked from every angle. There's rampant poverty, there's rampant abuse, there's pandemic. These kids are having trouble. They need a stable adult in their life. That's why every one of these programs is crucially important. And that's why we decided to go to help all of them.

So thank you all for making the case for us. It's now up to us in the Legislature to go deliver. Thank you, everybody.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. Anyone else have their hand up? I don't --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: I know --

MR. GETTMAN: I forgot to say, Senator: Go, Bills!

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Well, it's a little late, but --

MR. GETTMAN: I know.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: But they did it. They were good in that -- they got robbed. What can we say?

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you all to the panel and for all the work you do in our communities and on behalf of our families.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, everyone.

MS. BRADY-STEPIEN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We will continue to work with you as we pull together this year's budget.

I'm now going to call Panel E, which is our final panel for this evening: Hunger Free America, Joel Berg, CEO; Met Council on Jewish Poverty, Jessica Chait, managing director of food programs; Catholic Charities Community Services, Archdiocese of New York, Beatriz Taveras, executive director; and Empire Justice Center, Emilia Sicilia -- hopefully I didn't mess that up too much --

senior attorney.

And if we can go in that order, starting with Hunger Free America.

MR. BERG: Hello. I'm Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America. I'm here to announce there's no more hunger in New York and we don't need any more money. You have been working ridiculously long hours, so I thought I'd start with that.

(Laughter.)

MR. BERG: On a more serious note, Senator Krueger, you are correct, there's a problem with delivery of senior meals in New York City. I've already asked the City of New York to contact you about that.

In New York today, one in nine state residents, 2.2 million people, live in households that struggle against hunger. One in six kids, one in 13 employed people, one in 13 seniors. And we think, oh, this is a New York City problem, and the Bronx still has the highest hunger and poverty rate out of any county in New York. But the highest metropolitan area in food insecurity is

Utica-Rome, followed by Syracuse, followed by Albany, Schenectady, and Troy. This is a problem in every urban, suburban, and rural community of New York State.

I hope in your voluminous free time -- which you don't have -- you read the full written testimony I've submitted, which has a comprehensive plan for the Legislature and the Governor to reduce hunger in New York. So I will just focus my remaining two minutes on the biggest-ticket item we have, which are the federal nutrition assistance programs.

This year the SNAP program is set to spend $8.8 billion -- that's billion with a B -- of federal funds; 2.8 million New Yorkers are eligible and getting SNAP. But 25 percent of working people eligible for SNAP aren't getting it. Thirty percent of seniors eligible for SNAP aren't getting it. Thirty-nine percent of pregnant women and children under five eligible for WIC aren't getting it.

And so I know everyone loves Nourish New York, and we strongly support it, and

everyone loves the Thanksgiving-era turkey giveaways and cutting, you know, ribbons at food programs. But by far the most cost-effective and sensible way to fight hunger in New York is to use limited state funds to increase federal funding. Every dollar the state spends on SNAP outreach will generate $30 to $60 worth of federal benefits.

Even -- you know, SNAP is going to spend about 176 times more than what Nourish New York's going to spend. And that's all federal money, and Nourish New York is mostly or all state money. Even if you increase SNAP by 5 percent, 5 percent, that would be $440 million more to fill the grocery carts of low-income people at farmer's markets, corner stores, bodegas, supermarkets. Just that increase would be nine times the dollar amount of Nourish New York.

Archimedes said: If you give me a lever big enough, I can move the world. The biggest lever for reducing hunger is increasing wages, and we hope you will end

the ridiculous subminimum wage for tip workers. We hope you have a serious commitment to jobs creation, making housing more affordable. You make housing affordable, you're going to reduce hunger in New York. But most importantly and most quickly, we can significantly increase access to federally funded programs.

Thank you, and I leave you five extra seconds.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: We'll take that.

Next we go to Met Council on Jewish Poverty.

MS. CHAIT: Thank you all, and good evening. Hello, Chair Weinstein and Chair Krueger and fellow members of the joint legislative hearing. Thank you so much for your time all day.

My name is Jessica Chait, and I'm the managing director of food programs at Met Council on Jewish Poverty. And it really was a pleasure to learn more about the important topics you heard about today and to hear so

many strong advocates for low-income and at-risk New Yorkers.

