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

JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING

In the Matter of the
2024-2025 EXECUTIVE BUDGET ON
HUMAN SERVICES

Hearing Room B
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY

January 31, 2024
9:42 a.m.

PRESIDING:

Senator Liz Krueger
Chair, Senate Finance Committee

Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi
Chair, Assembly Committee on Children
and Families

PRESENT:

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

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

Senator Jabari Brisport
Chair, Senate Committee on Children
and Families

Assemblywoman Maritza Davila
Chair, Assembly Committee on Social Services

Senator Roxanne Persaud
Chair, Senate Committee on Social Services

Assemblyman Ron Kim
Chair, Assembly Committee on Aging

2024-2025 Executive Budget
Human Services
1-31-24

PRESENT: (Continued)

Senator Cordell Cleare
Chair, Senate Committee on Aging

Assemblywoman Kimberly Jean-Pierre
Chair, Assembly Committee on
Veterans' Affairs

Senator Jessica Scarcella-Spanton
Chair, Senate Committee on Veterans,
Homeland Security and Military Affairs

Senator John C. Liu

Assemblyman Khaleel M. Anderson

Assemblywoman Jennifer Lunsford

Senator Samra G. Brouk

Assemblywoman Yudelka Tapia

Assemblywoman Grace Lee

Assemblywoman Jo Anne Simon

Senator Jake Ashby

Assemblyman Jeff Gallahan

Assemblywoman Taylor Darling

Assemblyman Brian Maher

Senator Dean Murray

Assemblyman Chris Eachus

Assemblyman Billy Jones

Assemblywoman Monique Chandler-Waterman

Assemblyman Brian Manktelow

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Assemblywoman Sarah Clark

Senator Rob Rolison

Assemblywoman Marcela Mitaynes

Assemblyman Chris Burdick

Assemblywoman Jessica González-Rojas

Senator Alexis Weik

Assemblyman Tony Simone

Assemblywoman Marjorie Byrnes

Senator Peter Oberacker

Assemblyman George Alvarez

Senator Rachel May

Assemblywoman Marianne Buttenschon

Senator Daniel G. Stec

Assemblywoman Chantel Jackson

Assemblyman Manny De Los Santos

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ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Good morning, everyone.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Good morning.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Good morning.

My name is Andrew Hevesi. I'm the chair of the New York State Assembly Children and Families Committee. I am filling in for Ways and Means Chair Helene Weinstein as cochair of today's hearing. Chair Weinstein is recovering from knee surgery and is hoping to join us for next week's hearings.

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 the fiscal 2024-2025 year. The hearings are conducted pursuant to the New York State Constitution and the Legislative Law.

Today the Assembly Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee will hear testimony concerning the Governor's budget proposal for human services.

I want to tell you it's an honor to be here with my cochair, Senator Krueger. And I

will now start by introducing participating members from the Assembly, and after that Senator Krueger will introduce members from the Senate.

In addition, Ranking Ways and Means Member Ra will introduce members from his conference.

From the majority conference, we have with us Chair Davila and Chair Kim. And we also have Assemblymembers Tapia, Darling, Burdick, Jones and Mitaynes.

Senate, please.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Good morning, everyone.

And I'm delighted to be joined by Senators Persaud, Liu, Brisport and, since Senator O'Mara will be a little late, we are also joined by his members Senator Murray, Senator Rolison, and Senator Ashby.

And Senator Cleare. Okay, thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great.

Assemblyman Ra?

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

Good morning. We're currently joined

by Assemblyman Maher, our ranker on Social Services; Assemblywoman Byrnes, our ranker on Children and Families; Assemblyman Manktelow, our ranker on Veterans' Affairs, and Assemblymember Gallahan.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. I would also like to introduce Assemblymember González-Rojas as well. And we will be introducing other members as they arrive.

Time limits for witnesses. The governmental witnesses will have 10 minutes. Nongovernmental witnesses will have three minutes. Time limits for questions and answers, legislators. The chairs of the committees relevant to each governmental witness will get 10 minutes, and a second round of three minutes if desired.

The ranking members of these committees will get five minutes each. All other members of the relevant committees will get three minutes each.

To all of our witnesses, all written testimony has been submitted to the legislators in advance, so we ask that all

witnesses please do not read your written testimony to us. Instead, please summarize.

And to all my friends in the Legislature, please let myself or Senator Krueger know if you wish to ask a question of each witness or panel of witnesses. After the opening remarks of each witness or panel of witnesses have been concluded, the list will be closed.

Everyone, witnesses and legislators, should locate the time clock and keep an eye on it. Please note that when the clock is down to zero, you'll be alerted that your time is up.

Please be considerate and respect the clock so that everyone has a chance to be heard. And please note that these time frames for questioning include both questions and answers, so members are respectfully requested not to commence a new question with insufficient time on the clock to permit a witness to answer. I will remember that myself.

Due to the length of our hearings, we

have no alternatives but to strictly enforce these time limits.

I should add that if any witnesses for later in the day are here and have not yet checked in, please do so at the top of the stairs.

And I will now call on the first two witnesses, to call on you -- you've been sitting here for an hour. So thank you to the first witness, Suzanne Miles-Gustave, the acting commissioner of the State Office of Children and Family Services, and also Barbara Guinn, the acting commissioner of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Thank you both for being with us here today.

Great, please.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Good morning, Chair Krueger, Children and Family Committee Chairs Hevesi and Brisport, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. And well wishes to Chair Weinstein. We do wish her a speedy recovery.

I'm Suzanne Miles-Gustave, acting

commissioner of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. I appreciate this opportunity to present Governor Hochul's State Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget that enhances our mission to protect and strengthen all of New York's children, youth, families and communities, a commitment I know each of you share as well.

OCFS is committed to accomplishing this goal by following our guiding North Star principle of equity. Our pledge is that every program, policy, initiative funded by the Executive Budget will further transform our human services system into one that is far more responsive, not reactive, to the needs of underresourced and vulnerable New Yorkers.

We are doing this with a renewed commitment to center each of our initiatives in equity. It's only by transforming our human services system into one that values all voices, and brings the changes they are calling for, that we can make our state safer and more supportive for everyone.

This year's Executive Budget offers another critical opportunity to make truly meaningful investments in OCFS's core childcare, child welfare and adult services, and juvenile justice programs that deliver the services New Yorkers need now more than ever.

It's a true honor to serve a Governor with such an unwavering dedication to increasing access to quality affordable childcare for New York's families. Before Governor Hochul took office, New York's Childcare Assistance Program, as you know, struggled to give families the help they needed. Under the Governor's steadfast leadership, investments in childcare have grown to record levels and New York is now a national leader in increasing affordability and access to childcare.

I want to make clear that the more than $7 billion over four years dedicated to childcare also would not have been possible without your partnership. Today, New York is one of just a handful of states where

eligibility for childcare assistance is at the federal maximum of 85 percent of state median income, which is more than $99,000 for a family of four, and copays are capped at 1 percent of family income above the poverty level for all families, statewide.

This year's Executive Budget continues the state's commitment to affordability, with nearly $1.8 billion this year for the Childcare Assistance Program. To illustrate just how far we've come, in fiscal year's 2022 budget, a mere three years ago, the total funding provided for childcare assistance, from state and federal sources, was $832 million. That is an increase of 114.5 percent in just three years.

Governor Hochul also understands that without a strong workforce, we won't be able to meet the high demand for these services. Over the last several years, we have invested more than $1.4 billion in childcare stabilization and workforce supports. This year's budget allocates $280 million in underutilized pandemic funds to continue the

Workforce Retention Grant program and provide another round of bonus payments to staff in caregiving roles, so they will stay on the job, and funding to support child care programs' efforts to recruit even more staff.

Hardworking families don't just deserve access to childcare, we need to make sure that they have the peace of mind to know that when they drop their children off, it’s at a high-quality program, no matter where they live or work. The proposed budget provides $5 million to pilot Family Childcare Networks in regions around the state. Home-based providers, which include family and group family providers, are the largest component of our provider pool in New York State and are run by mostly women of color.

The budget will also boost quality by creating an enhanced payment rate for providers that are accredited by a nationally recognized childcare organization, participate in QUALITYstarsNY, or have completed training and actively participate in the state's Non-Patient Epinephrine

Auto-Injector Initiative.

Protecting our precious children is also a major part of Governor Hochul's broader focus on the mental health crisis. The budget invests $1.7 million in the seven regional infant and toddler resource centers across the state to expand the consultation services they offer to providers and families.

This year's Executive Budget also provides over $100 million in funding for after-school programming, an overall increase of $17.7 million from last year's Executive Budget. The budget also combines the previous Advantage and Empire State After-School programs into one single program, reducing administrative burdens for providers.

Of course, Governor Hochul's commitment to New York’s children, youth and families, and vulnerable and marginalized populations runs so much deeper than childcare, and this year's budget makes the critical investments in the programs and

services that enable OCFS to continue supporting, uplifting, and promoting their development. This year's budget includes an increase from $4.4 million to over $10 million to raise the minimum wage of employees of state-funded contractors operating OCFS programs.

Governor Hochul has also included a COLA increase in every budget she has proposed since taking office. This year's 1.5 percent COLA will once again benefit the families and voluntary agencies who care for New York's children in foster care, and adoptive parents.

As New York's first female governor, Governor Hochul knows and cares deeply about the matters most important to women. Not only has she been fighting for women balancing motherhood and careers by making historic investments in childcare, but the Governor has also made tackling New York's troublingly high rates of maternal mortality a hallmark of her administration. OCFS applauds Governor Hochul's focus on

addressing the maternal and infant health crisis in the Executive Budget, which includes $2 million in new funding to reduce the risk of Sudden Unexpected Infant Deaths by providing something so many of us take for granted -- a safe crib.

As the Governor noted in her State of the State, sleep-related deaths are the most common type of preventable child fatality that comes to the attention of state officials, resulting in more than 120 infant deaths per year. Portable cribs will be made available to underresourced families who need them most.

Since taking office, Governor Hochul has also made keeping all New Yorkers safe a top priority, as she understands that ensuring there are effective interventions for youth who are at risk of engaging in criminal activity is critical to improving outcomes for our young people and strengthening local communities. This year's budget includes a $3 million increase in funding, to nearly $11.4 million, to enhance

the Supervision and Treatment Services for Juveniles Program, or STSJP.

Since its inception in 2011, STSJP has been a key component of New York's vision to transform the youth justice system by incentivizing local programs intended to divert at-risk youth from placement in detention or residential care and to safely maintain them in the community.

I would be remiss if I didn't take an opportunity to also commend Governor Hochul's Executive Budget investments designed to increase the prosecution of domestic violence cases among high-risk offenders, and for prioritizing solutions for the mental health crisis, particularly among our children and youth. OCFS is a proud partner with OPDV to help survivors recover and gain stability, and with OMH on important cross-system collaborations, to advance the Governor's goals.

Before I close, I would just like to express my gratitude once again for all you've done to bolster our mission to provide

truly equitable and impactful services grounded in the dignity of our children, families, and communities. They definitely deserve that. While we all have different roles to play, I'm confident that the results of our partnership, along with the Governor's unwavering support, is something we will all be proud of.

Under Governor Hochul's leadership, New York is a stronger, healthier, safer and more affordable New York than when she took office, and this year's Executive Budget continues to advance that progress.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak directly to you today. I welcome any questions or comments you may have.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much, Commissioner. We appreciate it.

Commissioner Guinn.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Good morning. Good morning, Chairpersons Krueger, Persaud, Davila and Hevesi, and other members of the Legislature.

My name is Barbara Guinn. I am the acting commissioner of the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. I welcome the opportunity to speak with you today about Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget and its support for critical benefits and services our agency provides on behalf of New Yorkers.

OTDA is responsible, in conjunction with local social services districts, for the delivery of benefits that provide economic assistance and support to eligible families and individuals throughout the state. This work includes helping very low-income New Yorkers meet their essential needs, such as housing, food, and other basic necessities.

Since I have the opportunity to address you today, I'd like to start by thanking the staff of our office for their dedication and efforts to serve low-income New Yorkers in an unprecedented manner over the past few years. Our office played a vital role in helping New Yorkers navigate

the economic uncertainty caused by the COVID pandemic, as well as its lingering financial impacts.

Through this work, OTDA delivered $18 billion in pandemic-related emergency food, housing, and utility benefits in direct support of lower-income households in our state. These efforts enabled our agency to go above and beyond to meet the challenges of providing an unprecedented amount of assistance to many New Yorkers, some of whom were seeking assistance for the very first time.

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget maintains the essential funding for our agency's core programs. These include Public Assistance, which currently provides monthly income support for more than 600,000 individuals; the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, with more than 2.8 million monthly recipients of this vital food assistance; the Home Energy Assistance Program, which issued more than 1.5 million benefits last winter, totaling more than

$400 million; Child Support Services, which collected more than $1.6 billion on behalf of nearly 615,000 families last year; and disability determinations, through which our staff completed over 187,000 medical eligibility reviews for residents seeking federal and state disability benefits.

These programs are essential to helping millions of individuals in our state each day and to support stronger families and stronger communities.

As cochair of the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council, I can share that in 2023 the council made great progress in our work to develop a plan to reduce child poverty by 50 percent within 10 years. Additionally, investments and reforms Governor Hochul and the Legislature have made since the Child Poverty Reduction Act was enacted are already making progress toward this goal.

This progress includes expanding the Empire State Child Tax Credit to add children under 4 years of age, who were previously

excluded; investing over $7 billion over four years in childcare to expand caregivers' ability to access affordable childcare; raising the minimum wage by about $2 per hour, phased in over the next couple of years, and indexing this wage to inflation moving forward; and implementing strategic changes to help Public Assistance recipients with earnings retain more of their benefits, with the goal of encouraging work and economic mobility.

These initiatives alone have the ability to reduce child poverty in the state by 7 percent. The council will build on this progress and work toward reaching a consensus and issuing recommendations this year to meet our collective goal of significantly reducing child poverty in our state.

Governor Hochul's commitment to reducing poverty continues with the 2025 Executive Budget proposal to invest $50 million to support locally-driven anti-poverty initiatives in the cities of Rochester, Syracuse, and Buffalo. These

three communities have some of the highest child poverty rates in the nation.

The budget also makes other targeted investments to assist families in need, such as $128 million for OTDA's Homeless Housing and Assistance Program. The program funds capital projects that create permanent supportive housing for families and individuals who have experienced homelessness. It also is the only state resource for the development of emergency shelters, which often play a critical role in communities' comprehensive homeless services systems.

Governor Hochul also has committed to join the federal Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program for Children, or Summer EBT. The program is aimed at reducing hunger and food insecurity among children who are unable to access free and reduced-price school meals during the summertime. Eligible families with school-age children will receive $120 per child during the summer months.

The Executive Budget invests

approximately $13 million to support the administration of this program. Summer EBT is expected to provide over $200 million in federal benefits to serve over 2 million children in New York State.

We are also excited that the Executive Budget continues efforts included in the fiscal year '24 budget and invests an additional $23.7 million to provide year-round employment opportunities for at-risk youth. This includes the Summer Youth Employment Program, totaling $50 million, and the Youth Employment Program, totaling $38.8 million.

The year-round Youth Employment Program targets areas of the state plagued by high rates of gun violence as part of Governor Hochul's comprehensive effort to address this issue. Both programs are evidence-based and provide additional income for low-income households, critical career development services, as well as positive outcomes for program participants and their communities.

As you know, we work closely with our partners in the local departments of social services, who administer many of the programs we supervise. These agencies play a critical role in connecting New York families with public benefits. The 2025 Executive Budget invests more than $17 million to enable social services districts to increase qualified staff needed to provide family-centered, trauma-informed services. With the additional staff, they can offer greater support to families as a unit and help address any challenges to their well-being and help them attain financial stability.

Reducing child poverty and helping our fellow New Yorkers meet basic needs and advance economically is at the core of our agency's work. We look forward to our continued partnership with the Legislature in the coming weeks and months.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I welcome your questions. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner Guinn.

I am going to allot myself -- and this sounds selfish -- 10 minutes to ask you some questions, and then I'll move on to some of my other colleagues.

And, Ms. Guinn, I thank you for your testimony. Most of my questions are going to be for Commissioner Suzanne Miles-Gustave.

So good morning. How are you?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: {Inaudible.} Will you introduce your additional members, and I will do the same. Sorry.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Go ahead. No, feel free. I'll get my list.

Go ahead, Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. I just wanted to interrupt by introducing Senator Scarcella-Spanton, Senator May, and Senator Oberacker.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

I would also like to introduce Assemblymembers Buttenschon, Jackson, Jones, and Lee are all here. Thank you all for

coming.

Jo Anne Simon as well? Okay. She's hiding from me. Okay.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Oh. And Mr. Anderson over there.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. Welcome to all of you. All right, Commissioner, thank you. And thanks for resetting the clock.

So I first want to start by thanking you and OCFS for all of the great work that you do. And particularly on a personal level, you've been so gracious in teaching me a lot about what you do and what your agency does. And it really means a lot, and I'm grateful.

And thank you to OTDA and all of their staff as well.

So I'm going to spend the first portion of my questions talking to you about workforces, just various workforces. But I think we're in a little bit of a hole from the prior administration. I also want to say

there's some really good stuff in this budget, and I'm grateful to Governor Hochul for her leadership on a variety of issues. We have seen a change, a sea change over the last three years with the new administration.

However, because of the prior administration and their mindless austerity, every one of our workforces, every one of them is underresourced, all of them. And they're all in dire circumstances. And I'll go through them one by one, but the question will be essentially the same: How do we dig out of these holes so our workforces can get paid enough that we're not seeing the kind of dropoff in turnover rates in these workforces, which is bad for the services but terrible for the kids they're trying to service.

So I guess the -- let me start with the domestic violence workforce, who has not received a cost-of-living adjustment since 2008. How do we help them to get paid properly? We don't see money in the Executive Budget. So I'm trying to get a

sense of how we address this problem, because it's a longer-term problem.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you for that question, Assemblyman Hevesi.

And we do appreciate your partnership as well. My staff, they're the ones who really accommodate you most often with the questions, so I thank them. But your partnership is appreciated.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: I would agree. I know that we are all trying to figure out how to support our workforce. There are certain sectors that we've been able to invest in more than others. But to your specific question about the DV community, although they are not statutorily included in the COLA -- and I defer to the Legislature on any changes there -- they -- it is not as if their rates have not changed. They have not been stagnant.

So their rate is subject to a growth factor, and so there have been growth factors

implemented in their rate for the past several years. We can get you numbers of that growth. But we hear from our DV providers all the time. Much like our foster-care providers, the MSAR rate includes a growth factor and trend factors that we can increase that COLA.

So for DV providers, although they're not -- they don't have the COLA in the statute, their rate does increase with specific growth factors. And we can get you specifics on that.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I appreciate that answer. And so we have introduced a bill in the Assembly to catch all of the parts of our human services workforce that are not eligible for the COLA. And that is language that we would like inserted into the budget. I think we'll be pushing for that in our houses as well.

Is that something -- because you see that there's a gap, even when we do COLAs, right? Every time my colleagues and I do COLAs we think we're doing a great thing; we

come back five minutes later and you have people yelling at us: What about us? We've been left out.

So we have a bill to address that. So I would ask you to take a look at that. I know everything here costs money, but this is what happens when you spend over a decade of keeping all of these programs and their workforces at zero. So that's one.

I'm going to talk about next -- I'm going to move on -- same topic, childcare. Great investments by the Governor. By the way, the Governor's focus on childcare has been amazing. And that, complimented with Speaker Heastie and his leadership and Senate Majority Leader Cousins have caused us and led us to invest billions of dollars.

However, when you're talking about the childcare workforce now -- and we have given them several rounds, using stimulus funds, and some not -- of stabilization grants and even workforce enhancement. But it's just not doing what we need to do. So we've invested, what is it, 7 billion, or close to

that. But if we don't pay the workforce, we're going to continue to see a lack of childcare in New York State. Is there something that we can do to address that problem? Because even the bonuses and the workforce retention grants that we did last year, they didn't have the uptake that we thought they would.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So I would agree with you that the Governor's proposals have been historic. So under her leadership, right, we've committed to $7 billion over four years to support childcare. This year alone, there's almost 1.8 billion in the budget for childcare assistance.