Met Council operates the largest kosher emergency food program in the country. In response to the pandemic, working with hundreds of pantries across the city, including dozens of halal pantries, we have delivered more than 30 million pounds of food, serving 200,000 New Yorkers each month.

Our pantries serve all New Yorkers. However, we are experts at serving kosher- and halal-observant communities who trust us to provide not only the highest-quality appropriate food, but also through models that emphasize choice, dignity, and cultural confidence.

New York is home to the largest Jewish and Muslim populations in America, and for that reason the state can and must do more to ensure that the needs of food-insecure Jewish and Muslim residents are met. Religiously certified food is more expensive. Kosher and halal products are available from fewer vendors, and public food sources at the

local, state, and federal levels stock extremely limited quantities and varieties of kosher and halal-certified food, causing tremendous inequalities in the amount of food that is available to those who need it.

Moreover, sadly, we see every day that many food banks and pantries aren't able to adequately ensure that the foods that they provide are kosher or halal, or that these foods are going to the populations who require them.

Between March 2020 and October 2021, New York City operated GetFoodNYC, which delivered nearly 130 million meals to New Yorkers. For the first time through this program, the Mayor's Office of Food Policy recorded data on what kinds of meals New Yorkers requested. Shockingly, 21 percent, or one in five of all meals delivered, were kosher or halal. This is incredibly significant and demonstrates what my council has long known -- that the need for kosher and halal emergency food is extremely high.

When you read the report which was included with our written testimony, you'll see why we believe that demand is even higher than 21 percent, and how these challenges impact people across the state. Further, given the inflation of food prices, especially for kosher and halal-certified food, the K-shaped recovery and the vast underutilization of emergency food, we anticipate the need for emergency food to remain at current levels in the coming years.

We need your support to ensure that every New Yorker, regardless of their religious or dietary restrictions, has equal access to emergency food. To do this, in the FY '23 budget we must ensure that kosher and halal emergency providers are appropriately accounted for in all state programs.

And with this consideration in mind, we respectfully request increased funding for New York State's HPNAP or Hunger Nutrition Assistance Program to $54 million. The Governor's proposed budget provides no increase to HPNAP funding, yet in the past

five years the per-capita funding of HPNAP has fallen over 30 percent.

We respectfully request increased funding for Nourish New York at $85 million. It's an innovative program that similarly creates many bottom lines.

And in addition, informed by the GetFood report, we request that at least 20 percent of all emergency food that comes to New York City be allocated to the procurement and distribution of kosher and halal foods by organizations that have the cultural knowledge and capacity to ensure appropriate certification requirements and handling processes, and most importantly that this food gets to those who require it.

We're grateful to this body and each of you for your continuing support of emergency food programs more broadly, and respectfully request these considerations.

Thank you for your time.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Now to Catholic Charities.

MS. TAVERAS: Yes. Good afternoon --

or maybe it's good evening -- to Chairs Weinstein and Krueger and the members of the Assembly Ways and Means and Senate Finance committees.

I am Beatriz Diaz Taveras, the executive director for Catholic Charities Community Services, and I thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

For over 70 years -- in some cases 100 years -- throughout the state Catholic Charities has provided comprehensive, professional human services to vulnerable low-income residents in the poorest communities throughout the state. Our network of services enables a participant in any of our programs to access a continuum of services, which include case management services to help people resolve financial, emotional, and family issues; long-term disaster case management services; eviction and homelessness prevention; emergency food; immigration legal services; refugee resettlement; ESOL services; after-school programs at summer camps and community

centers; and supported housing programs for adults with serious mental illness.

Through its programs, Catholic Charities serves thousands of individuals each year without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, or religion.

We would like to bring to your attention the following items: Human services cost-of-living adjustments and minimum wage increases. The Executive Budget's inclusion of a one-time 5.4 percent cost-of-living adjustment for human service providers, 40.7 million in increased funding to cover minimum wage increases, and over 200 million in retention bonuses for the frontline workers is a welcome and great step towards reducing the gap between contract amounts and the true cost of providing services.

Catholic Charities supports the state's application of these funds to include the full range of human services programs and service categories, and the extension of these initiatives into future years -- that's

most important.

Under immigration and legal services, Catholic Charities provides services to tens of thousands of immigrants and refugees each year. At Catholic Charities we are asking for public support that would allow it to bring these vital services to more communities and increase the breadth of services we offer.

Catholic Charities urges the Legislature to preserve and enhance the Executive Budget inclusion of 12 million for the Liberty Defense Project and the Pro-Bono Project to ensure all immigrant New Yorkers access to free, quality legal counsel.

I would like to jump to affordable housing. Catholic Charities is encouraged by the Executive Budget inclusion of the 4.5 billion and the 5-year housing plan that will support the development and preservation of 100,000 units of affordable housing and the 10,000 units of supportive housing, and welcomes the state's continued support of the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative

and the Homeless Housing and Assistance Program.

In addition, Catholic Charities supports the increased assistance and resources for the rental assistance programs that help the unemployed, and for state and local support of similar programs that grant access to market-rate housing and assisting those, including immigrants, who are ineligible for financial or federal assistance.

The Executive Budget's increased allocation for the Legal Representation for Eviction Cases Program will help to provide much-needed aid for tenants struggling to remain in their homes, and the establishment of a state refundable tax credit for individuals and families under 80 percent of the area median income for rent paid in excess of 30 percent of their monthly adjusted income would provide further relief.

Finally, I have to put in a plug for Nourish New York. It was much welcomed that we were able to distribute good produce,

New York State produce, to so many families. Not only did it help our families, but it also helped the farmers, and I would be remiss if I didn't say we really do need continued funding for Nourish New York.

On behalf of New York's most vulnerable, and Catholic Charities, thank you for this opportunity.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you all. I don't see hands raised. I just -- I actually had a question for --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: There was a fourth person on the panel, Empire Justice Center?

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Oh, you're right. I'm sorry. And it's not even close to midnight, Senator.

(Laughter.)

MS. SICILIA: It's been a long day for you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Empire Justice, yes. Emilia.

MS. SICILIA: Yes, thank you so much. Good evening to the chairs and committee

members. My name is Emilia Sicilia. I'm a senior attorney at the Empire Justice Center. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

Empire Justice Center is a statewide legal services and advocacy organization for low-income New Yorkers. Support for New York human services remains urgent. As has been recognized throughout today, COVID has been devastating to those who are low-income, elderly, or have medical conditions -- most especially in Black and brown communities.

Our written testimony covers extensively the need to reform the public assistance budgeting rules and also the need for increased funding for MCCAP.

I would like to spend my allotted time to tell you about the need to increase funding for the Disability Advocacy Program, known as DAP. Empire Justice provides support and administrative services to DAP providers. The DAP program provides legal services -- legal representation, free legal services -- to disabled and low-income

New Yorkers who are denied or cut off from federal disability benefits. So that is Supplemental Security Income, known as SSI, or Social Security Disability. And the program was established by this Legislature in 1983.

DAP services help stabilize people's income, which in turn helps stabilize housing, health, and quality of life overall. For every dollar invested in DAP, at least $2 is generated for the benefit of New York State and local government in the form of public assistance costs avoided and the money spent in local economies.

So the first point I want to highlight about DAP is that obtaining disability benefits is very complicated. The evidence required by the Social Security Administration is very demanding. And for individuals contending with income and housing instability, together with physical and mental limitations, the process can be difficult to impossible.

And second, these obstacles have been

compounded by the affects of the COVID-19 pandemic. SSA offices have been closed to the public for almost all in-person services since March 2020, and they only recently announced tentative plans to reopen in the spring.

Because of local limited capacity for phone and in-person contact, even once the doors are opened we expect increased claims, increased appeals, but also more wait times and logjams. And throughout this pandemic, DAP has risen to the challenge of helping clients opening cases at a rate comparable to pre-COVID years, and helping clients who otherwise would have lost their cases due to SSA closures and to the many other obstacles that they face.

Finally, another point I want to make about DAP is that the demand for services at this time now also includes DAP clients with claims based on the long-term effects of COVID-19. A TIME article last year noted that the pandemic represents "the largest influx of new entrants to the disability

community in modern history."