But I understand your point. We have invested, although be it with pandemic funds, over $1.4 billion dollars in Workforce Stabilization Grants. A majority of those grants were focused on worker retention, so these dollars had to go directly to the workers to retain them.

But I think we need several

strategies, right, to retain our workforce. I really look forward to our Childcare Availability Task Force. As you know, the Governor reconvened the task force, gave them several charges. One of those were contemplating the workforce issues. Another one was creating a roadmap to universal childcare.

I think all of those need to be contemplated, along with the Legislature, in the context of the budget. I think we all have that North Star goal of paying our workers more, potentially doing more for families with respect to childcare. But it needs to be measured, and in the context of the budget.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Understood. And I appreciate that. By the way, I'll ask you a question later on, if I can, about the timing of the report from the Childcare Availability Task Force.

But again, another area -- workforce yet again -- foster care and preventative services workforce. Again, we appreciate the

1.5 percent COLA for some parts of that workforce. There are others that we leave out.

And then particularly for the preventative services workers, does the administration -- does your administration look on the 65/35 reimbursement to counties -- which I believe should be 75/25 -- as a way of paying that workforce?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So the 62/38 that's in the budget -- again, longstanding New York commitment to preventive services. That does not include additional funding. So that is the funding that we've dedicated for a decade, almost, if not more, to making sure that we focus on preventive services for families who need support as a way to prevent their entrance into the child welfare system.

I do think that, as you mentioned, we need to look at how to retain workers in all of our industries, including preventive and protective and our child welfare workers in the local districts.

But that 62/38 is open-ended, right, so counties can hire as many CPS workers as they need. Granted, there's a local share, similar with preventive workers. But I agree with you that we're trying to do many things in partnership with our local districts to retain local district staff, both CPS workers and preventive workers. Working with our civil service partners, you may have heard of the HELP program. I know commissioner Hogues talked about it yesterday. We've benefited from that HELP program, counties have benefited from that HELP program, getting more people into the industry. It's difficult to retain with the current salary, to your original question. But we need to recruit the next generation to make government service a positive and for it to be a touted career for those coming out of college.

So hopefully with that HELP program we're recruiting more folks into our industries. And retention, we're working on programs within our local districts to retain

employees, much like retaining employees in my industry -- in my agency.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Understood. So I appreciate that answer. And I just want to tell you on a personal level I think the 65/35 reimbursement to counties is the best public policy that I've seen in government. And the reason why you increase that number to 75 is to incentivize counties to get into the business of preventing problems for kids.

So we're going to keep coming back at that until we do it. And I just do want to say on the record while we are at 62/38 reimbursement, that violates the law. The law is a 65/35 reimbursement. So I just want to put that on the record.

And I know that that was something the last administration enjoyed doing, going below the law. But this administration has a different tack. So I'd hope we will be able to change that.

And then the last workforce I want to touch on is the after-school workforce -- and there's many more, but the after-school

workforce. First, thank you for your --

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: I didn't hear that.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: The after-school workforce.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: After school, thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Yeah, absolutely.

So thank you for the proposal in the Executive Budget that adds $100 million. Thank you so much for combining the two, Advantage After School and Excelsior. That has been a stain on New York State, the fact that you had some kids at this level, some kids who are disadvantaged at a lower level. It was disgraceful of the last administration. So thank you for that.

But the after-school programs believe that they need to get their per-student rate up to $4300 per child to pay the workforce. Is that something that the Executive would be open to?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So we were -- we are excited that the Executive

Budget added 17 million additional dollars to our existing program.

And yes, the intention was always to combine them, to reduce the administrative burden on everyone -- on providers, on OCFS, because we do facilitate those contracts directly. So we look forward to issuing our new RFP, which is not quite out yet.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: That is a serious buzzer. Okay.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much, Commissioner. Appreciate it.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And it even applies to you, even though you're running the hearing.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: No, I'm not so sure about that.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: So, Senate. Okay, our first questioner will be Chair Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you to our

commissioners for your time and your willingness to answer our questions. Mine are almost entirely for Commissioner Miles-Gustave at OCFS, and predominantly on childcare.

I think I want to start by responding to a section of your testimony saying New York is now a national leader in increasing affordability and access to childcare.

I just want to add on, you know, I do want to say that we are starting to recover from a pandemic that did hit our childcare sector -- when it was already in a state of crisis -- with multiple closures across the state. And although we've taken some steps to stem the bleeding, the underlying crisis has not been addressed. And I'd like to talk about how this Executive proposal for the budget compares to the enormous scale of that crisis.

In particular, the shortage of childcare providers that New Yorkers were facing before the pandemic has not been

addressed. Childcare slots are up less than 3 percent from the lowest years of the pandemic, according to data from the OCFS website. We know that one root cause of the problem is the poverty wages for childcare workers, with childcare educators earning less than 96 percent of occupations in New York State. And for the past few years, the State Budget has included some workforce grants to temporarily boost wages, but no significant investment in raising childcare wages long term.

Why does the Governor's budget proposal not include measures to permanently increase wages rather than just issuing one-time bonuses?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So thank you, Senator Brisport, for that question.

I think it's hard to argue that this administration and this agency has done incredible things for childcare. When we do say New York is a national leader, it's because we are one of the few states that

have increased the eligibility for CCAP to the highest allowed by federal law, to 85 percent of SMI. A handful of states have done that.

So we've increased the pool of families who are eligible and can take advantage of childcare. That is increasing access.

I agree that we need to collectively continue to think about how to increase wages for the sector. In last year's budget, if you recall, we increased the market rate for all childcare providers to the 80th percentile from the 69th percentile, where it had languished for quite some time. The federal recommendation is 75 percent. So again, we are above what the federal government has recommended.

And increasing the market rate for childcare providers does allow providers to increase salaries. Some providers received over a 30 percent increase because of that market rate increase.

I do think we're all very hopeful that

with our partners we can collectively look towards a couple of things: Really managing the workforce crisis and creating that framework for universal childcare with our partners in the Childcare Availability Task Force.

So we do look forward to their report and recommendations. I think the statutory charge for that task force was to do just that, to set about creating a framework for a phased-in rollout of universal childcare. Because that is, again, the North Star goal for all of us. I think we need to take measured steps, and we've done a lot in the past two years. And look forward to, like, the negotiations between the Legislature and the Executive on this budget.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

And I want to respond to the market rate. I appreciate we've increased the percentage of the market rate survey. I was reading through a study from ILR Buffalo reports that found that New York State subsidy rates still fall far short of

covering the actual costs of childcare in New York State. And I believe we both spoke about this at last year's hearing and both agreed that New York's childcare model does not compensate for the true cost of care, and that it doesn't make sense.

Do you know why this year's budget still doesn't compensate providers for the true cost of care?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So I know that -- to your point last year, we were reeling from disappointment when the federal government did not pass the Build Back Better bill, which would have allowed us in all states to move toward cost of care.

There are some federal rules out right now that we in the childcare industry are waiting for the Office of Child Care to finalize. I think the movement from all avenues -- from local, state, to federal partners -- are moving towards potentially universal childcare, which was in the federal bill that didn't pass, and the true cost of care, which we have not transitioned to.

So I know in our market rate survey we did include a few questions that tried to get at that cost of care, but we are not there yet. So we are still under a market survey framework. The survey results are back. We're analyzing those. That data, the actual new survey -- the market rate should be out sometime in October, I believe.

But I know that is the goal, because we want to fully understand how to support the industry.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

Another piece of this report did a poll that said the overwhelming majority -- 79 percent -- of respondents would support public funding for universal childcare. You know, a goal that is shared, making it a free public service akin to K-12 public education.

This state could certainly choose to raise the necessary revenue to do so in this year's budget by ending tax breaks on millionaires and billionaires. In fact, Washington, D.C., raised taxes on the rich in order to fund additional childcare

incentives.

If the Governor and Legislature agreed to fully fund universal childcare by taxing the rich, how would that impact the efficiency and mission of your agency?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: I definitely defer to the Legislature and the Executive on any negotiations. And if that should be passed and a bill signed by the Governor, OCFS would certainly implement it.

But I think with any industry, if there is more investment, we can do more. I think we all can agree that all of our social services industries would like more funding. If we had more funding, we can do more for sure.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

Also in the report it showed that 42 percent of families with children in New York, an adult has stayed out of the workforce because of childcare needs. For most of those families, childcare was not affordable. And nearly one in four parents kept out of the workforce reported that

childcare was simply no longer available or accessible in their area.

We know from the Cornell report that many of the poorest areas of New York have even fewer childcare slots now than they did in 2021, at the height of the pandemic. Has OCFS conducted any economic analysis of what the economic cost to New York has been from the lack of availability of childcare?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So I wouldn't say we've done an analysis of that specifically. But I do know that we've focused our efforts on providing families with resources and supports to do just that, to find available childcare.

We have childcare resource and referral agencies throughout the state that do just that. They work with providers, they work with parents, and they help to -- they help parents find available childcare.

I know that we've also invested in several supply efforts. So we had our Childcare Desert Grant last year to build supply, and it in fact did contribute to the

supply in New York State. And in this year's proposed budget, we are proposing that $5 million for the family childcare networks to, again, support these home-based and group-family-based childcare providers so that they can become a sustainable model. They're already the largest pool of providers we have in New York State, but they need supports. These are entrepreneurs and small business folks.

So those are the types of supports that we would like to give the industry to help them grow.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

And one of the ways in which parents can become burdened in accessing childcare is the way we so closely tie work hours to childcare. And this Legislature has now passed twice a bill to decouple work hours from the childcare hours eligibility.

And right before Christmas Governor Hochul vetoed the bill that would decouple childcare assistance from a parent's exact work requirements, suggesting she

intended to revisit this issue in the Governor's budget proposal. However, I didn't see anything in her proposal about this.

Did Governor Hochul discuss the issue of decoupling with you at all?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So the decoupling bill was not in this year's budget. I think, as the veto message indicated, the Executive is open to discussing that in the context of the budget.

That specific bill had about a $140 million price tag, and that investment was not contemplated in the financial plan for last year.

And we do recognize that families need flexibility. I think that's why in our series of strategies over the past several years we've tried to make childcare more accessible and affordable for all families.

I think that the heart of the decoupling bill speaks to the burden that applying for childcare, receiving childcare puts on a family. And because of that, we've

done a lot to make the process smoother. As the Governor mentioned in last year's budget, our systems are antiquated, right, but we've been moving towards fixing that.

So this year OCFS issued the first prescreener on our website to attract families to the OCFS website to see if they are eligible for childcare. It is just a prescreener, so then they can get referred to their own districts. And we are working on an online application that we are in testing right now.

So, you know, there are providers out there that provide nontraditional care. So I think making it easier for families might -- might definitely help.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Your time is up.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: (Inaudible.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: (Inaudible.)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Good morning.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Chair, forgive me for interrupting. If I could just ask the commissioners to lean a little forward or speak closer into mics. Some of the members are having trouble hearing. Thank you very much.

Sorry for the interruption.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: I'm sorry, so I have two questions for Barbara Guinn.

The first one is regarding the overall public assistance caseload. It's projected to increase by 19,000 recipients, the biggest increase of which is in the safety-net single population. What factors are contributing to this increase?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So thank you, Member. Certainly there is a projection for the public assistance caseload to increase. We have, after years of decline or even steady public assistance caseloads, we have seen significant rises over the past year to two years.

The increase is largely based on, you know, an economic model that looks at and

helps use economic factors to project the number of individuals who are likely to need public assistance in the coming year. So it obviously is tied to, you know, efforts to get people to work, which is obviously our objective, is to provide the assistance while folks need it and then to provide support so that they can go to work.

And I would just mention that, you know, efforts like the investments in childcare certainly will help families move in that direction.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Thank you.

I'm going to address the elephant in the room, and that is can you provide us an update on how much of last year's $1 billion has been distributed to New York City for shelter costs for asylum seekers? Only because my colleagues have been asking these questions and we have not gotten any clear answers.

This year there's a proposal to give $2.4 billion. So we would like to know how much of that $1 billion that we were able to

allocate last year was spent.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Sure. So first I just want to say that the investments that were included last year, as well as the significant investments included by Governor Hochul this year, are essential to helping New York City address this humanitarian crisis. It is a crisis, and it's one that Governor Hochul understands that the state needs to help the city to address.

With respect to the reimbursement that's been provided to New York City to date from the 1 billion, to date the city has submitted requests for reimbursement that total -- in terms of the state-share portion would be about 325 million. That amount is only through September of 2023, and we do not think that it reflects all costs. So there is definitely considerable cost yet to be claimed, and the city is still expecting to fully draw down the billion dollars that was included in the current budget.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: As you are

aware, we're seeing this played out in the news every day, all day. And in my mind I thought the billion dollars was already spent. But if you say 300 million out of the billion -- what was the number --

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: About 325 million has been claimed by the city to date with respect to the state share for their cost.

But that does not reflect all the costs incurred by the still. Additional claims are expected. And the city is indicating that they expect to draw down the billion dollars.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Thank you.

My next question is going to be to Suzanne Miles-Gustave. We have also seen -- the entire world has seen it played out on the news. Providers, especially providers that are probably familiar to families and are not aware but are licensed -- how much of this money or this increase in childcare is going to be used for oversight to make sure that these incidences do not happen again?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Assemblywoman Davila. I know we spoke previously about the tragic Bronx fatality, I think you're referring to, which was abhorrent, should never have happened.

But I think it's just an indication that we all have to be a lot more vigilant when to comes to the opioid epidemic and the gross negligence of some providers. And unfortunately, we've had to look at our training, look at our outreach. It is a shame that we have to train providers on fentanyl exposure, but that is the world unfortunately that we're living in.

So we are educating our providers. We are educating our licensers and our registrants to understand this new world.

As a result of that tragic, tragic fatality, we did a lot in partnership with Department of Health and OASAS to create information to go out to providers, to give them access to that info. We are working on a training video for our providers with respect to fentanyl. And we have increased

our inspection requirements for New York City.

We currently have a contract with DOHMH. They do our inspections for our providers. And we are in talks with them to increase the inspection rates for those providers in New York City. So all that is -- is being implemented currently as we speak.

But I agree with you that we are in a different time right now. That specific instance was a criminal activity. It's, you know, sometimes hard to compensate for criminal activities. But we are -- we've taken that incident seriously, and we've stepped up our training, education and inspections.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: And I just want to close with this. I do believe that most people don't understand this, but growing up in Bushwick, I see it at the corner of my house right now -- even marijuana, which is legal, is being completely laced with fentanyl. People don't understand this. So

I think that there needs to be a conversation regarding that information as well.

And providers should be held completely liable. Not just their licenses taken away -- completely liable. Marijuana's part of the problem as well. And I understand, we made it legal. But legal is legal. We're buying from farms that we know where it's coming from. But now there has been a different market that has been created. And, you know, we just don't -- we need to educate our providers that that's also an issue.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: And just to be clear, I would agree with you. Our health and safety requirements have always included identifying instances where health and safety would be a critical impediment to a childcare service and the children in that area.

So although, right, marijuana is legal, it is not legal for underage youth. So that would not be a new piece of information that our regulators would need.

We've always trained them to make sure that they can spot any health and safety risks in a childcare service area.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. I think we don't have any more introductions right now, but before I start with Senator -- oh, Senator Weik is here. And Senator O'Mara is here. He also was not here before.

I just want to answer also Assemblymember Davila's question. If they are legal, licensed stores, I would be very interested in hearing that anyone thought they were spiking product. The problem is in your community, almost all those stores are illegal. They are not licensed. They are in violation of endless laws. And hopefully in the budget we are going to be trying to be much stricter about being able to padlock them.

But you are not wrong. One of the reasons that drugs are so dangerous, and why we wanted to legalize, was to make sure that the products being sold to everyone were

safe, as opposed to what's going on in the illegal market. So thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: We are seeing a lot of marijuana being laced with other drugs.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: But it's not from the legal stores.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: No, not at all.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: No, I know. But I'm not saying you're wrong, I think it's just a reinforcement of why using the legal product is so important.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Absolutely. Absolutely.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Sorry. Didn't mean to do an editorial discussion on your time.

With that, Senator Roxanne Persaud, chair.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you. Thank you.

Good morning, Commissioners. It's always great to see you. And I appreciate everything that you and your staff do when we

reach out.

I'm going to start by addressing Commissioner Guinn. You know, we had the conversation about the backlog in New York City. And, you know, it was a positive conversation. And we thought everything was going in the right direction. And then the reports came out telling us otherwise.

It seems to be that they're clearing up their backlog, but more people are being denied. Can you tell us, why is that happening? And what is your agency going to do about that to ensure that the city is not making up rules to clean up their backlog by denying applicants?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Absolutely, Senator. You know, I assure you that the timely and appropriate processing of public benefit applications is essential to the work that our agency does. And so we understand the need for oversight to ensure that each social services district, including New York City, is appropriately processing applications and doing so timely.

I believe you may be referring to the mayor's report that was issued yesterday, and then also a news story also about denials. With respect to case processing, the city has made significant progress in terms of reducing the backlog. The backlog was quite high during the summer months, and the city has been taking steps to add workers to address that backlog. The backlogs are down significantly from where they were in the summer, which is what's reflected in the most recent mayor's report.

With respect to denials, we have looked into that, and we are seeing an increase in denials across the state. It isn't New York City alone. In looking at some of the factors that could be leading to those denials, I'll say, you know, a few things.

One, whenever you have a situation where cases are not being processed quickly, you're going to have individuals who are going to submit another application. Right? Because they're concerned, they haven't heard

back, and so they submit another application. That's one factor that's playing out throughout the state that we're hearing from many offices throughout the state.

Additionally, you know, when you improve access to benefits where people can apply more easily, that also sometimes means more people are applying who may not at the end of the day be eligible.

Again, we have seen an increase in denials. I think we are going to do a deeper dive to look more specifically at the denial population. Each month we have staff out that are providing oversight and doing case reviews.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is an area that we are very much focused on in terms of making sure those benefits are getting out timely. And we will certainly add a specific review in the coming months to specifically look at denials to make sure that those cases are being denied appropriately.

I am told that management within

New York City has taken a look at this matter because they too want to make sure that workers are processing cases appropriately, and that by and large they are finding the denials to be appropriate. That doesn't mean they aren't finding some issues. And based on any issues that they're uncovering, they are certainly providing additional training to their staff. Because anyone who's eligible should certainly be given the benefits they deserve.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you for that.

Can you also give us -- you don't have to give it to us now -- of the number, from the backlog, what percentage do you think were duplicates?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: I'm sorry, what percentage --

SENATOR PERSAUD: What percentage of applications were duplicates? Because if they're saying that it could be the denials are based on duplicate applications, what percentage of those applications in that backlog were duplicates?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right.

And I do not have the percentage of duplicates, but we can certainly get that information to you. As when we meet with social services commissioners, both individually and as a group, we are certainly focused on timeliness and accurate delivery of benefits. And that is what they are reporting.

And so we've been trying to do work to help them better identify those duplicates at one time so that they are able to more quickly take action on any applications that have come from that household.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

We had a legislation last year to create a fiscal cliff task force which was ultimately vetoed by the Governor. Tell us, what is it that we need to do to find out what is necessary for folks to survive in the State of New York?

The fiscal cliff task force is essentially to understand the needs and what is it that we need to do so that people get

to the point where they're weaned off of government assistance. If there's no task force that's informing us as to what needs to be done, what else can we do to get to the right answer?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. So, Senator, we're very happy to work with you on this topic regardless of a task force, to the extent that we're able.

Looking at the extent to which people are able to earn their way off benefits without facing a steep cliff is certainly a worthwhile goal, and it is something that the state has taken recent actions to try to address.

You know, pleased that in Governor Hochul's first budget we were able to get some changes through that are essential and that we have wanted to get through for many, many years. And what those changes did is it eliminated some of the artificial cliffs for public assistance. So just because you hit poverty or just because you hit a certain threshold doesn't mean your

benefits should go to zero. So those cliffs were eliminated.

We also increased the amount that any recipient of public assistance can earn and save. So for public assistance, we've definitely made some steps in the right direction.

And then also last year, with the support of the Legislature -- and I know a particular interest of yours -- we were able to also exclude earnings for public assistance once a person enters a new job 100 percent for six months, and then also very importantly to not count stipends or other income derived when someone's in a training program. So that change was really critical to allow people to participate in necessary skill development without having to make a choice between increasing their skills so that they can attain economic mobility or meeting their basic needs. It allows them to do both.

I would say that the investments in childcare and the increases in eligibility

for childcare are also another very important step that the state has made to allow people to earn more and make work pay so that they are not worse off by working due to the increased cost associated with childcare.

Lastly, I would just say that there are some federal programs that we are advocating to increase earnings disregards for, to align with what we've done in New York.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay, thank you.

Can you tell me about the year-round employment program? What areas are we covering, and how many youth are in that program?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the year-round employment program is targeted to at-risk youth in the areas that are identified by DCJS as part of the GIVE program. So really targeted to areas with high rates of gun violence.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Do you have an updated list of those areas?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: We do.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Can you send it to us?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Absolutely we can send you that list.

SENATOR PERSAUD: And I just need to know what's the -- how many youth are in that program. Because, you know, we've seen a spike in gun violence, but we're not seeing resources going to the areas where there is a spike in gun violence. So I'd just love to see what --

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah, happy to send you the list of each participating area. They all started the programs up in January of this year, so we're pleased about that. And the expectation is that the program will allow about 2,500 youth, at-risk youth to be served year-round with this employment and mentoring opportunity.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. So what would it take for us to have a year-round fully funded Youth Employment Program? You know, not just we're funding Summer Youth

Employment, but the amount of funding that we're giving -- every year you hear us saying the same thing -- it's not enough. We just increase the funding to cover the increase in minimum wage, but we're not capturing as many youth as we should be capturing in summer youth. What would it take for us to do that?

Because we continue to ask for money -- and I promised my folks that I would not say the amount of money I'm asking for, but we need to invest in our youth program to ensure that the year-round employment program is fully funded. So thank you for that.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah, thank you, Senator. We're big proponents of the Summer Youth Employment Program. But right, it is limited to the summer months. And if there is, you know, a way that the budget can come up with additional funds, we would be very pleased to administer it.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Senator.

We have been joined in the Assembly by Assemblymembers Eachus, Alvarez, Lunsford, Simone and Clark. Thank you all for coming.

And now to Assemblymember Ed Ra, ranker of the Ways and Means Committee.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you very much.

Good morning, Commissioners.

Commissioner Guinn, if I could just follow up quickly on the answer about the migrant funding. So you said $325 million through September. Is that just like housing contracts? Because I know obviously in the financial plan we've got up to about 1.9 billion. But that's, you know, stuff that's gotten through the Department of Health and other agencies.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. Right. The 325 million that's been reimbursed to date is by and large for temporary emergency housing-related costs.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay. Thank you very much.

And I did ask Homeland Security last week regarding the plan that was approved by your agency and the Department of Budget and whether any aspects of that could be made public regarding, you know, what the city's overall plan was. So I would just reiterate that concern to you as well.

The other thing I wanted to ask about was fiscal cliffs. We had a, you know, a task force, I guess you would call it, bill that was passed last year that was vetoed by the Governor. I'm not aware of any initiative within the budget. I think it's definitely an issue.

I believe the bill passed unanimously, so it had very bipartisan support to look at this issue. Because, you know, too often individuals are faced with difficult decisions with advancing themselves but then have a concern that they may lose out on benefits as a result.

So is the department doing anything with regard to what that task force would have done in looking at this issue so we can

try to come up with some fixes to assist those individuals?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah, absolutely. It's something that we are focused on. And we'd be happy to work with your office to provide additional information absent a formal task force.

You know, so Governor Hochul has made several changes in recent budgets to have significant changes with respect to public assistance programs, to eliminate artificial cliffs that were in place previously. So pleased to say that individuals are able to earn more -- currently it's about a 62 percent earned income disregard for public assistance -- save more, and then also the investments in childcare obviously help reduce costs that individuals otherwise would incur when they go to work.

Governor Hochul is fully committed to supporting families and helping them enter the workforce. And we agree that individuals should not have to make a choice between additional work hours and having that offset

more -- you know, their increased wages be less than any loss in benefits.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: And with regard to something that was in last year's budget, the income disregard provision, I know the department put out a directive I think at the end of last year regarding this. Are we expecting formal regulations to be forthcoming? And if so, when?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes, we have fully implemented that consistent with the date in the statute. So we did issue the directive at the end of December. So it is being implemented, and we certainly are moving forward with corresponding regulations that are almost complete. So I would expect those to be issued within the coming months.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay, thank you for that.

One other issue in this budget. There is this one-time $50 million appropriation for Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse for antipoverty initiatives. Can you elaborate on any specific plans that you have for that

money?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. So we will -- you know, as indicated by Governor Hochul, these will be locally driven, but we certainly will be providing a bit of state direction. So the plans will be developed with the counties, in consultation with the mayors, in terms of what they think would be most effective in reducing childhood poverty in their cities.

We would like to see investments that make long-term changes, not just kind of a one-off. So it can either be something that changes the system that's available to support families, or it could be direct payments to families that really put their entire family on a different path from an economic mobility standpoint.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay, thank you.

And lastly, assuming these, you know, initiatives are successful, would this be something your agency would look to expand in the future, not just in cities but to rural areas as well?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. I can't speak to what future investments may be made, but I would say that the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council is looking at childhood poverty with respect to a state lens in order to come with specific recommendations to have statewide impact with respect to reducing childhood poverty.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you, Commissioner.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: You're welcome.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Rolison, ranker.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And Commissioners, thank you for being here this morning.

I'm going to direct my questions in the area of OCFS. I had recently met with the Childcare Council of Dutchess and Putnam and talked about a variety of things after last session. And one of the things that was brought up was the Child Care Resource and

Referral, CCRR. And they indicated that that has not seen an increase in 10 years and is, you know, critical to the sustainability of childcare for a lot of reasons.

What are your thoughts on that, Commissioner?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Senator. I would say I would agree. But we've already resolved that issue. So we are in the process of negotiating a new contract with our CCR&Rs, and we've increased their funding for a couple of different projects they have.

I know that CCR&Rs are go-to technical assistance providers, so there are several initiatives that we're contemplating right now that require technical assistance. And although some of those have to be RFPd, our CCR&Rs are the most -- the best suited to provide that specific technical assistance to our childcare providers. So I would not be surprised if they receive those contracts as well.

But we would agree, they are

instrumental to our ecosystem.

SENATOR ROLISON: And thank you for that. That's good to hear. I did not know that.

Because one of the things that really, you know, concerned the Childcare Council's individual providers is, you know, the lack of a business plan from many of our providers because they just don't have the ability to do it or the time to do it, which impacts their business, which impacts childcare. Which impacts families, going to work, and all the things that -- I know that you know all of that, of course, right?

But these childcare providers that aren't even -- they're not even -- some of them it's tough to even collect the monies and document it. The business plan, where -- what is OCFS doing -- is it through, you know, the CCRRs? Is that the main area that can really be providing the assistance to create a viable business?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: That's one of the structures, yes.

So I think that's why we're so excited to roll out, if passed in the budget, the family childcare networks. Because as mentioned, our family and group family daycare providers are the largest component of our childcare framework -- mostly small businesses, predominantly run by women of color. And we know that we need to give those small businesses, those entrepreneurs, the appropriate business supports to maintain and sustain their business, because they provide the childcare for the state.

So that childcare network -- and we have to, right, RFP that out as well -- but that childcare network will be that business support. It will be hopefully business coaching, some peer-to-peer support, to really create a foundation for those group family daycare providers and a go-to resource for those exact specific questions.

SENATOR ROLISON: In the area of reimbursement, I've heard -- we heard it last year during budget hearings and a hearing that Senator Brisport had on childcare early

in the session -- was the reimbursement based on enrollment, not attendance. That seems to be if the child is not there.

Can you elaborate on that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: For after-school or for general childcare?

SENATOR ROLISON: Just in general.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: General.

SENATOR ROLISON: In any of the programs and funding through OCFS.

It seems to me that's a challenge, because the money's already allocated and it's already in the budget, and these children, if they're not there one day because they're sick or their siblings are sick, they're there the next day. So why can't we fund based on enrollment and not attendance?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So as a general framework we do -- the money follows the child, right? The family is eligible for childcare assistance.

However, I think we accommodated that

issue last year because now, statewide, families can have up to 80 absences. And every childcare provider, every county, it was not consistent a year ago, and now it is. Up to 80 absences, and that childcare provider payment will still go to the provider.

And providers can now have up to 20 closure days. So that is consistent across the state. And that's built into our financial plan. That is what our new regulations for childcare assistance provides.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you for that.

I have 15 seconds. Real quickly, once the federal pandemic funds are exhausted, what's your thoughts on that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So we've been using our pandemic funds for things like the childcare workforce stabilization. So they've not really been baked into our ongoing financial commitment. So I think that -- I'm sure the Governor will continue her commitment of 7 billion over

five years.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thanks, Commissioner.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

Assembly.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Four years. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Chairman Kim.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Chair.

I have a couple of questions for Commissioner Guinn. Thank you for your testimony today.

I want to first thank my colleague Anderson, Member Anderson, for raising this particular issue around stolen SNAP benefits.

We've seen recently in my district as well a trend that's rising. I personally have gone through the process of taking a disabled person in a wheelchair to the SNAP office in LIC, with their home-care worker, and trying to navigate the system and trying to figure out where's my $200 for the month,

and he can't get any food on the table. And it was like a seven-hour process from getting from Point A to Point B to even get clarity that, hey, somebody's stole your ID.

And the only solution that was left for that person was, Oh, you should just change your pin code and call it a day. And that's what they told us at the SNAP office.

There was no accountability, there was no way to track what happened here, like who took that $200. So my question here is, do we have any accountability and effort to, you know, to figure out how much money we've lost so far? Are there any protocols, are we working with any, you know, federal agencies or local authorities to hold some of these accountable? And how are we going to fix this moving forward instead of just changing individual pin numbers?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. Thank you for your question.

Definitely the skimming of public benefits, including SNAP, is a serious nationwide problem. Our agency has been

working with law enforcement, with the US OIG, inspector generals and others to try to support efforts to stop this action.

Thanks to the Governor and this Legislature, we now have a better answer than just change your pin. Provisions were included and have been implemented as of this past August that permit us to replace stolen benefits. So those provisions allow us to replace both SNAP stolen benefits and also, thanks to the Legislature, also to replace public assistance benefits.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Yeah, those are all great things, and we were definitely helping the victims get their benefits back. But if you don't actually fix how you're getting hacked and how they're doing this, this is a free-for-all.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: That means these people are going to be, hey, there's free money here, we're going to continue to attack and hack the system.

So I think we need to figure out the

next solution, how to create a more secure payment system so we can root out some of these targeted attacks.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah, you're absolutely right. And one effort that we will be putting in place next month will allow recipients to easily and simply lock their benefits so that they cannot be accessed until they need them. And so that we'll roll out next month.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator John Liu.

SENATOR LIU: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First I want to underscore Assemblymember Ron Kim's issue. The stealing of people's benefits is a serious, serious issue. We happen to share the same constituency, but as you mentioned, it's a problem statewide and perhaps nationwide as well.

So whatever new technology we can look at as well as just any measures to both keep the benefits secure and streamline the

process for New Yorkers who need these benefits, that would be much appreciated and much needed.

My question is for the other commissioner, which is about the after-school programs. Because I think more and more of us are coming to the realization that after-school programs, the benefits far outweigh the costs. And so my question to you is, what is your agency doing with after-school programs? I know there was a merging of two separate programs. Has that saved any money? And can we now extend the programs to more and more schoolkids across the state?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Senator, I appreciate that question.

So at OCFS we are very excited about our combined Advantage and Empire program. Those are the two separate programs. So in this budget the Governor proposes an additional allocation of 17.7 million so that the whole component is $100 million.

We know that there's been -- there have been some issues with our after-school program. As mentioned, OCFS administers those contracts directly with providers in the community. And providers suffered during COVID, there's no mistake about it. We had to pivot several times during COVID. We changed our budget format from enrollment to attendance and then, with the outreach of providers, at their request we changed the framework back to an expense-based budget.

So that's taken some time because those pivots required contract amendments at every stage. So it's been a tough go for our providers. We've lost some seats because of that -- because of provider loss. So currently we serve about 34,000 students with our current after-school program.

Again, the effort to combine them is to make the program stronger. We know that we need to create a framework for providers to sustain their program, and that was an issue with the switching from enrollment to attendance. It's very, very difficult to run

a sustaining program.

So we hope that -- we're still working on that framework currently. The RFP is not out yet.

SENATOR LIU: I think we're out of time here. But the point -- I would underscore also the necessity to expand more of these programs across the state: 34,000 is a tiny number.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Senator.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Darling.

ASSEMBLYMEMBER DARLING: Thank you, Commissioners, for your work and for being here today.

As the chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Foster Care for the State of New York, I want to amplify a major concern. When our foster children age out of the foster care system, many of them have shared that they feel like they've fallen off of a cliff. Many of our children experience housing and

job insecurities amongst other issues. And one way I know that we can tackle this issue is an increase in funding for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative.

So we need an investment of $10 million, and I say this often -- all the time -- we can invest in our children today or pay triple to repair the negative impact of lack of investment now. Excuse me, later.

So what other plans or measures are in place within the proposed budget to best support our foster youth here in New York State?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Assemblywoman Darling. I would agree with you wholeheartedly. We want to invest in all of our children.

We know that we have to spend specific time and resources to really bolster our supports for our aging-out youth. These are youth who have been traumatized and grown up, at times, in foster care. Many of those youth don't have permanent resources. They are free for adoption but have not found that

forever family.

So we're doing a couple of things, and it's -- we're very excited that the Governor's budget adds about $3 million in addition to some of our prevention, right, funding for older youth. We have youth development funding, we have our Chafee funding. So our federal funding provides funds for older youth. During COVID we were able to initiate a direct test transfer program for our older youth. We spent all of our money, and those youth got upwards of $2,000 for -- and they can use it for whatever they wanted to.

ASSEMBLYMEMBER DARLING: They said that was really helpful, that cash.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: And we spent all of our money and were able to get a reallotment from the federal government from states who did not spend their money. So we just received another $2 million to put back into the Chafee portal and $3 million that we're going to use to spend on claims from counties who have been

administering Chafee funds.

So although the Chafee funding is limited, we're trying to, right, leverage that as best we can.

We are also rethinking what aging out of foster care even looks like. We are partnering with a national partner to think about permanency. Right? Again, not every older person gets a forever family. Not every older person can age out into independent living. Everyone needs a support system. So we're rethinking what permanency looks like. And hopefully we'll create a framework for all of our older youth to make sure that they age out from foster care into a network of some sort.

ASSEMBLYMEMBER DARLING: Perfect.

Commissioner, I'd just ask that we include the youth and people who have experienced the system as well as legislators who are interested in assisting. I would love to be part of that process.

Thank you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE:

Would love to have you. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Senator May.

SENATOR MAY: Thank you -- (mic off; inaudible) -- I have two questions. Sorry.

I carry a bill to establish a new SNAP minimum of $100 raised from the 23 that is there. And I know OTDA would implement that, or help implement that.

Can you tell us what that implementation might look like? And especially at the county level, how we would do that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So you're referring to a state-funded supplement to SNAP --

SENATOR MAY: Exactly.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: -- to increase everyone's minimum benefit, right?

So, you know, SNAP clearly is a very effective anti-poverty, anti-hunger program, and the administration of the program, you know, in the scheme of things we administer goes quite well in terms of being able to

access families quickly.

With respect to state funding, if there were state funds added as a supplement, I think we would certainly need to work through various accounting issues and technical issues with our EBT vendor. You know, but in the event the Legislature and the Executive determine that a state supplement should be implemented, we would be very happy to work with you and our vendors to find a solution to issue those benefits as soon as possible.

SENATOR MAY: And would, say, Double Up Food Bucks still be able to be applied to that funding as well?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: In the event that the Double Up Food program, right, that they could -- they could change their model also to apply to state-funded benefits as well as the federally funded SNAP, and that would be important in order both to encourage both, you know, the purchase of healthy fruits, vegetables and also support local farmers. Yeah.

SENATOR MAY: Right. And local stores, actually, too.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes, absolutely.

SENATOR MAY: My second question is about -- so I represent Syracuse, which ranks number two in the country for child poverty, and Rochester and Buffalo are always together with Syracuse at the top of that sad list.

I applaud the Governor for recognizing this problem in the budget with that $50 million. Do you have information about how that would be distributed and how we would determine the impact of it after it was distributed?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. So the budget does indicate that about 25 million would go to the City of Rochester and then about 12.2 million each to Syracuse and Buffalo.

We're happy that the appropriation language does also carve out some funding so that we can evaluate. So we will be able to contract out, most likely, with an expert in

the area of studying economics and childhood poverty so that we can specifically measure the outcomes of those.

With respect to what's funded, we're -- you know, we're going to work with the county social services agencies, county executives and also the mayors of each of those cities as they develop a plan. And what we would like to see is investments that make real long-lasting change, whether it is something that is part of the ecosystem of the provision of supports for families or if it is direct payments to families to really turn their lives around and help them move not only out of poverty but hopefully well beyond poverty.

SENATOR MAY: So you see it as relatively flexible in terms of the kinds of things that it could --

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: It is relatively flexible, just we want to make sure we have outcomes.

SENATOR MAY: That's great.

And I know a lot of these programs

suffer from the slowness of distributing the funds. Would you expect that this would be fast-tracked in some way?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: I mean, I would expect that -- we are hopeful that the Legislature will see to pass this within the budget that is passed.

And due to that expectation, we will start working with the areas prior to budget enactment.

SENATOR MAY: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Mitaynes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Good morning.

I have a question for each of you.

With the recent success of the promised New York City pilot program subsidizing childcare for undocumented families, has OCFS examined the possibility of a statewide program of that nature, since the Governor excluded undocumented children from receiving aid in the past?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you for that question, Assemblywoman.

So we understand the burden of childcare on those families whose children aren't eligible. Unfortunately our federal funds are really specific and children's status is most important. So some families where their children do have immigration status that it's eligible, even if that family's undocumented, that child will be eligible for childcare assistance. But if not, our federal funds unfortunately can't be used in that way.

However, I know that we do have a facilitated enrollment program in New York State. We have a provider in New York City and a provider for the rest of the state. And in this year's -- last year's budget, two specific grant programs were approved. One is a program for families who weren't otherwise eligible -- so families who are above the eligibility rate, families who are potentially undocumented.

It is a limited fund, but it is a possibility. And we are committed to working with the Legislature to see how we can

accommodate all families.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

What is OTDA doing to ensure that people who have recently lost EBT money to skimming are reimbursed for the funds that they've lost?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So in addition to outreach to households who have applied in the past for skimming, we are working closely with social services districts to make sure that they are appropriately implementing the new ability that we do have to reimburse families and individuals for lost Public Assistance as well as SNAP benefits.

And I'm pleased to say that to date we've been able to reimburse $20 million back to low-income families and individuals, and we want to make sure that anyone who is subject to skimming is able to get a reimbursement to the extent that we're permitted to under law.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: And is the limit of two reimbursements per year

preventing people who had their money stolen from being reimbursed?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So there is a limit on -- for each household, that they can get reimbursement up to two times per year, with each of those issuances equaling up to two months of benefits.

You know, we would hope through more education and information that those households would do everything they can to protect their benefits, and we are rolling out a change next month that we will strongly publicize and look for help from all the legislative members to also inform constituents about the ability to immediately lock their card when it's not in use.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: (Inaudible.)

SENATOR MURRAY: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Commissioners, for being here. I hope this is working okay.

Commissioner Miles-Gustave, this is mainly for you. You and I last year, we talked about childcare and we talked about

collaboration with the business community. Has there been any of that since last year? Have you been working with the business community as far as childcare and solutions?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Yes, Senator. We're very excited about several of our programs.