For the past six years, DAP funding has stayed flat while program costs increased and the process of pursuing a claim became exponentially more difficult. The Executive Budget -- we're grateful it recognizes these challenges by increasing funding, but to fully meet the demands facing DAP the Legislature should maintain its support and continue its $1.5 million add-on.

Thank you for your time today.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Now I'm going to say thank you to the panel for being with us.

I just had a question -- I just wanted to clarify. When you said that kosher food goes to people that don't necessarily request kosher, that's because when food comes into the food pantry, that groups that don't necessarily need kosher or halal food have access to food. Like if it's kosher tuna fish, they don't care whether it's kosher or not; it's tuna fish, and they take it.

So that you're saying is that we need

to somehow segregate kosher -- food for people who are kosher-observant and halal-observant to maximize the food that we have, is that -- do I get it right?

MS. CHAIT: Yes. I mean ideally, right, the important framework to think about is if kosher -- if food is kosher, anyone can eat it. Or halal, almost anyone -- I mean, halal is a little bit more tricky, but certainly with kosher everyone can eat it. When it's not kosher, then you are excluding, you know, people from accessing that.

And what we found with our work with many of the halal pantries in communities we work with is that in many cases kosher food is an acceptable alternative. Not always, but it is often the case.

Unfortunately, so much of the food that comes directly from the federal government has an incredibly limited supply of kosher food. So if all food were kosher, of course that wouldn't be required. But given that it is so incredibly limited, then the way it is administered by the Tikvah

partner in New York City, which is Food Bank for New York City, they make that product available to their entire network of emergency food pantries.

And so in that case you have groups that, exactly as you are saying, may access or choose the tuna, not prioritizing it necessarily because it's kosher -- probably not because it's kosher -- but because it is tuna fish and what they need or want.

In fact, Food Bank for New York, even though they are incredible partners to us, they cannot guarantee that the food that is listed on the site will or will not be kosher when they have multiple variations of a product. And so yes, what we have is food going to communities where it is not required. And as a result, the food that is required is not getting to the communities where it's needed.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

We have a number of -- we have a Senator who -- at least one who has

questions, so let's turn it over to Senator Krueger.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

I want to thank all four panelists. I feel like it's a flashback to my previous life with all of the topics raised here tonight. Joel Berg knows that I've have been working on food stamp/SNAP outreach pretty much his entire life. I'm older than him, but I think his entire life.

And he's 100 percent right, every dollar we can bring in in food stamps from the federal government is worth far, far, far more than that to our economy, to our businesses' economy, to our farmers' economy. Because you don't do anything with SNAP but buy local food, eat it, and create jobs. So the state should do more, can do more, and thank you for highlighting that.

Met Council on Jewish Poverty, I also spent much of my life on emergency food programs and started the New York City Food Bank. And my only concern with your analysis

is what we wouldn't want to do is have some kind of system of emergency food that appeared to discriminate for or against any given individual or community. And of course kosher food and halal food are significantly more expensive also. So we need to balance those needs.

But I wouldn't want a two-tiered system of emergency food. Even though I don't want anybody to have to go to emergency food programs.

Catholic Charities, I used to do eviction prevention services with you all. And the Empire Justice Center, I used to run a benefits access program. And I can't emphasize enough how important the DAP model is for helping people with extreme disabilities finally get the federal benefits they deserve, which are much more enriched benefits than the state benefits.

So it's also -- you help people, through your legal services offices, get a benefit that results in their receiving a higher level of benefit than what they end up

with on public assistance, and the feds paying for it.

So I just wanted to thank you all for your work, and it all improves people's lives and actually saves the state money. So thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

I'm going to go to Assemblywoman Rosenthal.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: Hi. Thank you, Helene, and thank you to all the panelists for waiting it out. But it's not that late, because yesterday's went on till, I don't know, midnight or something.

So I wanted to ask Emilia about DAP just a little bit. You asked for increased funding, and we certainly know the importance of the DAP program. How do you think you could best use that funding? Like explain how essential it is to the program.

MS. SICILIA: Sure. Well, I think it's important just to keep in mind the trajectory of the budget for the program, where we saw funding cut, I believe it was in

the aughts, and funding was increased most recently in 2016. But it really is only kind of, with the increase in the Executive Budget now, essentially making us whole from many years of underfunding.