So currently available, open today, is a tax credit for employers who have created childcare slots for their employees. We rolled out the Employer Supported Child Care Tax Credit program in early January. The window unfortunately is short, so applications close today. So businesses listening, please submit your applications.

And those are for tax credits for businesses who have created infant and toddler slots in the 2023 tax year, they can get a tax credit. We do anticipate it opening again next year for the 2024 tax year. So we hope that's a good incentive for employers to start supporting childcare slots for their employees.

We're also in the midst of rolling our

what we affectionately call the Tri-Care program -- the Tri-Share program, but it's secondly the Employer Supported Child Care Pilot. So that is a program in last year's budget where we will -- and there's going to be an RFP and a facilitator to manage the pilot. But we're hoping to solicit employers who are going to support and significantly pay for a portion of childcare slots. If they pay a third, the state will pay a third, and that employee will pay a third.

So those are the types of business integrations that we're hoping to continue to roll out.

SENATOR MURRAY: That's great.

And now when you say childcare slots, what exactly do you mean?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Just a spot for a child.

SENATOR MURRAY: But for specific facilities or opening facilities in their business? Or is it optional?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: It's optional for the -- for both programs,

actually. If employers created a program and they expanded infant and toddler seats, if they're partnering with a nonprofit provider and they're paying for those -- slots, I'll say, then they may be eligible for a tax credit.

For the Employer Supported Child Care Pilot, they can create their own or partner with a nonprofit. Either way, an entity needs to be a licensed childcare provider, so it's most likely a partnership with an existing provider in their region or neighborhood. And then if they earmark those slots for their employees, that will trigger the tri-share.

SENATOR MURRAY: That's great.

Now, has there been any effort also -- we talked about some of the larger employers maybe opening up childcare facilities within their company. But some of the pushback was, you know, a lot of regulations, a lot of red tape, a lot of things. Has there been an effort to kind of streamline those efforts?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So

I can't say we've been streamlining, but I will say that we've been supporting potential licensees. If you're looking to open a childcare, we are aware that we have a capacity issue. There's a supply-building division in my office, and so they're looking to partner with whoever needs to -- who wants to partner to open childcare. That worked really hand-in-hand during our Desert Program, and we helped folks who would not have normally been able to open childcare programs through that grant program.

But day-to-day business is helping providers create and sustain that network of childcare.

SENATOR MURRAY: That's great.

Now, one other issue that was brought to my attention was when getting some of the childcare assistance, there were some stipulations like certain -- with, you know, close to home, childcare close to home. Some were saying wouldn't it be easier to use like a voucher system to pick which childcare company you want to use -- maybe closer to

work, maybe make it easier for someone that's going to work.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Right.

SENATOR MURRAY: Are we working on flexibility there as well?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So a primary tenet of our childcare program, and promoted by the federal government, is family choice. So families should always be able to choose where they send their child.

There are some jurisdictions that have very strict processes that may or may not be funded by federal childcare dollars, but those programs funded by federal childcare dollars are required to give family choice.

SENATOR MURRAY: Okay, thank you. That might have been the problem; it might have been a local issue there.

Because I also want to say thank you for all you're doing, and I also want to thank the Governor for being very open to working and finding solutions. So I really appreciate your efforts.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you. Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Buttenschon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Thank you, Commissioners. I echo the previous comments of my colleagues on the importance of after-school, childcare, and Early Intervention programs.

I represent the Utica-Rome area, and I'm a lifelong resident of that district. And unfortunately I have to tell you that we buried another child last week due to gun violence.

This is something that -- we've had over a hundred youth and gun violence incidents. In fact, a resource officer was shot in the head by a child on a school property.

These incidents are new to my district. This is not something that my community is used to seeing. The parents of

the child that have used guns are asking for secure, safe rehabilitative environments for their children to live in. They'd pled with me that they can't have their children in their homes at this time due to concerns of other children and violence.

You testified that you had the incentives of diversion placement, and I appreciate that. But every child is different. How will you address the question that the parents are asking of you?

I also -- I will finish with my questions, because I know you possibly won't have time to answer and I will have to get them in writing, so I appreciate that.

Also, every child is different. And we're facing many challenges of dual diagnosis. What new programs do you see that you will develop with your fellow commissioners? And again, I ask "new programs" because this is not working in the district I represent.

And finally, can you advise me of the importance of the two-on-one system, as this

is something that we have seen within the community that collectively brings us together.

And one question for Commissioner Guinn. Did your office have any input on the cities that will be receiving the Anti-Poverty Initiative funding? Because poverty is overwhelming in my district over the last few years, and we weren't considered. And we have to work at this holistically and collectively.

I thank you for all the work that you and your team do, as I know I see them here and I -- I do reach out quite frequently. So I know you answer. But I have to talk to these parents. And we can't have this.

Thank you.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: I can go first. I'm not sure how much time we'll have, Assemblywoman Buttenschon, but I appreciate your comments, your sentiments. I know we work very closely with you. You're very passionate about your counties, and we are as well. So we know that gun violence

has been a problem and crime is a problem. Specifically leaving out of COVID, we've seen a higher need for more programs. We can talk more specifically about those initiatives.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Cleare.

SENATOR CLEARE: Good morning.

My question is similar to the previous question regarding the poverty -- anti-poverty funding for Rochester, Syracuse and Buffalo. And I'm happy that we are looking at anti-poverty, especially childhood poverty.

But why are there no similar programs for other poverty-stricken areas of the state like South Central Brooklyn, South Bronx, Harlem? There are other pockets of poverty. And I just want to understand what was the strategy, what was the thinking in not including those areas.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. Including these areas, they were chosen -- these are just areas of the state that by many measures consistently rank to have very

high rates of child poverty, both in the state and in the nation. That does not mean that there are not other parts of our state that have rates of childhood poverty that are absolutely unacceptable.

We will work, you know, based on the appropriation that has passed, to implement and implement in a way that hopefully we can learn things that are relevant that can then be extended statewide. You know, this is one item, one investment. It doesn't mean that childhood poverty is not something that needs to be addressed at a statewide level.

I would refer back to our Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council. This year the council will make specific recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature on efforts that we could implement as a state that will reduce childhood poverty in our state by no less than 50 percent. We believe we can do it. We believe child poverty is something that can be solved. It requires thought and it requires investment, and we look forward to

sharing those recommendations with all of you at the end of this year.

SENATOR CLEARE: Well, I just want to urge the state to look at these other areas, because there has been a long history. There's a lot of data. And we know that we need -- it relates -- child poverty relates to crime, it relates to many other things that are existing in those areas as well. So I think we should have a more global approach to anti-poverty.

The other question I have -- and of course I want to talk about after-school. We need after-school. Across the board, we don't have enough. Our children need after-school. So I'll lend my voice to that as well.

But the other thing I want to ask about is the nonprofit human services workers who go out every day to provide services for New Yorkers and have not seen the raise that they need to take care of their own families. So this year we have a budget that again leaves out a number of state human service

work -- contracts, in the COLA language, under OTDA and other agencies.

What can we do to bridge the gap?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And you will have to answer that question offline.

SENATOR CLEARE: And she'll send it to me.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Or put it in writing so all of us can share it.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Sure.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Chandler-Waterman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: All right. Thank you, Commissioner. A little trouble there.

So I'm going to talk about after-school, like my colleagues, about the after-school program, particularly Empire State After School Program, which as a nonprofit exec I had the privilege to be at the inception of that program.

And our district, predominantly Black

and brown -- East Flatbush and also parts of Canarsie, Brownsville and Crown Heights. So you know that there's a big uptick when it comes to gun violence.

We created a task force that basically came up with, from education and public safety, is that we need more after-school programs. Right? So it was severely, as you know, underfunded, 150,000 for 110 kids. There's delays when it comes to the funding process. I know that the CBOs have not received their money for the last school year. And they're doing another school year, and I don't think they received those funds either.

There is a delay in -- on dispossession, delay in Galaxy for the school to administer, for staff to support. And then also it's due to expire, and we need an extension, an expansion, with also more funds.

So I just want to make sure that how do we work out these issues that impact this community-based organization through direct

services, which of course impacts our -- all the staff being paid a living wage, our parents, our youth. And it causes a whole bunch of issues that of course escalates on the ground with gun violence.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Assemblywoman. I appreciate that question.

So I would agree. OCFS is delighted to be one of the implementers of our childcare after-school programs in New York State. We are only one of, right, a couple -- New York State SED administers some after-school, but our Empire and Advantage programs are obviously administered by OCFS.

So we are, as indicated in the budget, combining those to strengthen them. So we do recognize that we've -- we had issues coming out of COVID. It was difficult because there were no kids in schools, and we changed our contracts to a different type of budget. It was difficult for our nonprofit providers to adhere to those new rules; we then changed it back.

So there's been a lot of ups and downs for the community. We want to save all that stress. In combining them, it streamlines the requirements, it streamlines the administrative burden on both the CBOs and OCFS. Again, we are still in the process of finalizing the RFP, because we do know it's expiring. We have every intention to let an RFP out so that in the next school year folks know who will receive those after-school contracts.

But we are focused on strengthening the program and making sure that those providers are sustained.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: Okay. We want to make sure there's not a lot of red tape with the RFP. But we can talk and work together on how we can make sure -- make sure the CBOs are in the process of figuring out how that could work best for them to procure the funds. Because they have to pay their staff, and it's going to be a problem on the ground.

So I look forward to continue talking

to you about it.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Happy to do that.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: (Mic off; inaudible.)

SENATOR BROUK: Okay. Hi, good morning, Commissioners. Thanks for joining us today.

Today we've heard a lot about the anti-poverty funding, so I'm actually going to continue with that trend.

I not only am proud to represent the City of Rochester, but I also am a born-and-bred Rochesterian myself. And I always want to say there's amazing things about Rochester. I am so proud to have been raised there and certainly instilled with the values of my family there, and a lot of incredible things have come out of Rochester.

Unfortunately, though, most of the headlines that we see these days are about things like poverty, things like higher rates of violence. So much so that last year my office took on the task of really digging

into why we saw some of these correlations of higher violence than -- it felt like more violence than other places in the state, and higher poverty.

And one of the things that we identified is that if you look at the relationship between AIM funding year over year and rate of violence in especially upstate cities, you see that Rochester has been chronically underfunded when compared to its neighboring cities, and continuously has higher rates of violence. And we know -- you know, anyone looking at those two things knows that there is an intersection and a relationship.

So while we're obviously pleased to see that there was $25 million allotted towards Rochester of this anti-poverty funding, I'm also concerned. Because according to our report, to be on par with a city like Buffalo, it would be $34 million annually for Rochester. We're looking at $25 million in one year.

And so certainly concerns about what

we can do in one year to alleviate massive amounts of not just poverty, but really concentrated. And I want to just quickly say to have concentrated poverty and to grow up in that, it means that that's all you see. So to be a young person, all you see is other hungry young people. Right? When you go to school, all you see is overcrowded classrooms. That's all you know. And we know that that affects your outcome.

So my question to you is, how did you land on the 25? And are there thoughts around how to create sustained funding?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So with respect to the amounts, I mean, those were based on, you know, decisions that Governor Hochul and her team made in terms of how to invest.

I think 25 million is a significant amount of money, but it's certainly -- because it is one-time, we need to make sure that those investments are done in a way that we can learn something from it and/or make a significant difference for children, very

specific families in those areas of concentrated poverty.

You know, we agree, we certainly understand the trauma that poverty creates for children and creates for families. And that's why I think as a state we all need to do everything we can to reduce childhood poverty.

You know, I would point to, in addition to the specific investment, you know, so many other things that are -- as part of this budget, are important in terms of --

SENATOR BROUK: Sorry, just -- to not {unintelligible} but really quickly, I just need to know, are there limitations on what municipalities could use this for? And you'll have to write that to me.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: It's very flexible, and we'd be happy to work with the counties.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Maher.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Thank you.

Hello. Two questions.

Specifically, one is on youth employment. I see that the budget has increased, and I just want to say I've had personally experience with this program with several of the counties that I represent in the Hudson Valley, and they are doing tremendous work. We are working with local youth and local families and school districts to identify the youth and their families who could work in these jobs. But we are losing some opportunity with the income threshold.

And just like we've seen that threshold increase for childcare services and assistance, would it be possible and is it part of the conversations in the future to increase that for the youth employment, both year-round and in the summer, to catch more youth who are just at that cliff of eligibility?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: The funds that we are using to support this program are

federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and so that does have a limit of the 200 percent of poverty.

Certainly would be willing to work with you and see if there is any flexibility there. The federal government has actually kind of hinted in a different direction that they're going to be a bit more strict with respect to income limits for that program, that states wouldn't have any opportunity to exceed the 200 percent. But we certainly, you know, are glad to see that you've recognized the positive impacts that these programs have. And we certainly encourage all areas to really conduct outreach to reach the neediest -- the neediest youth in the counties.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Is there an opportunity to use a different pot of funding from the state to increase that threshold, especially if the feds are going in the opposite direction?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So at this point we are solid in terms of the federal

200 percent of poverty level. In terms of -- it would require, obviously, a different funding source to be identified.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Yes. Okay, that's something I would advocate for, just on the record.

The second part is, do you audit these programs? I know that some counties do it on their own and some contract with nonprofits. Just seeing how we're maximizing every single federal dollar, what is that audit process like? And would love to have access to some of those statistics to see if our model in some counties work where maybe they don't work in others.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. We do. We go out and visit programs, many programs on an annual basis to get a sense of how they're using the funds, the populations that they're targeting. And obviously we do look at the cost per, and do everything we can to keep administrative costs associated with the program down.

There's a lot of variation among the

counties both in terms of the type of jobs that are available and also the length of the program. So that also makes a difference. But we do perform reviews of those programs, and we'd be happy to talk with you about what we've found.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: I'd love to know whether it's an audit that's available via Excel. Just the statistics on how many counties are using all of the money, is there an allotment from year to year that they're not hitting because they're not being able to sign up the youth because of the threshold. I'd love to be able to quantify that, both in my district and statewide, to see if there's things that we can do to address it.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. I mean, by and large counties are spending every single penny of the Summer Youth Employment Program funding.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: And even the year-round, the newly established year-round?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: The newly established year-round just started, so it's

yet to be seen. But I would expect similar outcomes because they're very -- you know, they're not only meaningful programs but they're also very popular programs for youth throughout the state.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: I couldn't agree more.

I definitely want to pivot now to childcare. So I know that the minimum wage increase, the $2 per hour, there are a lot of things in here that speak to those that are providing employment for childcare providers. But there are a lot of childcare providers that are hindered because of some red tape and bureaucracy that does exist in the State of New York, or so they say. And I just wanted to talk a little bit about increasing ratios and what that process is like.

So if you have an emergency -- a facility closed and there's an emergency and there's weeks before parents can find a childcare provider, some of them have to drive an hour to and from work. But if there was a process in place to easily allow,

temporarily, the ratio to change for existing providers -- how are those conversations going with your office and are there any recommendations being made?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So I think those conversations are ongoing. And thank you for your question, Assemblyman.

You may know that we were able to waive some of our regulations during COVID. And so to the extent that some of those waivers might be helpful to the provider community on a more permanent basis, we're open to those discussions.

So if you have not gotten an answer or you think the issue has not been resolved, we're happy to contact you.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Fantastic. Thank you, and thank you both.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Our next questioner is Senator Tom O'Mara.

SENATOR O'MARA: Good morning. Thank

you for being here, and your testimony.

Commissioner Miles-Gustave, regarding -- there have been a couple of questions already on the Advantage and Empire State After School programs. What -- my understanding is that the RFPs are not out yet. When do you expect the RFPs to come out? And it's also my understanding that many agencies still have not been notified of awards under the 2024 programs.

What's the status? And when can people expect to see these come out?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Senator, for the question.

So we are excited about our new combined after-school program. The RFP is almost finalized. We do anticipate it being released in the next several -- I'll say weeks, to jinx myself. But hopefully really soon. We do understand that providers need to know what their plan will be for next September. So we know we're in a limited time frame here. But that is in the works.

With respect to your question about

previous payments, I know we've had some challenges with those iterations of contracts. So many of our providers who are in the middle of a contract amendment have to close out that contract year before they get allocations or before they can even claim for the following year.

So we unfortunately have a lot of providers who we call constantly. We have a team here working on making sure there is no backlog of those after-school contracts. And we give very personal technical assistance to all of our contract providers.

Some contractors just don't have the capacity to continue, right, to finalize one year to then move on to the next. So we're trying to work with the providers who are still on our open list, and we track those very specifically, try to close those contractors out so they can then move on to the next year's funding.

SENATOR O'MARA: Okay. So they can't even apply until they're closed out?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE:

No, I'm not saying they can't apply to the new RFP. But they can't access their subsequent year's funding until they close out their previous year.

SENATOR O'MARA: Okay. Will the coming RFPs, are they going to be -- for what period of time? A five-year period of time? Or what period of time? Or just annually?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: I'll get back to you on that. Good question.

SENATOR O'MARA: Okay. Are there -- other than these two programs, Advantage and Empire State After School programs, are there any other after-school programs in the budget that I haven't brought up?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So we do intend to fund, through some additional after-school funding, out-of-school time for older youth. So we recognize that our after-school programs are school-age childcare, really care for folks under 12 -- kids under 12. That's our school-age childcare.

We know that there needs to be

specific focus on middle school, high school kids, and specific youth development programming focused on those children after school or out of school, during that time. So we do plan to create a program and to fund in a couple of regions a very specific out-of-school-time pilot for older youth. But that's in progress.

SENATOR O'MARA: Is -- with the tight time frame it seems to be ready for the start of the next school year. Is there any possibility of extending the current contracts?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Well, the new RFP will be ready for the next school year. Programs will have allocations for next school year. And we're hoping to have the older youth out-of-school-time programs be ready for next year as well.

SENATOR O'MARA: Okay. Thank you.

And perhaps for both of you, just in general with regards to the $2.4 billion allocation for the migrant crisis in New York City, all these programs we talked about with

you today, are all those programs also available to migrants, so in addition to the 2.4 billion that's allocated in the budget?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So -- I mean, every program's eligibility criteria differs. But with respect -- I mean, migrants -- some migrants are eligible for Public Assistance benefits and some are not. And it does depend on their status. We have expanded the -- you know, last year there was an expansion with respect to Public Assistance to expand the number of noncitizens who are eligible, but clearly many of the individuals will not be eligible for Public Assistance.

You know, the Governor's focus --

SENATOR O'MARA: What kind of -- those that are eligible, do you have an estimate of the numbers? And, more importantly, what the impact is on these programs for New York citizens --

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah. I mean, at the moment the numbers who are receiving Public Assistance, it's not a large

number. In New York City we are looking to see the future, but our focus also is on helping them secure work, legal employment.

SENATOR O'MARA: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Byrnes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BYRNES: Thank you very much. All right, looks like we're up and rolling now.

I want to thank both of you acting commissioners for being here today.

My question, though, will be for Acting Commissioner Miles-Gustave. And that question is about the Raise the Age portion of the budget.

You know, I spent most of my life in the criminal justice field as an assistant district attorney, even as a juvenile prosecutor. And I've spent a lot of time with my constituents on these issues, including union members in the Monroe County Detention Center. And what they have

collectively told me, and which I see all the time in the news, is that they do absolutely feel that this Raise the Age has caused teen violence to increase, carjackings, repeated offenders, including multiple times, and no consequences.

There's general outrage in my community. There's also outrage throughout the entire state. The Governor promised in her State of the State and in her budget address, she promised us that her number-one priority was the safety of New Yorkers. So as we look at this budget, what I see is that Raise the Age is not helping. In fact, I believe it's hurting people and it's creating more victims.

How can we start working on any form of the solution when the Executive Budget indicates that it's going to maintain the same funding as last year and that there will be no changes to existing services? How do we get moving forward when it appears we're stagnant, and stagnant is hurting us?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE:

Thank you, Assemblywoman, for that question.

I do understand your concern. I read the same sensationalized press that's out, right, that we all do, talking about Raise the Age and talking about the failure of Raise the Age. But I think we all need to bring it back to the intent of Raise the Age. And again, New York State was not unique in this respect. We were one of the last two states in the country to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 16 and 17. So we were behind the eight-ball there.

So we are trying to save our children, and not, right, confine them in adult prisons. We know the research on brain science and what that means for youth who experience adverse childhood experiences. They can't make decisions in the ways that adults can. These are children, and we should treat them like children. But we should also be sure to have the supports and services to advance their development.

And so I do know that counties are putting alternatives to detention and

prevention plans in their country Raise the Age plans, sending them to OCFS and the Executive, and we are approving those plans. So I'd encourage you to go back to your counties potentially to see what the counties are doing with respect to those prevention and alternative to detention programs, because the budget reappropriates $250 million every year to support those interventions.

And I know we're also -- we're colliding with the aftereffects of COVID, and we have -- we're seeing the mental health of our youth decline. So the Raise the Age and the increase in census that we're seeing in detention and operated facilities now also coincided with COVID and --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BYRNES: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: -- we know we should provide more services.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BYRNES: My follow-up, then, would be it wasn't that many years ago where we had maybe 12-, 13-, 14-year-olds at

the detention center who may have stolen a car, and they were getting services and things of that nature.

And now we have at one point, a little over a year ago, there were 10 or 11 basically adult males all accused of murder at the detention center -- because they were all shaving, they had children of their own coming to visit them at the children's detention center.

And the staff was afraid. They have no ability to defend themselves. The whole dynamics of what should be criminal justice has changed, and I believe not for the better.

Thank you, Commissioner.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I think I'm the next Senator before we get to chairs having second rounds.

So thank you both for being here.

And Commissioner -- sorry, I don't want to call you by your first names -- Commissioner Guinn, we had talked about this, but then in the New York Times yesterday

there was an article about how the rate by HRA of approving eligibility for benefits had actually been plummeting, not going up -- during our conversation, I think you were under the impression perhaps some progress was being made. So I just have to ask, and I know others have brought this up, what more can we be doing to make sure that the City of New York -- and again, I don't know other counties' statistics. I know my city's aren't going the right direction. I mean, they are just shocking: 15 percent on time, that's the rate.

And then, second, tying it into what my colleague Assemblyman Hevesi talked about in the beginning, if we were paying a fair share of the administrative costs to our local DSSs, might we actually see improved ability to meet our targets?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Thank you, Senator.

With respect to the performance by New York City and other social services districts around the state, I believe when we

were speaking we were focused at that time on timeliness. And we have definitely significant improvement throughout 2023 with respect to timeliness in New York City and other places.

We're not where we need to be, but we are taking steps in the right direction. That is due to targeted efforts by counties to hire. I think that the HELP program that Commissioner Gustave-Miles referenced also certainly has been a benefit to counties in terms of easing their ability to bring new staff on. We know 38 counties have participated in that and been able to hire a thousand workers just since that program was initiated.

So with respect to the denial rate, which I think was the focus of the Times story yesterday, you know, again, we have looked at it. We will look more deeply at the reasons for denials to make sure those are appropriate denials. We have spoken with leadership in New York City about the issue. They have looked into the matter to also make

sure that those denials are appropriate. Definitely need to do better there.

With respect to hiring, I think that any additional funding to counties to help them hire is always helpful. However, in this particular instance we are not necessarily hearing that counties are unable to hire due to lack of budget authority to hire. It is really tying back to the significant workforce challenges that everyone is facing.

So things put in place to help that, including the civil service reforms -- I know some counties have made changes in terms of the requirements for workers to loosen those up while still maintaining, you know, a high-quality workforce, and then also some limited areas where they have been able to provide increased wages for staff to do this work.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And Commissioner Miles-Gustave, so I just was hearing about the Raise the Age concerns from a colleague from other

countries much farther north of New York City. So I actually believe in New York City we mostly feel Raise the Age has actually been quite effective. And I think we're seeing a decrease in juvenile crime -- I'm sure not fast enough, I'm sure still too high. But I just don't know, is there an exceptional problem of an increase in juvenile crime in the counties that that Assemblymember represents?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So I would defer to my colleagues at DCJS for the official stats.

But I know in discussions with our partners we know that overall crime has decreased, juvenile crime has decreased, gun violence has decreased. I do think people are still reeling from that post-COVID spike. But we've invested money in our services and I do believe we're back to our original intention of making sure that we support and serve our young people in age-appropriate situations -- facilities.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very

much.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: You're welcome.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I cede the rest of my time.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember González-Rojas.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you for being here, Commissioners.

As a proud member of the Mom Squad, I want to thank you for the Summer EBT inclusion. That's something that -- I wrote a letter in December, when we were up against that deadline. So as moms, we really appreciate that -- that inclusion.

Commissioner, there's a recent DOH report that said one in four people were struggling with food insecurity in New York. Are you aware of the minimum benefit for SNAP for an individual?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: I believe people can receive a benefit that is as low as about $40 per month, but most are 23 --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: It's $23 per month.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: -- $23 per month. That certainly is not the typical benefit, but it is a low benefit when we're talking about a supplement to help people purchase food.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Do you think that's sufficient to address the food insecurity that we're facing in the state?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Overall the SNAP program is a premier program in terms of addressing food insecurity. But in the event those benefits could be increased, we would support those increases.

And, you know, at the federal level I know some changes have been made, and at least I can say it is a program that is indexed each year. But certainly families could use more.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: New Jersey recently increased their rate to $95 a month. So I have a bill that would increase the rate to $100 a month, and I hope that

we'd have the Executive's support.

Last year we funded the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program, NOEP, which is vital in ensuring that communities understand the SNAP program and are able to enroll. We funded it at $5.45 million, and that included a $2 million additional funding from the Legislature, right, to support this outreach.

So if it's not restored, we're concerned about losing NOEP workers in places that were addressing some of the largest food insecurity challenges, including Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse. So I'm concerned seeing the additional add that we fought for not included in the budget. So do you know why that money was not included, given the high rates of food insecurity in New York?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the fact that the Executive Budget does not carry forward a legislative add for next year is not unique to this program, and certainly does not in any way indicate a lack of support for NOEP. We too believe that the

NOEP program is key to helping make sure individuals are aware of the benefits that they can receive and helping them access those benefits.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: In just my last few seconds, to clarify, does New York State allow us to replace skimmed public benefits, New York State law?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes. A New York State law passed -- thankfully -- last year does allow us to replace benefits that are stolen.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

For the three-minute chair follow-up, Senator Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

I have a few more childcare questions for you, Commissioner.

First, being that we've heard the figure, the $7 billion figure, mentioned a few times at this hearing. I just want to confirm that that was an amount that was

promised over four years. And if you could just confirm how much of that 7 billion has been spent since it was promised, and how much is left to go.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: You want me to do math, Senator?

SENATOR BRISPORT: Yes, please.

(Laughter.)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So we can give you the exact amount, but I know there was over a billion last year, 1.9 billion this year. And then the rest.

But we'll get back to you with the specific breakout in the financial plan.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

I'd also like to ask a follow-up question about the differential payment rates. Your testimony mentioned an enhanced payment rate for providers that are accredited by nationally recognized childcare organizations. I know earlier you mentioned a specific price tag from the Executive around decoupling, around 140 million.

Is there a price tag for the

differential payment rates? And is it more than 140 or less or --

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So not yet. I know we're still working up the details of that differential rate. But we are looking towards quality programming, so trying to incentivize providers to increase quality in some way. So that is our effort to do so. But those specific details have not been negotiated yet.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Okay.

And I also want to talk a little bit about the workforce retention grants from last year. It's my understanding that one of the big reasons why the funding wasn't spent is we were hearing that the government support for workforce retention was difficult to access. And another reason was because there was an overestimate from the Governor's office about how many people would participate in the retention grants.

The workforce supplements were decreased because of this overestimate. So I just have a two-part question. Why was the

estimate so far off the mark as it was? And when the Governor's office learned the estimates were off the mark, why didn't we increase the amount we were giving to workers last year?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So thank you, Senator. I'm not sure I would characterize last year's program in that way. I would say that we allocated 500 million for workforce stabilization grants, but it is up to that provider to apply for these grants.

We built new systems to push this pandemic funding out. So I don't know if it's because of the pace. I have not heard that. But I'm happy to get some specific feedback from you on some of those reasons that you've heard.

We are using the remaining pandemic funding in this year's budget to then facilitate additional workforce grants. So the 280, that's the remaining pool of pandemic funds.

SENATOR BRISPORT: But given that we are rolling over, was there any consideration

of an additional payment last year to workforce?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: I'm not sure if I understand your question.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Just as opposed to rolling it over to this year, having stuff left over.

I'll follow-up with you another time.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: We'll get back, yes.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Grace Lee.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Good morning.

I have some questions for Commissioner Guinn.

I want to thank the Governor for helping to secure $391 million in the budget last year for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program. As of November we had disbursed -- the state had disbursed about $94.8 million helping 14,863 households.

I wanted to know if you have any

updates on disbursements as of this January.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: And you are referring to the Emergency Rental Assistance Program proper?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Yes, ERAP.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay. In terms of total payments out the door for the entire program, we have disbursed about $3.4 billion to support payments to -- 293,000 payments to property owners on behalf of low-income tenants.

We are very pleased with the additional funds that were included in last year's budget that did enable us to also start processing last year the payments to households whose rents are subsidized.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Do you have any updates on that particular pot of money and how much of that has been disbursed?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. So with all the money that's available for this program, including those funds, we have about $180 million left to be distributed.

With respect to subsidized households,

of the total distributed to date, about 188 million has been distributed to subsidized households, and most of the applications that we have in-house that remain to be paid are associated with subsidized households.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Great.

Have you had any challenges pushing the money, getting the money out to -- or processing applications?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: No. I would say that our application process at this point is pretty smooth. It is -- you know, does require a bit of documentation and review, but we have been successful in reaching out to property owners where we do need additional information, and case processing is going quite well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: All right. We only have a little bit of time left, but I wanted to ask about the $2.4 billion that the Governor has proposed for migrant assistance.

Can you just give us kind of a general overview of how you're looking at

distributing that between upstate and downstate, particularly in New York City, and then kind of the services that you're -- how that that distribution will look?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the $2.4 billion that is in the budget to serve and address the migrant crisis will by and large be spent in New York City, to help New York City address the crisis.

The vast majority of funds are associated with temporary housing so that we can keep people off the streets, and then there are also services for case management, legal assistance and health items.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

For her three-minute chair follow-up, Roxanne Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

So for OCFS I'm just going to ask general questions, and if you can send us back the numbers.

With the consolidation for after-school programs, can you tell us how

many students would be served by this consolidation, and could you give us a breakdown by counties?

Also, how many students were previously served in those programs, and by counties also.

And will there be an expanded capacity with the new -- with the consolidation of the after-school programs? If you could just send us those numbers.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Okay.

SENATOR PERSAUD: For OTDA, we talked about the increase in SNAP benefits. And could you tell us when was the last time there was an increase?

And as you know, I have legislation that was introduced last year that would benefit families more because we would offer an increase in SNAP benefits of cash assistance, utility payments, and index it to inflation. So could you tell me, you know, what's your thinking on that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Sure.

The SNAP program, which derives from federal statute, is indexed every year. So it does receive a slight increase intended to keep up with the cost of food.

The Public Assistance benefits are not indexed and have not been increased in many years.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. So, again, the legislation looks to increase that. And I would hope that, you know, both houses and the Governor would take that into consideration because the people who benefit greatly from it, they will benefit because of the number of increases that they'll be receiving. So if we can continue to work on that.

I want to again push on the COLA for human services. We know -- you know, you hear me say it over and over -- we would love to have the COLA across the board, not the select populations that have been receiving it. And we give the breakdown of every population that should, and so we're hoping that the Governor will include that in the

final budget this year, and so that the human service workers will be paid accordingly.

So thank you very much.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Burdick.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Yes, thank you.

This is a question for the acting commissioner of OTDA. And this relates to ESHI. And as I understand, there's 210 million that's proposed to maintain operational support for current and new supportive housing, an unchanged amount from last year.

I have a question with respect to supportive housing for -- transitional housing for those released from our correctional facilities. This is something that I've been grappling with since getting into the Assembly. It seems to be an area that falls between the cracks. HCR handles permanent housing, they don't handle

transitional housing. DOCCS doesn't have line items for this. And also I'm troubled that it's operational support.

I'd be interested in understanding what OTDA's plans are with respect to this, and also whether it might consider funding some community-based organizations like Fortune or others that have been very successful in this area. Because that can help guide how we might respond to the Executive Budget with respect to ESHI.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right, thank you. And certainly ESHI and our HHAP program that supports the capital development of supportive housing provides opportunities for people who are formerly incarcerated who are otherwise -- are homeless or are facing homelessness.

With respect to -- I know that the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision has recently implemented some transitional programs --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Sure, I'm aware of that. But if you can tell me what is OTDA

doing. Are you building new supportive housing?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes. Yes. And we do also have supportive housing programs that are administered by organizations such as the Fortune Society, Osborne and others who clearly do a really good job --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: If I may interrupt --

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: -- in supporting this population.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: -- because of limited time. So is some of that 210 million actually going towards new supportive housing?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes. Yes, the ESHI program is available to support new providers every year. And certainly part of our portfolio --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: And as you're mentioning, with community-based organizations that might be providers and might be the developers?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. Typically there's a developer and then there is a provider. Often they're separate and the providers are often the nonprofit organizations that have expertise with serving the specific population being served.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Great. Thank you so much.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: You're welcome.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: All right, here we go. Assemblymember Lunsford.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you so much.

My question is for Commissioner Miles-Gustave. I'm going to ask you some questions about our foster care agencies in light of the Child Victims Act claims.

As you know, many of our counties' CPS services are provided by voluntary not-for-profit service providers. These foster care agencies serve over 90,000 children statewide. And according to

a recent survey, there's over 800 claims under the Child Victims Act against these services, 40 percent of which have no insurance.

Given, of course, we care very much about the victims of these heinous acts and they deserve every dime of recompense they can receive, the reality is that the payment of these claims is going to have a drastic financial impact on these foster care agencies that are providing a legally mandated government service.

Is there a plan for what to do in the case of financial failure for some of these organizations?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you, Assemblywoman Lunsford.

So at OCFS we completely are aligned with the intent of the Crime Victims Act, and we know that victims deserve the justice they seek. At the same time we do recognize, in partnership with our provider community, that there are some unintended consequences of this legislation. And much of the burden is

falling on the current component of those providers, and their insurance policies, many of them no longer have them.

So we do recognize this is an issue, and we're talking with our partners constantly about potential solutions. So we agree that the foster care voluntary agency ecosystem is critical to the service delivery provision of those services for our population. So we know they are very important. But we are trying to work with them to create a solution.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: I think this is one of those circumstances where not just for the children who in these foster care agencies have disproportionately experienced ACEs already -- and being displaced again would be very traumatic -- but also for our counties who would be left having to pick up this emergency.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and I just encourage you to try to find solutions -- some I may have ideas for -- for how to deal with this in a

way that is proactive and not reactive.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you very much.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Clark.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Thank you. See, we're so -- we all work well together.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: This is to our OCFS commissioner. So good to see you again. I am going back to childcare. Many, many questions; I could be here all day, but I will abide by my time limit.

First, on presumptive eligibility, we have heard from the feds that their dollars -- that this is a completely useable form that we can use their dollars for. Last year we were -- you know, one of the biggest issues we're seeing both upstate and in New York City is some longer and longer

waiting times to get approved for childcare subsidies.

And given the fact that this can be the difference between being able to start a job, being able to, you know, put your child somewhere safe when you do start the job, getting approval for your childcare subsidies as quickly as possible is really important. We know presumptive eligibility works; it should actually be increased in terms of the metrics used.

But if we could get assurances that the federal dollars -- you know, last year we were able to allow counties to opt in, which they sort of already can -- and could before. But if we could get assurances that the federal dollars could be used in that way, would it be something -- would it be OCFS looking at making it more of a required way to approve subsidies so that we could get them out quicker?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So thank you for your question, Assemblywoman Clark.

So I know we're looking at presumptive eligibility. And as you mentioned, we made it optional for the districts. And they would be, you know, required to put their district dollars in if they went through a process and that family was in fact not eligible. So I know we're open to having conversations about how we continue to move down this path to getting better access to families, and I know presumptive eligibility is a way to get families more quickly into that provider --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: We have heard it out of the vice president's mouth, so I think we can figure out some ways to get there to make it work for us here in the state.

My last two questions, the cost of care -- I know Senator Brisport has talked a bit about it. You know, would OCFS support us moving to that system? We can move to it if we pass it, if we change from market rates to cost of care. Would OCFS -- you know, this bill had passed many years ago, a previous Governor did veto it. But we know

we have a much more supportive Governor.

Could we get OCFS's -- you know, would OCFS be on board to sort of get to the point where we were able to pass it and actually make it the rule that we use to set subsidy rates?

And my last question is on differential pay. We allow counties a 5 to 15 percent. Why not just, at this point, ask all counties to go to 15 percent? We know most do 5 percent. One of the biggest issues we hear is nights and weekends and nontraditional hours is the biggest need and it's why childcare dollars aren't being used.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: Okay. I forgot your first question, but I'll move to the second one. We'll get back to you on all of that.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: That's a great answer.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Manktelow.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Here we go. Thank you.

Commissioner Guinn, just a couple of questions back to the theft of the SNAP benefits. So you said I think earlier that an individual could be reimbursed up to two times, is that correct?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Up to two times per year, with each instance covering up to two months of benefits.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: So in that situation, if two times doesn't cover it or it happens again, what happens to the individual then?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: We would have no authority to reimburse them for additional dollars that were stolen. Certainly there are emergency benefits that could be issued if they are in fact without food. But we would expect the retroactive benefit -- the replacement benefits that were able to provide for their immediate food needs.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Okay. So --

and you said -- I believe that you said that you've used up to about $20 million of reimbursement so far. Is that correct?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes. We've been able to distribute $20 million to replace stolen benefits at this point.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: So we have the original 20 million plus the other 20 million, so now we're at 40 million.

Of that 20 million, the reimbursement, where did that come from?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: So it comes from both -- if it's SNAP, it comes from the federal government, from federal funds that are authorized to replace stolen benefits in the manner that we're doing in New York State.

And if it's Public Assistance dollars, it comes from state, local or federal dollars, depending on how that Public Assistance case is funded.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: So it's possible some of our local counties would have to be part of that reimbursement, is

that correct?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes. If it's a safety-net case, the localities do have a cost associated with those issuances.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: And of the individuals that are actually out there stealing the benefits, how many of them have been caught at this point?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: That's definitely not something I can speak to. It's being handled by law enforcement.

We have heard cases of individuals being caught, and certainly hope that they're all caught, because it's unconscionable.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Is there a follow-up from law enforcement to let you know where they are with all that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: I do not believe there's any obligation for law enforcement to keep us informed about their investigations.

There are times we are providing information to support investigations.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Okay, I

appreciate your time, and thank you for answering my questions.

ACTING COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay, thank you.

I believe, unless I'm mistaken, I will be the last to ask questions. And hopefully this will be an easy one.

But I want to go back to the topic, if I can, of Raise the Age. So first, I really appreciated your answer, Commissioner. From my estimation, Raise the Age is one of the best programs, a stunning victory for us in 2017-2018. And it was right on the science, as you said. It's right for kids. It is absolutely a great program.

And we're taking political hits on it, and I think there's a reason for that. So two things I want to address.

So first, one problem that I want to identify right off the bat is when that program was created in 2017-2018, we had a prior Governor who had a history of being

angry and mean to the City of New York because he didn't like the former mayor.

To date, New York City has still not received any Raise the Age money. So is that something we can address in the future?

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE: So thank you for that, Assemblyman Hevesi.

I'm not aware that New York City has submitted a waiver application. Because the law does allow for cities that are beyond the cap to submit a waiver application if there is undue hardship. I'm not aware of an application submitted by New York City, but happy to review one if they should submit.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. I appreciate it.