So we are, you know, now facing the most complex cases and -- you know, that are both the result of Social Security rules and processes becoming more challenging, and then compounded with COVID-19. So additional funding would help us address all the extra work that's being done right now by DAP providers to help with every little aspect of communication and navigation of SSA.

While it's been closed and so limited and so difficult to access -- also, you know, difficult to obtain the necessary medical records -- all those things are taking a lot more extra advocate hours. And so we need to make the program whole, to catch up with the costs of the program, to support the additional work that's necessary for existing cases that we have right now -- but then, with the additional money, expand to meet the

need, because we do -- everyone expects increased claims, especially now with the agency opening and hopefully becoming more accessible to file those new applications.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROSENTHAL: You make a convincing case.

And thank you all for all of your work. Joel, I know we've worked together back in the past, so I look forward to maybe doing some more work together. And thank you, thank you all.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Senator Krueger, I see you still have a colleague.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, we have Chair Roxanne Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Well, thank you, Senator. Thank you to all the panelists.

Jessica, it's great seeing you. You know, Senator Krueger touched on some of the things I wanted to say. I am concerned when we talk about a separate system for food, for the food supply. I spoke earlier to -- when the Aging commissioner was on and asked about

the need -- spoke about the need for more halal and kosher food.

That being said, I just want us to be careful when we're talking about separating -- separating the food to the extent that we're, you know, dedicating only, you know, kosher food and halal food during the pandemic.

Met Council, we've done a lot of distributions with you. You have some of your pantries in my district, and we're appreciative of that. I agree with you, some of the kosher food for the halal population, they could not use it, and so we had issues with that.

At the same time, some of the food that came from the federal government we had major issues with, where we had to separate the food and make sure that the population that we were distributing the food to were not receiving the products that they were going to sort of toss in the garbage.

But I appreciate everything you do. But I'm just concerned when we're talking

about making this great separation. You know, we want to make sure all food pantries are funded where they could provide food, but I just don't want to see us saying, you know, we must do X amount of dollars to one particular population for food. That's just my concern. It doesn't -- because, you know, everyone is going to start asking for the same thing, and then what do we do?

So we just say it's one pool of money, everyone gets from that pool, but we should not say X should be dedicated to X population.

So thank you very much. And as usual, you know, Jessica, it's great seeing you.

MS. CHAIT: You as well. Thank you.

If I could just -- can I quickly respond, is that --

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Sure.

MS. CHAIT: Thank you.

So I appreciate the concerns raised, and I would say that I think in effect we do have two systems already, because my council has to rely so heavily on philanthropy and

other sources to in effect ensure that these pantries that are kosher and halal have the resources and the full amount of food that they can provide.

That said, I think our asks for increased HPNAP and Nourish are really using the infrastructure that exists. And we just want to make sure that the populations that are essentially forfeiting other food, that when those allocations are made, that that is being considered. Because in fact we are not taking so much from the federal government or from other programs that are available, and in effect are unable to supply balanced pantry bags without additional resources.

And so that is obviously our goal, is to create a very equal system where all New Yorkers and, frankly, all Americans have equal access to the foods that are required to feed themselves and their families.

But we have more detailed recommendations, and we can follow up with your offices to share that. So thank you very much.

MR. BERG: I just had one quick point about SNAP, again, that you can use it for kosher, halal, vegetarian or vegan food. Another benefit above some emergency food.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Correct.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

I want to thank this panel not only for being here today but, really -- probably even more importantly -- for the work you do on a daily basis on behalf of -- to serve our constituents.

And I want to thank all of -- my cochair, Senator Krueger --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN WEINSTEIN: -- my ranking member, Assemblyman Ed Ra, and the ranker on Finance, Tom O'Mara, and the respective chairs of the committees that were here today for your participation.

This will be ending the Human Services hearing. Let this be a model for the hearings next week in terms of the -- and the week following, in terms of time.

And speaking of continuing budget hearings, I would ask people to join us -- the next budget hearing will be on Higher Education. It will be on Monday the 7th, beginning at 11 a.m.

This hearing is now officially closed.

(Whereupon, the budget hearing concluded at 6:45 p.m.)