And now here's the second piece, and I think this is why this issue, which should be, again, all of us taking credit for a win here, has become a political liability and we're getting hit on, is because the mechanism for Raise the Age funds going out the door remains a reimbursement.

So from my understanding, if Raise the

Age had been fully funded every year since 2017-2018, we're close to $800 million or a billion dollars that would have gone out the door.

We have -- one of my colleagues, Michi Solages, has a bill that we will be looking to put into this budget that separates the capital portion of Raise the Age -- because you know that's a component -- but the other piece of it, it stops it from being a reimbursement grant and allows the providers to get the money up front. And I think the reason why we're getting into this trouble is we're asking providers to lay out money they just don't have.

So the question for you is, is the Executive open to changing the dynamic of the Raise the Age program not to be a reimbursement grant, to be an upfront grant? And in that way we can get the money to those kids, get the money to those families, and make Raise the Age the program that it should be.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MILES-GUSTAVE:

Thank you, Assemblyman. I would defer to my principals on that specific question.

However, I do know that we do need more outreach to our counties to make sure that they're taking full advantage of those funds of the counties that have Raise the Age plans. We have approved -- about 39 approved Raise the Age plans. So that means every county does not have an approved Raise the Age plan.

So I do think that, right, there's more money to be spent. We fully, right, fund that appropriation every year, 100 percent reimbursement for Raise the Age incremental costs for those counties. So I do believe we all can be doing more.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. I agree, we need to do more for the entire state and New York City.

Thank you both for your testimony here today. We very much appreciate it. Thank you.

PANELISTS: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

(Off the record.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Commissioners, we really appreciate it.

Panel B. I'd like to call up New York State Office for the Aging, Acting Director Greg Olsen; and the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, Reverend Viviana DeCohen is the commissioner.

Please come on up.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And if people need to grab the leaving commissioners, please take your conversations out in the hall so that we are not interfering with the next panel.

(Pause; off the record.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Commissioners, thank you. Welcome.

Assembly first?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, the whole day. It's your day. Assembly, then Senate.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Let's talk about taxes. I'm loving this job.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Just kidding. To

the chair at home.

Assemblymember Jones. We're going to lead off with you, sir -- in a second. Sorry, we were going to questions. I apologize.

Commissioner, you're up first.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, let's do the testifiers first.

Ten minutes each, please.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: We can go. We can go right to questions if you want.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: No, no, I want you to go first.

Thank you, Commissioner. Go ahead.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: You got it. How you guys doing today?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: All right.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: It's great to be here, Chairperson Krueger, Chair Hevesi, of course Chairs Kim and Cleare, a pleasure knowing and working with you guys. I got to shout out to Assemblyman Jones and I thought Senator May was here, the previous chair, and really all the distinguished members of the

Legislature. Always happy to be here to testify.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Move the mic closer.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, it's never a problem I've usually had, but I appreciate that.

My name is Greg Olsen. I'm the director of the New York State Office for Aging. Honored to testify, as always, on Governor Hochul's Executive Budget that seeks to make New York more affordable, more livable, and a safer New York, while opening doors to the communities and people who have historically been blocked from equal chances at success.

The proposed Executive Budget includes many proposals that support older adults and their families across agencies, even amid efforts to close a $4 billion budget gap through responsible steps that safeguard opportunities and supports for millions of New Yorkers and their families.

I am pleased to testify on the

provisions of Governor Hochul's proposed budget that directly affect the New York State Office for Aging, along with additional budget proposals that will positively impact older New Yorkers and their families and move towards a broader goal of creating a more affordable and livable New York.

The Governor's State of the State message and subsequent Executive Budget proposal builds upon accomplishments passed in last year's budget and sets New York on a path for a better future regardless of age.

Utilizing the state's 2019-2024 Prevention Agenda 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 our policies fulfill New York's pledge as the first age-friendly state in the nation.

We are further strengthening and coordinating this vital work through the

Governor's priority of developing a State Master Plan for 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 through which we can all grow up and grow old successfully.

In 2018, as you know, New York became the first "age-friendly" state in the nation, receiving that designation from AARP and the World Health Organization. New York was first because we ranked high at the time in the eight domains of "age-friendly," and because of our plan to move forward in a comprehensive way to systematically build age-friendly and smart-growth principles into how government operates and functions.

Through much-needed investments, the Governor's FY '25 Executive Budget expands and strengthens that foundation with initiatives that will help individuals access needed services and lead healthy lives by:

Increasing funding for vital services such as the CSE, Community Services for the

Elderly program, elder abuse and nutrition funding;

Continuing the funding for the Master Plan for Aging;

Continuing the $23 million in historic investments for older New Yorkers across the state for those who are awaiting services, bringing that amount of investment up to $122 million since 2018;

Continuing the $2.9 million to expand efforts to combat isolation, bridge the digital divide, improve overall health and wellness, reducing depression, addressing elder abuse, and strengthening NYSOFA's stipend program for volunteer recruitment and retention.

You guys have always had my testimony in the past; it's usually a few pages. This one is a lot thicker because all of these innovations we have been testing, and I put a sample of them in there so you can see the incredible return on investment for either things we are already fully subsidizing that doesn't cost an older adult anything, or

things that we're piloting in terms of reducing loneliness, isolation, and improving overall health and wellness. So I encourage you to check those out. It's really exciting.

We're continuing our bill-payer program with Ann Marie Cook and Lifespan -- who will be testifying after us -- in 10 counties to prevent and mitigate financial exploitation of older adults;

Providing an additional $1 million for our state's E-MDT, an Enhanced Multidisciplinary Team approach to combating elder abuse in all its forms;

Maintaining funding for the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, which serves as an advocate, as you know, for residents and their families in nursing homes and other facilities;

Investing an additional $3.4 million in cost-of-living adjustment funds for providers;

And for the first time establishing an interagency Elder Justice Coordinating

Council to better plan for and connect the various agencies and systems that prevent and address elder abuse.

The Governor's budget provides the support necessary to continue our trailblazing initiatives. Again, I referenced those a second ago. Examples include:

Our award-winning animatronic pet project, which to date has provided more than 27,000 pets to older New Yorkers. This model is now being replicated in 35 states across the country;

Our partnership with GetSetUp, which helps provide 4,500 lifelong learning, health and wellness classes to individuals over the age of 50 that is completely free for anybody over 50;

Bringing the Virtual Senior Center, a "self-help in the city" model to 19 counties in upstate New York;

Being the first in the nation to actually use AI positively through the use of ElliQ. We have over 900 units out throughout

New York State. That's also being replicated across the country;

Our partnership with GoGoGrandparent, which is a specialized ride share project to increase additional transportation options statewide;

And then many, many caregiver initiatives to support caregivers and individuals themselves through Trualta, Arch Angels, Memory Lane TV, Relish-Life, and I could go on.

We've implemented more than 20 public and private partnerships to combat isolation and loneliness, improve overall health and wellness, increase physical activity, support informal caregivers and care receivers, promote technology, promote the development of new relationships and friendships with others. We have measured for efficacy all of these -- and again, I encourage you at another time to reference what I've provided. That's just a sample.

I'm proud to say that NYSOFA is a national leader in the implementation of AI

and other technology in serving older adults and their families. NYSOFA is also the nation's first state in the country to partner with the National Association of Home Builders to make Certified Aging in Place Specialist certifications available to our case managers. We're also the only state in the country that mandates certification of our case managers and our health insurance counseling and assistance programs.

The budget, though, is about more than just NYSOFA. As you know, in all of our daily lives we don't just touch one system, and older adults do not just touch the State Office for Aging.

One of the great commissioners is the one sitting next to me, and we work so closely together because we have 440,000 veterans who are over the age of 60.

And so those are just some of the partnerships that we have to have and maintain in order to leverage the skill that other agencies have so that we can serve people holistically.

The following other key investments in this budget I'd like to just mention: obviously, increasing affordable housing stock; eliminating the copayment for Insulin; investments in clean water and a greener economy; energy affordability; strengthening medical leave for those with disabilities and health needs; expanding access to oral health and dental care; strengthening anti-discrimination laws for Section 8 voucher recipients; strengthening storm resiliency and emergency response; investments in victim assistance; investments to make New York a leader in AI; and reinvigorating the Most Integrated Setting Coordinating Council, which is really charged since 2005 with developing and implementing the state's Olmstead Plan -- and pleased to see that.

All of those things are important to individuals over 60 and their families. We will continue to engage anyone, anywhere, anyhow who can help us improve the lives of older adults and their families.

I'm especially proud of our work to significantly increase access for our hard-to-serve individuals and communities. NYSOFA has worked tirelessly with our county partners to reach diverse communities, and these data efforts are paying off. I want to have a special shout out to Colleen Scott, on my staff, who works every single day internally and externally to increase our ability to serve hard-to-serve communities, as well as my staff for many of the accomplishments that we have.

According to our assessment data, all of our core services saw an increase in serving minority older adults, and I'm really proud of that. We will continue to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion and work with experts to provide training on cultural competence, trauma-informed training, support for the unique needs of the LGBTQ+ older adults, and more.

As you guys know, I always appreciate coming to talk to you about the great work that we do. And as always, I'm happy to

answer any questions after Commissioner DeCohen.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. Commissioner, please.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairs Krueger and Hevesi and esteemed members of the Senate and Assembly. I'm Viviana DeCohen, commissioner of the New York State Department of Veterans' Services and proud veteran of the United States Marine Corps. And I'm honored to provide testimony on Governor Hochul's 2024-2025 Executive Budget.

Under Governor Hochul's leadership, and with the support of the Assembly and the Senate, DVS has continued to deliver on behalf of New York's veterans and their families. Throughout Governor Hochul's administration, DVS has made it a priority to expand our agency's reach and visibility within the community, and to bring more veterans into contact with the state and federal benefits that they have earned through their military service.

This has included significant success improving our connections with veterans as they complete their term of service and transition back to civilian life. It has also included the establishment of a network of digital kiosks around the state to provide veterans with information about important services available to them through DVS. We are also continuing to work toward launching a network of Mobile Veterans Centers, which will boost these efforts even more.

In addition to all this, DVS has cultivated relationships with public and private partners at every level, giving rise to successful initiatives to connect veterans and their families with everything from essential needs to events and opportunities for community members to show their appreciation to our veterans.

This record of progress continued in 2023, and our accomplishments over the past year are a testament to our commitment to holistic care for the empowerment of New York's veterans and their families.

Over the past year, DVS began operating New York's first State Veterans Cemetery, launched a new Veterans Memorial Registry website, awarded millions of dollars in capital grants to nonprofit veterans organizations around the state, and established and built on partnerships with nongovernmental partners like the Bombas sock company and Carnegie Hall.

In 2023, DVS also continued to provide nourishing meals to veterans and servicemembers facing food insecurity, in collaboration with Hello Fresh and community-based partners. We have now helped deliver nearly 1.5 million fresh meals since the program began. Over the past year our veterans benefits advisors also helped distribute $200,000 in FreshConnect Checks around New York State, helping put more fresh food on the table in veteran households.

On top of all this, our Veterans Benefits Advising Program secured a remarkable $68.47 million in monthly -- that's over $800 million -- recurring VA

benefits payments through 35,000 filed claims in 2023. This substantial tax-free federal financial support directly impacts and improves the lives of veterans and military families, ensuring they receive the benefits they rightfully deserve for their military service.

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget proposal includes $1.25 million in appropriations that will help DVS hire even more veterans service benefits advisors, allowing us to assist more veterans with more claims and ultimately put even more tax-free dollars, federal dollars, in the pockets of New York's veterans and their families.

DVS remains steadfast in developing responsive strategies amid changing demographics and societal shifts. We are delivering on our mission to "find and serve" veterans where they work and live, as demonstrated by the more than 500 outreach events in which DVS staff participated across New York State in 2023.

DVS, in collaboration with the

New York State Office of Mental Health -- OMH -- the State University of New York -- SUNY -- and the New York State Dwyer Coalition, has also continued its efforts with a working group dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of the Joseph P. Dwyer Program. This collaborative effort has resulted in the development and release of a comprehensive set of tools to support both new and existing Dwyer Program chapters in fulfilling their mission.

Over the past year, we also provided training and accreditation to veterans service officers in every county of New York State and hosted the largest National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, known as NASDVA, conference in recent history, with over 48 states and three territories in attendance. This underscores our commitment not only across the state, but also across our nation, to ensure the highest-quality services for those we serve.

Our collaborations with external partners have also furthered our commitment

to addressing fundamental needs. For example, through a collaborative effort with Bombas, we distributed 15,000 pairs of socks -- we call it Sock It To Me -- across the state to our veterans facing housing insecurity. Bombas has already pledged another 5,000 pairs of socks, allowing us to reinforce our dedication to ongoing support while emphasizing the importance of holistic care for our New York veterans.

In response to the unique challenges faced by veterans, we also continued our work with vital mental health resources such as "Worried About a Veteran," a first-in-the-nation program aimed at preventing suicide amongst our servicemembers and veterans by empowering family members with tools and resources to intervene early. This initiative reflects our commitment to addressing mental health as a critical component of overall well-being.

Governor Hochul's 2024 State of the State initiatives and fiscal year 2024-2025 Executive Budget actions reinforce her

administration's dedication to advancing veterans' well-being. One proposal involves collaboration with various partners on the development of a comprehensive medical "pocket card" for healthcare providers. This is crucial, given findings from the New York Health Foundation revealing that fewer than 3 percent of New York's medical providers had adequate veteran or military cultural competency. The card aims to equip them, our medical professionals, with essential information, enriching the quality of care for our New York veterans.

Additionally, we acknowledge the importance of representing the vast diversity of those who serve. This impetus behind the Governor's initiative to establish New York’s Women's Veterans History Trail, spearheaded by DVS, honors the exceptional legacy of over 62,000 women veterans in the state, aiming to document and celebrate their extraordinary contributions to military service throughout New York's rich history, and ensuring that their barrier-shattering service continues to

inspire future generations of New Yorkers.

Lastly, we remain committed to ensuring that the unique needs of the veterans we serve are met. To this end, under the Governor's initiative, DVS is collaborating with partner agencies and organizations to develop specialized mental health support tailored explicitly for women veterans, focusing on combating alarming suicide rates. This pioneering toolkit and training program represent a crucial lifeline for women veterans across New York, highlighting our commitment to their mental health and overall welfare.

As commissioner of the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, I am proud to share the transformative journey we have undertaken under Governor Hochul's leadership. The actions taken by the Governor and DVS -- and all of you -- signify a resolute commitment to prioritizing veterans' needs, and our 2023 accomplishments highlight the tangible impacts of this dedication. With nourishing meals, benefits

advising, mental health resources, strategic partnerships and more, we have truly laid a foundation of comprehensive care across the entire state.

Governor Hochul's 2024 State of the State and Executive Budget proposals will allow us to continue our important mission. As we navigate challenges and pursue innovation, we remain dedicated to "finding and serving" veterans wherever they are, ensuring that New York's veterans and their families receive the highest-quality benefits, programs, services, and resources.

Your continued support is invaluable, ineffable. Together we will continue to champion the well-being of our esteemed veteran community.

I look forward to answering any questions that you may have. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thank you, Commissioners. We very much appreciate it.

We're going to go to Chair Kim for his questions first.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you, Chairman.

Thank you both for your testimonies today.

Director Olsen, I have four rapid questions, quick answers, followed by some deep-dive questions.

Does the New York State Office for Aging manage or oversee Medicaid-related payments or reimbursements?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: No.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Is it accurate to say that investing in the State Office for Aging helps save the state billions in Medicaid costs in the next five years?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I don't know about billions, but certainly saving because the clients who are Medicaid-eligible we're able to keep them off of Medicaid.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Okay. Well, our calculation sees that we can save up to billions of dollars in the next five years if we invest in NYSOFA.

Does NYSOFA reimburse MLTCs or utilize managed-care organizations for payment to

providers?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: No.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: So to summarize, NYSOFA pays directly to providers, counties, municipalities, for non-Medicaid-related services for older adults who, if you don't serve, will try to spend down or impoverish themselves to qualify for Medicaid services managed by MLTCs or managed-care organizations. Correct?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: If we can't provide the service and that's the only option, then that's something we assist with, yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: So changing subjects, unfortunately, you know, our long-term care and end-of-life care has become a system, in my opinion, of extracting maximum money from our state rather than providing patient- and worker-driven solutions by investing in the right places. I had hoped by now the New York State Master Plan on Aging could have started these honest and bold conversations so we can

finally start building solutions.

Do you feel optimistic that the Master Plan on Aging would accurately address the lack of investment and funding for aging services?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I do, Assemblyman. And I know that there has been, you know, within the 400 meetings and several dozen town halls, the investments in terms of the front-end prevention not only in NYSOFA but other areas, is at the forefront. Which is why we're talking about social determinants of health and value-based payments to actually pay for the things that are valuable.

So yeah, I believe that the Governor wants to create a mechanism to look at not siloed approaches but a whole-systems approach.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: The Executive Budget, Greg, proposes Article VII legislation that would establish an Elder Justice Coordinating Council with SOFA to protect older adults from abuse and

mistreatment, in enhanced collaboration between the state agencies involved in elder justice.

What are the Governor's elder justice priorities, and why is this council needed?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, this council, Assemblyman, is huge. So you know we are the only state in the country to have an E-MDT. Certainly Ann Marie can speak to that if you have a round of questions next time.

But what this will do is really help us create at the state level a similar structure at the local level. There are a lot of different state agencies and partners of theirs that are also dealing with elder abuse, financial exploitation, et cetera. So that's OCFS, DFS, Victim Services, State Police, et cetera. So it will allow us to come together to set those priorities and then develop a standardized response leveraging the assets of each system so that we're looking at people holistically and helping to meet their needs.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: You know, you brought up the Long Term Care Ombudsman program, and we've been focused on this, my colleagues and I, for the last several years, and I'm sure many will follow-up on that topic as well.

We had a slight increase last year in our budget, and with that increase we saw a slight improvement in performance of weekly visits. I think we went from like 9 percent to 12 percent, which still isn't great, but it's a step in the right direction. But why is the Executive cutting the program instead of going to invest more, since you are actually performing and going in the right direction?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, and I think the agreement that you guys had with the Governor last year to add that 2.5 was huge, because as you know, as the number of volunteers goes down, it's really something where you need FTEs. And that's what the money went to.

You know, I think others have

testified to this. It doesn't -- not having legislative adds picked up doesn't mean that there's less or no value in those services. That's just kind of the way that this process runs, as you know. And I'm really hopeful because we've only now been a couple of weeks since the budget's come out, and the State of the State, that we have now until, you know, April 1st to have the dialogue about what the priorities are statewide. And I'm hopeful that this as well as EISEP will be part of that mix.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Yeah, I mean it's one of the -- I think it's one of the successful stories of us not getting everything that we wanted because we've had, I think, capacity issues to scale this program. But we've done it; we were scaling incrementally, and we're committed to working with the Executive in investing in the right amount so we can build that capacity and build the public side to oversee the nursing home and long-term-care facilities.

So I hope we can find the solution

here to continue to build --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, thank you for your support.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Social adult daycares, it's been something that our committee has been focused on for the last one year. There's been rampant unchecked growth of these adult daycares. They're popping up everywhere down in New York City, unlicensed sometimes -- most of the time. And they are -- some of them are just ghost centers. They are liquidating benefits and giving kickback money for older adults without providing any breakfasts, lunches or any services.

And I'm hoping this year we can figure out a solution how to streamline the certification and oversight process and NYSOFA can play an active role in rooting out the bad operators. Because in the midst of all that, my constituents and our constituents desperately need places where they can tackle their social loneliness and isolation. And the successful ones provide

invaluable service where people are constantly socializing and feeling better about their mental health.

But it only takes one bad apple, and we have a lot of bad apples that's dragging down this market. So I'm hoping we can do something together to fix this.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I mean we're always interested in that. And Assemblyman, you know, there's two models for social adult day: There's a medical model under MLTC. That's really what you're referring to, and that's a Health Department, Office of Medicaid Inspector General. And then there's our social adult day programs which, again, we do monitor and oversight as well.

But all of the SADs programs are required to use our standards at NYSOFA as a minimum base. So I think that there's a collectively larger issue with SADs, but I think what you're referring to in terms of the city is the reason we created this process at the state, because of those

problems that you identified.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: I'd like to close by focusing on something that you and I both enjoy talking about and tackling, which is social loneliness and isolation. I understand the administration launched something that we talked about for a while, creating an Ambassador to Loneliness in Dr. Ruth. There was major news around this last year.

What specific actions is Dr. Ruth, Ambassador for Loneliness, taking right now to help New Yorkers cope with loneliness?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, first you have to thank Senator Krueger, who is really the brains behind that. And appreciate all your support, Senator.

Look, you and I have talked a lot about this, and the same with Senator Cleare and others. Loneliness and isolation is not just a huge public health problem for older adults. It certainly is for kids as well. So, you know, there are two other countries, Japan and the UK, that have identified an

Ambassador to Loneliness because it is a public health epidemic.

Having the ability to have somebody like a Dr. Ruth in New York State who can work with the Governor and can work with our agency, Office of Mental Health, and others to really raise awareness on what the problem is and that there actually are solutions that communities can engage in that are either no-cost or low-cost.

But if we don't have this out in the forefront all the time, we get bombarded by other things. So having a spokesperson that can really talk about this issue is what the whole goal was. So we collectively worked up a plan that we are -- you know, have just finalized to kind of work with Dr. Ruth over the next year to be able to highlight some of these things and put something -- you know, put a process in place that makes sense.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: So I only hope that we can recruit more ambassadors and create a robust program around the state, and hope that they can also play some sort of liaison

role between all the agencies in terms of the services available to older adults. That's something that I think is critically needed, because almost every agency touches the older population, and having an active ambassador-like program to let our constituents -- especially down in New York City, who may not actually know many of the SOFA-related services -- be aware, that would be great.

Thank you for your time today.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you, Assemblyman. Thanks for your partnership and support.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Cleare, chair of the Aging Committee.

SENATOR CLEARE: Hi, good afternoon. Thank you. Thank you for your testimony and thank you for coming here today and all the work that you are doing around social isolation -- I know we had some great programs in my district -- and older New Yorkers really appreciate it. But social

isolation is a big problem.

I want to talk a little bit about the budget that we have $44 million -- 44 million more dollars than last year. And I just wondered how come we're not using this money to increase LTCOP. Is this -- is the $44 million figure attributable to federal funds? Or how does NYSOFA plan on investing that money?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, there's not an increase of 44 million in our budget.

SENATOR CLEARE: It looks like it.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: So we got a -- you know, we're around 178 million in state, which is a little bit more than where we were last year. We got an additional 7.3 million from the federal government this year. And the counties still have almost $50 million of unobligated ARPA funds that are available to them through September 31 {sic} of 2024.

SENATOR CLEARE: The only mention we have of the Master Plan on Aging in the Governor's proposed budget is that you need another million dollars to continue to fund

it. But can we expect the proposals under discussion to emerge in time for policy and fiscal consideration?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: So, you know, we had -- a first interim report came out. We're expecting the second report to come out fairly soon.

I can tell you, Senator, just by some of the people who are behind me or may not be here today, they're on many, many, many of the subcommittees. And I'm sure that, you know, between now and the end of the budget cycle or the end of session, they'll be communicating with you about what's been discussed and what some of the recommendations are.

But in terms of the formal report, that should be out -- you know, it's forthcoming fairly soon.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. HMH Part F makes changes to the Special Needs Assisted Living voucher programs. So why are those changes needed? I think you have to be -- in order to be eligible you have to be a

resident. And would this make it harder for people to qualify for the program? And are we excluding people by making that change?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I'm not familiar with that change, so if it's the ALP program, Assisted Living Program under the Health Department, that would be the Health Department.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay, I'll get back to you with that one.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Sorry about that.

SENATOR CLEARE: I'm going to go to New York City for a minute. Currently New York City's budget from NYSOFA for older adult services is 35 percent of the state's allocation, when roughly 40 percent of all New York State's older adults live in the city. Why the 5 percent gap, and what can we do to close it?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I'm not sure where that figure came from. My figure's about 43 to 44 percent of our funding goes to New York City, because our

funding is formula-based, meaning it's a percentage of the 60-plus population in New York, which we have 4.84 million people.

So the city has almost 2 million people, so they're in or around 43, 44 percent, not 35.

SENATOR CLEARE: So you're saying it's the math. I'll compare math with you.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I would love to. If I'm wrong on that, I'll be the first one to admit it. But that's been traditional.

Again, it's -- it's not something that we control. We have an interstate funding formula that has to be approved by the federal government, and that's how our federal and state money gets distributed across the state, is by the proportion of a county's 60-plus population as compared to the whole.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. This next question is about home care and the recent 55-cent-an-hour increase, which -- well, it effectively disregards the wage disparity

for -- within the sector, excluding home care workers funded through EISEP.

Are we going to -- and this happened before, I know, and the state made up for it. But we just want to know are we going to do that again to make sure that everybody is getting parity across the board.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes, that's a great question. I'm glad that you asked.

So EISEP is just one funding stream for our home care program. It's significant, but it's 48 percent. So we use a variety of funding streams to provide personal care Level 1 and 2.

We have covered the rate increase for the counties, or at least directed them that they could use the COLA dollars to make up that gap, because the MLTCs received the rate increase, our network did not, and we used those COLA dollars to do that.

Many of our counties are providing, and they're able to negotiate their own rates. We don't dictate that. So in some parts of the state you're going to have a lot

higher rates in order to secure an aide to keep somebody at home and stay off of Medicaid.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Currently there's 16,000 individuals and their families waiting for non-Medicaid home and community-based care, but the Governor's proposed budget cuts the $9.3 million legislative add from the program that delivers those services.

We need an additional investment of $51 million to address the waiting lists. Do you see us restoring that money in any way to help?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, as I mentioned before, legislative adds are traditionally not added. I hope that you all see the value of those types of programs and services and that, you know, between now and the end we will have a dialogue. And if those are priorities, you know, for you guys as well as they are for us, those types of things will be restored.

There are long-term services that get

really difficult to turn on when dollars go away, like the stimulus funding. But there's many things on a waitlist, like a home modification or transportation, that counties could absolutely be tapping that $50 million that they have until the end of September.

But I think that's -- to your question, that's going to be a dialogue over the next couple of months.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Of all the adult care facilities, a whopping 88 percent do not get a weekly visit, which is the state goal of the LTCOP. Yet the Governor's proposed budget cuts the $2.5 million from LTCOP, so we need an additional $15 million to reach the LTCOP goal of one visit -- just to get one visit once a week.

What are the plans for us to do that? We can't cut the two and a half; we actually need much more than that.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yup, so the two and a half that you all agreed to two years ago was baseline, and we are really thankful for that. This two and a half that

was a legislative add last year, as you know, was not covered.

I think that the Governor, from what she has said and what she has done since she took office on how important getting to the bottom of quality-of-care issues in nursing homes, has made that a priority. So again, I think between now and the end of the budget, folks like yourselves and others that recognize the value of the LTCOP program, the reduction in the volunteers and the need for FTEs, this will be a part of -- part of the budget negotiations.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. And -- thank you for that.

We have an unfunded aging service mandate that has left area agencies on aging with a $10 million deficit, curtailing their ability to provide service and keep up with demand. An additional $10 million is needed to cover the deficit. We can talk about it.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Senator, what's the unfunded mandate?

SENATOR CLEARE: Well, this is part of

the visits. So we have to make sure that we get the money to the agencies. Yeah, I think that's a part of the last thing that we talked about, the LTCOP program.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Okay.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay? And the State Office for the Aging for the last five years has been required to submit an annual report. We haven't gotten the annual report -- I'm going to shorten this question --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Our general --

SENATOR CLEARE: -- to the State Legislature on how funds appropriated to address the waiting lists have been spent.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, that -- we do -- we've published that report already, and I'm drafting the next one. So I'll make sure that you get that. That went -- that was public last year.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Okay. All right. So that's all those questions that I had. Thank you.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you, Senator. Appreciate you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Chair Jean-Pierre.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Good morning. There we go. Good morning. Thank you both for your testimony.

Commissioner Olsen, I would love to hear more about the Ambassador to Loneliness program, if you can share that with my office. And my office will reach out.

But most of my questions are going to be directed to Commissioner DeCohen.

Thank you for being here. We missed you at our hearing back in December. But I have a few questions.

The first one is the Executive Budget proposes 1.1 million in reappropriation, an additional 500,000 for emergency and temporary housing. Can you tell me if that 1.1 million has been spent? And if not, why not? And why the additional 500,000?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much for the question, Assemblymember and

Chair, and for all that you do.

We are actually still dotting the I's and crossing the T's for that $1.1 million, and we are going to be having the announcement in the coming weeks. We have to implement that program from scratch, as you know, and we wanted to ensure that once it is launched, that everything is going to be set for that.

I don't have to tell you the importance and the need of our veterans across this state for not only housing needs but housing emergencies that this can speak to. While we've been out there as well, you know, this goes a little bit beyond the housing. This goes also to those veterans who are housed who have disabilities and incur emergencies within their homes. Something like being without a washing machine is so vital and so crucial. Those who are behind in rental situations, those who are behind in mortgage situations.

So we're looking forward to announcing this rollout in the coming weeks.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: So how did we get to the additional 500,000?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: That I'm going to have to get back to you on, because we were not on that part, we were on the part with the $1.1 million grant for the housing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. So look forward to talking to you more about that.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: My next question is Section 4 of the Veterans Service Law requires that DVS prepare and submit a report on homeless veterans every three years. The report was due in June 2023. Do you know what the delay is?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yes. We had actually brought aboard a special engagement coordinator to be able to have boots on the ground to be able to get that data and those numbers. And because the person is still new, we're still new, onboarding, we're getting ready to have those numbers for you anytime now. I have to --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Do we know a date? Do we have a date?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: -- and have it pulled.

It should be within the next 30 to 60 days. It won't be long. Within that timeline.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. In 2022, the DVS annual report indicates that the Discharge Upgrade Advisory Board did not receive any applications. Does DVS have an estimate of how many veterans have less than honorable or bad paper discharges?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I do not have those numbers. Again, we will have to get back to you on that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. What resources does the department use currently to reach out to veterans who may be seeking a discharge upgrade, and are there plans to improve that outreach?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Currently we're still utilizing the restoration of honors. To date we have restored 50

restoration of honors and upgrades. Our "find and serve" method to where we are boots on the ground with our veterans benefits advisors -- you see our executive deputy commissioner and our general counsel, who are sitting next to me, our book bags and briefcases and pocketbooks have become our offices, because we are now interfacing with our veterans across the state.

Part of our "find and serve" has also been extended to our houses or worship for our faith-in-service, where we are finding those within the houses of worship. Interestingly enough, we're finding that a lot of our pastors and our bishops and rabbis are themselves people who served who were in need of upgrade discharges within their houses of worship, and for themselves. So this has also allowed us to extend our offerings of upgrades and the restoration of services.

And again, we're no longer putting the restoration of services in the mail. We are now parlaying, we're calling them over the

phone to let them know that they have been upgraded and to congratulate them. Or we are giving them in person. So glad to say that I've met with a good dozen or more of them in their homes to deliver the restoration of honors in person from New York City, Bronx, all the way to Buffalo.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay, awesome. Just for the sake of time, I'm just going to keep going. How many applications have been received for grants under the Veterans Nonprofit Capital Fund Program?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We're so glad to say that currently we've done the first round: 39 veteran organizations have received the grantee award to allow for a capital grant for improvements for their organization.

The second round is now in effect, and the deadline is going to April 19th. And so we're hoping that those that were not in the first round can get in the second round so that we can distribute that second part of the 2.6 million.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Sorry, just want to stop you. What outreach methods are you using in order to get it out for April 19th?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Good. Good. We've already utilized all of the social media platforms. We utilized our distribution list, and we've reached out to all of our county partners to get on their listserv as well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. And the kiosks. Can you quantify how many veterans actually have been served in -- under utilizing the kiosks.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Good. Good. We're still in the portion of gathering data because we have actually upgraded our kiosks to become digitalized. And so now we -- instead of nine kiosks we have now deployed 13 kiosks and counting. We have more money that has been allocated for additional kiosks, and we've had much more requests.

I have to tell you we're excited now

to have these not only roll out in places like here in the Concourse where they can now be utilized and digital by our state partners, but we're now getting requests and we're hopeful to now see them in places like the Jacob Javits Center in New York City, Grand Central Station, and some of the airports.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. And my last question is in your testimony you said that the "Veterans Benefits Advising Program secured a remarkable $68.47 million in monthly" -- and that is an almost 8,000 increase of claims reported from 2022.

How is DVS maintaining quality and responsive representation to fill these almost 8,000 more claims from last year?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Well, this is what we've done with boots on the ground. That "finding and serving" has been so instrumental, our Governor has given us an additional 1.25 million for additional veteran benefits advisors. I want you to know now that our veteran benefits advisors

are sitting with our veteran in a holistic approach, taking care of everything that they need within their claims and beyond, for their households.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. Well, that's all I had. Thank you so much.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

Next up is our chair for Veterans, Senator Scarcella-Spanton. Ten minutes.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you, Chair.

And thank you so much, Commissioner, for all the work you do and for your service.

One of the first things I wanted to ask about and bring to your attention is the Comptroller recently laid out a report of the personal income tax checkoff. There is close to three -- there's a little over $3.4 million of that money that has not been disbursed yet in the last six years. So it goes for veterans remembrance and cemetery

maintenance and operation, homeless veterans assistance, Veterans Home Assistance Fund, and military family relief.

Specifically for the cemetery maintenance, they actually saw the biggest increase of any tax checkoffs of over $950,000. And with interest, it has $1.5 million sitting waiting to be disbursed.

So my question would be, is why hasn't this money gotten out yet and what can we do to help you get it out the door to the groups who need it?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you for your question, Senator. Thank you for all the work that you do as well.

As you know, we recently took over the cemetery, and we're still in the writing phase and still dotting all the I's and crossing all the T's to ensure those things as well. Right now we wanted to ensure that it continued to run at the same high-quality level that it was serving, and to ensure that they have all the staffing and the needs to be able to maintain it at that high standard.

But these are things that we are working on diligently, and we're checking them off one by one.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Okay. And so what will the mechanism be for -- let's say for homeless veterans assistance? That has close to $1.4 million sitting waiting to be drawn down. Will you create something for organizations to request that funding? How will you get that funding out?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We can get back to you on that so that we can have a solid answer for you.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Okay, perfect.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: That brings me to my next question. We had -- the budget has 1.1 million for Homeless Veterans Housing Program. And this year we have -- the Governor's recommending 600,000 in funding for this program. Can you provide more of the details on this funding?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Again, we're going to be getting this out within the coming weeks. But just to let you know, again, it will be for our veterans who have emergency needs, those who may be behind in their rent, in their mortgage. We're even getting phone calls -- and again, we want to ensure that the needs of all our veterans are met. Things like emergency refrigeration and things of that nature that we're looking to put in there.

Again, just dotting the last I's and crossing the last T's. So when I say the coming weeks you're going to hear this announcement, the coming weeks you'll hear this announcement and all the criteria for our veterans to be able to utilize this.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Perfect. I think it will be a great addition if we're able to figure out in the next couple of weeks how to draw down those additional funds that have been sitting. I think that will go a really long way.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Absolutely.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: And do you know how many veterans received homes through the use of last year's funds and how many homes would be provided in this year's funds with that $600,000 allocation? Or is it not just for homes, it's for homeless veterans, so it's different serv -- it's like the refrigeration --

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: That's correct.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Okay. How many veterans does New York State Department of Veterans' Services serve annually? And essentially how many veterans reach out to the office monthly? Are you keeping track of that number?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: As you know, we serve over 688,000 veterans -- let me say this, because this is something that I want us to have a clear understanding of. When we say "veteran" -- and now that I am going across this entire state, that is not a good representation of those who have served.

And, you know, Senator Ashby, you

know, thank you for your service.

We are now utilizing the term on our flyers and advertisements and working with even our county veteran officers, who know all of the veterans within their town. Now, when we sit and we say for those who've served, and we're setting up a table, a totally different population is coming forth to say I served, I was in the Army for four years, but I was just a photographer, I did this or that. That number is not a good representation.

But because we are doing the "find and serve" and we are approaching this for those who have served, in the smallest of towns where they're saying there's maybe one or two women veterans, 50-plus came out in a small town.

So, you know, we say 688,000; we know that there's much, much more -- many more than we have served. Twenty-four percent being served in the national average, because 17 percent are for those with the disabilities.

What we're seeing now -- and again, we're not waiting for anyone to come inside the building. People may not know that you exist. We want them in front of us. The difference of having them in front of us -- and I can testify as a veteran who's done this and gone on a website to get a resource, I have my VA Health card. For years I did not know of any other resources. Now we have the testaments and the letters of people that are sitting in front of our veteran benefit advisors -- not in the office, but when we're at the supermarket, when we're in the laundromat, when we're now involved in the houses of worship and their health and wellness days, to be able to let them know to do a benefits check for those who served. The numbers have quadrupled.

And again, we are now bringing in over $800 million in the past year. That's data and that's a quantitative number that we can say doing the qualitative work, the phenomenological of allowing the veteran their voice to tell us what it is that they

need, and to meet those service needs. And this has been with your help as well in the past year that has made the difference.

To ask the veteran not just about their claim but everything that's going on in their life, in their home, has made the difference.

We just did a Fabulous Friday where we highlighted one of our veteran benefits advisors because the gentleman wrote a letter and said that if he did not sit with her and if she did not ask him about the ideation of suicide and do the Columbia protocol, then that would have been his last day. So he wrote a letter because she asked him those questions and traded off to our partners, and he was able to get the services that he's still here.

The other letters talk about going in to find one resource and leaving with five more.

And to let you know, our partners across the state, we no longer have to send them across the water or across the road to

get these resources. Now they can go home and furniture is being delivered. Baby items, through Operation Babies, is there. Diapers, the diaper program that we're getting ready to roll out. A baby crib. Book bags for their children. This has all been because of your assistance across the state, and we see the difference.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Yeah, and being mindful of time, I know -- thank you. I really appreciate the great work you guys are doing, and I think those mobile service vans have gone a long way.

How many mobile service vans were you able to obtain last year with the $300,000 allocation?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We're getting ready to roll out three. We actually put the bid through twice; we didn't get any takers. This time we put the bid through again and we were specific with letting them know the accessibility and the technological services that we want on them. We're looking forward to having them out. When they roll

out now, we can literally do the "Sock It to Me" across the state with the socks on there. Hopefully the diapers will be on there.

But also just to let you know, you know, VBA reps are there also. They can get the FreshConnect tickets and services for food. They can also be told about the legal services, free legal services through our partners like the New York State Bar association that's now helping our veterans with everything with -- from their life, from adoption, which we're helping a couple right now, to divorce, all the way down to wills.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: That's great.

You know, one of the things we've discussed in detail -- and again, I really thank you for your partnership. We always try to make sure we bounce ideas, and you've been fantastic with that. You know, I think it's really difficult for veterans returning home to figure out what services they are qualified for. What do you do to encourage veterans or those who served -- I will change

my language too -- to get enrolled with the VA or let them know what New York State offers?

And we've spoken about a lot of ideas, but would love to see that, being mindful of time.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yeah, thank you, Senator.

As you know, again, Executive Deputy Commissioner Joel Evans and myself have now signed I think 10,000-plus "welcome home" letters that have gone out. We've been able to do this with the Department of Defense and working now with so many of our military installations to be able to capture those folks when they're getting home. The difference is now it doesn't say call an 888 number. It now has the name of one of our veteran benefits advisors on there. They can now call Susie and Donna. And we're doing the handhold with them of all of their benefits.

Again, we're no longer just claims. We've expanded beyond that. We can get your

claims, do you have a family, does your spouse need employment. Everything from A to Z. And that's because of your help, so thank you so much.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you. Thank you, commissioner.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, Chair. Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Jones. This time I mean it.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Thank you. Don't start to clap yet.

Thank you for being here, Director Olsen.

Commissioner DeCohen, thank you for your service. I see we have a few of our local veterans up there. Thank you for your service as well. My questions -- and thank God for the Dwyer funding, getting that statewide was an initiative that many of us

here worked on a couple of years ago, and we have it.

My questions will probably be to Director Olsen, but I think they're very relevant with both of you here, since -- what is it -- over 440,000 of our over-60 are veterans.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Unbelievable. Many in my area as well.

So I have to drill down -- I'm going to ask you a couple of questions; I have to drill down on the budget. Okay, I see a little discrepancy, it must have been an oversight. I see we have less money in our Office for the Aging budget than we did last year. And I say that because I'm looking at EISEP. We'll drill down on that. I know the chair talked about it as well.

I see the 9.3 million add is gone. I see other funds down. We're talking about that non-Medicaid-eligible list. All right?

I hate to talk about return on investment when we're talking about our

veterans, our loved ones, our neighbors, our family members. But unfortunately this is one of the few areas we have to talk about in human services. We have to talk about return on investment when we're talking about our neighbors, our loved ones, our veterans. We have to talk about it because we're so severely underfunded every year.

Okay, let's talk about return on investment. Director Olsen, is directing money towards EISEP and other programs on this list a good investment? Do we get a good return on investment?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, I think we do get a good return on investment.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Does it save Medicaid dollars?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I believe it does, because the average person is an 83-year-old low-income female, lives alone, four to 10 chronic conditions, three ADL limitations, six IADL limitations. They're on our caseload between five and seven years, for under 10,000.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: When is New York State going to wake up and realize that this is a good ROI in actually servicing our loved ones, our veterans, our neighbors? When are we going to wake up? That's a rhetorical question, when are we going to wake up.

Second -- I only have 30 seconds left, time clock -- is the Master Plan on Aging released?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: There's a first interim report, there's a second report that's going to be coming out shortly, the final in '25.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: And is there any funding in the budget as it sits right now to implement anything in the Master Plan for Aging?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: The money in the budget for the Master Plan is to continue the process that will end at the end of '24.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Nothing to implement the plans.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Not at this point, because the recommendations are just

being put in.

ASSEMBLYMAN JONES: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Ranker Senator Ashby.

SENATOR ASHBY: Thank you, Chair.

Commissioner DeCohen, thank you for being here.

In 2022 the division was upgraded, elevated to a department. Right? And that gives a higher status -- you're a commissioner now, right -- and also allows for an increased budget, you would think, and access to federal funding. Have you seen an augmentation in your staff since then?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you for that question, Senator Ashby.

I don't have to tell you because you see what's happening out there. As a result of the Governor's 2022-2023, we know that just even our veterans service organizations had received 150 percent increase from the 10,000 to 25,000 --

SENATOR ASHBY: Commissioner DeCohen, have you seen an -- have you augmented your

staff?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yes. Thank you. The 1.25 million that the Governor has just given us to increase our veteran benefits advisors is allowing for an increase across the state to be able to do that.

But I don't have to tell you that we are standing on a beach with sand, and what we have done with this sand is not to ask for more sand. But what we've done, showing in the dollars that we brought in for the past year, of over $800 million, speaks for itself.

We've done together incredible work across this state with what the Governor has given us.

SENATOR ASHBY: Have you seen an increase in maybe federal partnership, being now a department that allows you to garner federal funding? What federal partnerships have you had?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Right. Well, I have to tell -- I have to tell you that now what we've done is we've been called

to Washington to be able to participate in things like the Women Veterans Center of Excellence and the meetings with the Honorable --

SENATOR ASHBY: Has any of this resulted in an increase in your budget as a department?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: This --

SENATOR ASHBY: Because what I'm looking at now is a $2.4 million cut. So you're a department now, you're a commissioner, and you're seeing a cut.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: No, what -- let me tell you what you don't see. What you don't see are the initiatives that we were already working on where we already had the money set aside in our budget. Things like the Women Veterans Trail that's coming on, the health pocket card that we have, the toolkit and all of the programs that we have for the suicide prevention. Those were already allocated in the budget with what we've had.

Listen, we have our veterans at the

table, and they are all being fed. And again, who dares to be on the beach and say we don't have enough sand? We have beach.

And again, the 1.25 million that's been given to us to add additional veterans benefits advisors, the partnerships that we now have -- because we are a department -- with our intrastate agencies, people like Greg Olsen that we're now having caregiver programs -- we have expanded tremendously. Our arms are stretched.

SENATOR ASHBY: Now that you're seeing a cut, $2.4 million cut, what programs do you anticipate cutting?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We have not seen -- see, it looks like a cut. Let me -- let me be clear --

SENATOR ASHBY: It does, because that's the arithmetic, that's the math. It's a cut.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: The math -- the math -- the math is equated to our work bringing in over $800 million in tax-free federal benefits back into the pockets of our

veterans and families. And that's what we want, increase for our veterans, and that's what we have. We have increased -- we have sand on the beach.

SENATOR ASHBY: Commissioner DeCohen, that's -- I mean, that's just not true. It's a cut. It's a $2.4 million cut. And in --

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Senator --

SENATOR ASHBY: In the last six years, we've neglected to disburse over $3 million to veterans nursing homes, to burial services.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Senator Ashby --

SENATOR ASHBY: This is a department now, right?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, Senator Ashby. It's a --

SENATOR ASHBY: This is a department. We're supposed to be getting new resources. What in your communications to the Governor or even the federal government has led to an augmentation of this department? Can you tell me?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Senator Ashby, as the boots on the ground going across this entire state, we are seeing all of the funds that this Governor and this administration again has given to our veterans service officers and our counties. We are going in, they have acquired, with the money given --

(Overtalk.)

SENATOR ASHBY: Commissioner DeCohen, I understand that. I've been to Niagara County and Nassau County as well on behalf of our veterans, advocating for the Dwyer Program, advocating in fact for your division to be elevated to a department. And what are we seeing as a result of that?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We are seeing an increase in services for our veterans across the state, the veterans, the very homes that I have been to and gone into, we have seen increase there, especially with our amazing veterans --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, Commissioner.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: -- service officers.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: We're going to cut off this line of questioning.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: But thank you. I think you were clear with your answers.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Next up is Senator May --

Oh, I'm sorry, Assemblymember. Assemblymember.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Outrageous.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Clark, please.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Excellent. Thank you. I am going to stick to Aging for now, so you are on the hot seat. Thank you, Director.

Quick questions, first on the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. Obviously we've

heard it. You know, we see what the Governor did on elder abuse; we understand that she kept the dollars in her budget proposal to continue the expansion of the work Lifespan is doing on elder abuse. You know, I think what our colleagues here are confused by is why she didn't do that on the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, understanding that we are trying to professionalize it.

Do we have a current understanding of where we are with FTEs, how many were hired last year? And do we sort of have the buy-in from the Office for the Aging that getting to the point where we have the needed dollars to make sure it was fully professionalized, to ensure we are getting the visits that we need into these facilities happen?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, thanks, Assemblywoman. We absolutely can provide that data for you. The number of FTEs we hired, the increase in those places visited. You don't have to question on whether we have buy-in in this program or not. I think that, you know, in prior administrations it hasn't

always risen to the top as the value that it is.

I think that this chamber and this Governor think differently, which is why we see the increases. And again, you know, not to mimic what everybody else has been saying, we do have a $4 billion deficit, tough choices need to be made, but this is the start of the process and I'm hopeful that we'll end -- you know, this will be discussed in the next couple of months.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Okay. And on the critical question, what is the budget number to remove everybody from waiting lists?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: It's not as easy to say. So if you had a workforce that was available, and includes PC aides or what have you, it would probably be between 40 and $50 million.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Okay. I mean, I just think these are -- as we see the population aging -- it's probably one of our most increasing; we've seen the reports that

it's also the most growing in poverty -- I just think putting a concerted effort to get people off waiting lists for literally basic needs is something we really need to think about.

My last thing -- and it's less of a question but more of a sort of plug to put in your mind as we look at the 1115 Medicaid waiver and understand the social determinants of health.

And understanding a program like Community Care Connections and what we've seen it do with Medicaid dollars to keep people out of our health systems and instead care for our aging New Yorkers, I just want to add -- or just throw it out there that I really think as we look at what to fund through social determinants of health, we really look at that program, we look at expanding it across the state and understanding its effectiveness to really help our older New Yorkers.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Could not agree with you more. The CCC program is one

of several initial BIP Innovation Grants that have shown a great ROI, and the 1115 waiver actually does have 1.75 million that we've worked with Ann Marie to expand.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

We'll try Senator May now.

SENATOR MAY: Thank you, Chair Krueger.

And hi, Director Olsen.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: How are you, Senator?

SENATOR MAY: I'm going to follow up on the Long Term Care Ombudsman question. And just what percentage of the visits are being made by volunteers right now, do you know?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Are you just looking for volunteers or are you looking for everybody?

SENATOR MAY: Well, we want to move away from the volunteers. That was part of the goal, was to professionalize it.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, so we can get a breakdown for you. I don't think

we want to move away from volunteers. I think what we want to do is have a robust FTE and volunteer, because we've lost 600 of them over the last decade.

SENATOR MAY: Okay. But you -- are you confident that we're moving in the right direction on this?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, I think the resources that, you know, the Governor and the Legislature provided us, you know, that's what that money goes to.

So, yeah, we can absolutely show you a pre and post, where we are because of those resources. And, you know, we're not all the way. We can always do better. But we have significant improvement, and I think that's exciting.

SENATOR MAY: Okay. And then we passed the Reimagining Long-Term Care Task Force bill a couple of years ago, and you're one of the statutory cochairs. Has -- have there been any meetings? Are there plannings for meetings? Do we need to do an extender for --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Not all the appointments have been made yet. So we are waiting for those appointments to be made. I believe they're on the Legislature's side. And then we are eager to get going with our partners at the Health Department.

SENATOR MAY: Okay. Thank you.

And then more of a comment, but Commissioner, I hope that you're aware of the program we have in Syracuse for the Tiny Home for Good, which is building tiny homes for homeless veterans. I would love it if you would come up and -- if you haven't seen that and seen what's happening there, it's a pretty exciting program too.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much. I would love to see it. I actually know the developer of that program prior to coming aboard.

SENATOR MAY: Oh, great. Well, we'll look forward to seeing you in Syracuse.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much. Thank you.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Do you mind if

I tag along on that one?

SENATOR MAY: Absolutely.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I'm a big fan of micro homes.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Manktelow.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone.

And Director Olsen, I heard you say earlier that -- your partnership with our veterans. And I know that as our veterans are getting older, we have our Vietnam veterans, we have our Korean War veterans, we have our -- we even have some World War II veterans. And I know Senator Ashby and myself, we have legislation to look at senior -- or veterans nursing homes across the board.

Is that something that your office could help us get across the finish line?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: You know, I'm not sure. I'd be happy to talk with you more about that.

We are identifying veterans in the community, and that's why we have such a great partnership, because we literally screen for veteran status so that we can make a soft referral to DVS and their partners to access the 105 federal, state and local benefits.

But I'd love to talk to you more about that.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: All right. You know, as we talked about the budget, I believe that $2.4 million cut, you know, that would go a long way towards nursing homes for our veterans long term. And I'd love to work with both of you on that, because I think it's a very important initiative.

And thank you for partnering with our commissioner, and I appreciate that.

Commissioner, good afternoon. Semper fi, my friend.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Good afternoon. Good afternoon. Semper fi.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you for your service.

Back to talking about the budget. I had spoken with some of our county veterans officers out in the counties, and we actually have one up here behind you. And one of their issues is with funding about getting vehicles to have vehicles that they can drive around within their county to help service the veterans at the same time as well.

Is that something your office could help push forward with the Governor's office as far as helping to create funding for them to have vehicles to accomplish that?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you for that question, first of all. And thank you for your work as well and your service.

That's a question that I would refer them to our county veterans officer in one of the counties, because he actually utilized that increase in budget to purchase a vehicle to -- for his county to be able to service their veterans better.

As you know, that amount had a 150 percent increase, went from the 10,000 to 25,000. And that was one of, again, our

county veteran service officer in Tioga County who was able to acquire and purchase a vehicle. In fact what he did with that amount of money just within his organization has been remarkable.

And so many -- let me just say that so many, all of our 60-plus counties have done remarkable this past year in serving our veterans. And because I'm there, I'm able to see it firsthand, those who are outdoors without services that now have a 100 percent claim, and their lives are better. And again, the many letters that we have, I wish we could bring the letters. And I wish we could bring those veterans themselves, who can attest to the great work that's being done throughout New York State.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: All right. I appreciate the answer. And thank you for that answer.

Another question. Years ago, back in I believe 2019 was the last year that the Boys State -- are you familiar with Boys State, put on through the Legion? That was

actually a line item in the budget. It was appropriated I believe at $150,000 back in 2019. I believe that hasn't happened since then.

And I was wondering what your comments are about getting that funding back, getting that funding back to the Boys State program. Do you have a comment on that?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Oh, that's something that we can definitely talk about.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Because I think it's a great program that brings a lot of young people forward, and I think we need to do that.

I've only got a little bit of time. Back to the Veterans Cemetery. It was great to see you out there last Memorial Day. It was good to see you there, New York State Veterans Cemetery out in West Sampson State Park back then.

I know that there's $4 million, 1 million for capital improvements and another 3 million for a maintenance facility. It's my understanding, speaking with the

director out there and the head of the grounds crew, that the equipment that's being used is actually leased through a private contractor. Do we foresee the state taking that over and providing that equipment for that cemetery?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Well, we were happy to actually keep the grounds -- the groundskeeper on contract because he was happy, he's been doing this for years. It was his desire to stay on. And so when he allowed us to know that he already has his own equipment, he's familiar with that equipment and the usage, we were happy to take him on as well as allow him to continue on with the use of that. Everything's been going well on that.

And should we ever have to, then we know that the money is there to do that.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Okay, thank you. So I just want to be sure that money is there, because that's not going to last forever.

And my time is up. Thank you both.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Rolison.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you, Chair.

For Director Olsen, I am interested in knowing a little bit more about the Elder Justice Coordinating Council, as a former police officer involved in cases involving elder abuse.

What is the time frame for that report? I just don't see it in my notes. Is there one?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I think that there is. I don't have that in front of me. I can get back to you.

But both -- there's a couple of existing committees at the state level that this is not going to eliminate. But we work extensively -- and again, Ann Marie's a great person to ask the same question to -- State Police, Sheriffs Association, DAs --

SENATOR ROLISON: Will they be, you know, brought into this --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: State Police

is actually named in that.

And there's a coordinating council -- and I always mess up the name, it's really long -- that I sit on with -- it's run by DCJS and the State Police. And so all of those, you know, folks that have already been meeting on things like this for years can help influence this new council by bringing in all the various players that deal with this issue, from law enforcement to service.

SENATOR ROLISON: Do you -- and again, because this part is new to you, do you see any short-term goals of this council that would be able to advise and give the Legislature, you know, guidance on potentially strengthening laws against elder abuse and holding people accountable for it in a different way than we are right now?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I think that will be part of, frankly, the deliberations.

I think the earliest short-term thing, frankly, Senator, is connecting the dots.

And what I mean by that is too often a lot of agencies don't work that closely together because they're -- you know, they're focused. And we work with everybody that's been named in there -- Office of Court Administration, et cetera.

So this will be a really good opportunity to understand what everybody does, what our assets are, what we need to do together. And I can't imagine things like that aren't going to come out of this, is what can we do better, what statutory changes may be needed, other types of enforcement actions.

SENATOR ROLISON: Good. And you had said, director, that you, you know, currently are sitting on some of these groups that are meeting --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes.

SENATOR ROLISON: And what -- just in my last 50 seconds, what do you see, as director of Office for the Aging, how that information from the professionals who are doing the work every single day will be able

to advise this interagency council to make concrete recommendations to the state, to the Governor, and to the Legislature? Do you see that happening?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I do.

I think we specifically have to reach out to existing coordinating councils and then we -- you know, out of our 62 counties, we currently have 60 with an E-MDT program, two more coming. And that is everybody at the community level, from a geriatric psychiatrist to a forensic accountant to a district attorney, law enforcement, et cetera.

You know, I've been doing this work a long time, and not at the macro level, at the micro level. If we are not getting the advice and guidance from people at the ground floor, then we're not doing our job. So I am fully in lock step with your questioning.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you for that.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Eachus.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Thank you.

Mr. Olsen, I love your exuberance when you show up here.

I'm going to make more statements than questions because there's so much and so little time.

Ombudsman program. I'd like to hear in the future about what you're doing to recruit volunteers and whether we still have that requirement where the volunteers can have no relatives in the actual facility that they're checking. You know, that's not helping you to get the volunteers in.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: We'll get that for you.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Yeah. And then the other thing that we discussed was the reporting of the ombudsman and how it kind of just is choppy and doesn't come back and all.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Okay.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: And then the final thing is the ElliQ AI companion

program. Nine hundred units are nothing. If they're being successful, you know, let us know what kind of money you need for the future to hopefully bring more of those on board.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I appreciate all those questions. We'll get the first two answers to you. I have folks here helping to take notes.

You see some of the outcomes data that we have for ElliQ. It's only 900, but we're the first state in the country, at least from a state agency perspective.

And then one final thing. I'm Greg. My dad's watching; he's Mr. Olsen.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: And I want to thank our chair, Mr. Kim, because I think he was the one that really kind of started with the ElliQ program and brought us aware of it and all, so --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah. And the Assemblyman has another project that we're working on with another tech, out of

South Korea. So we're excited about that.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Thank you.

Commissioner DeCohen, thank you for your service. And again, just some more statements, probably.

First of all, Boys State/Girls State. I am making requests for money from -- for those of 150,000 each. The last time we did the money for Girls State they turned it back. I don't know why.

The second thing is, you mentioned diapers and helping veterans. There is such a thing as a diaper bank. You might want to check into that and see if you can work together to do that.

The question I do have is the capital grants. You said the second round is April 19th, to apply for those capital grants?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: That's correct.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Where do they go to apply for them?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Everything

they can -- to get the information -- well, they can get the information on our website now, and that will direct them to go through the grants gateway.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Okay, thank you.

And then the digital kiosks, I know you mentioned those. I would hope that you take and -- you consider counties, various different counties, that have a large number of veterans in it and maybe a county center, you know, government centers and so on like that.

And then also once the mobile veterans centers come online, I hope you use us to maybe ask if we can bring those mobile centers into our districts. I know we would all love to share them, but we would love to have them there too.

So -- and then the final thing that I have is you mentioned about 10,000 welcome-home letters. I'm surprised you're able to get that information, because usually the Defense Department doesn't let that information out. And some of the county

departments would love, if possible, to have that information to make contact with those veterans.

Thank you.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, sir.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Next is Senator Weik.

SENATOR WEIK: Thank you.

Thank you, Commissioner, for your service to our country, and thank you for being here today and for your testimony.

I represent Nassau County and part of Suffolk County, home to the most veterans in all of New York State. So a kiosk in Suffolk County would be very welcome.

But we also represent so many veterans, and we're always looking for more. And it looks like we're getting significantly less. So when we look at the Dwyer Program, we've only got an increase of about a million, which really doesn't do much for the Dwyer Program.

We're also looking for more capital

improvement money. Because of COVID, so many of our American Legions and our VFWs were shut down. They were unable to raise funds to do things like repair their roof, update their bathrooms and so on. And that's really usually where the Dwyer programs take place. These centers are essential for our veterans.

And then of course the money that was collected from the income tax not being distributed and just sitting there, not available to our veterans, not being used for our veterans.

You seem to be okay with the status quo with the Governor cutting your budget. I'm just curious, are you planning on asking for more Dwyer money, and are you going to be asking for more money in the budget this year?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much for your question. And thank you, Senator, for your service as well.

Again, what's not seen is that the Governor has doubled her money to Dwyer. They'll be getting about $8 million in their

program. We've been happy to continue to work with Dwyer, which has been a magnificent program from the incep, working with them with, now, partners like OMH and SUNY, who have developed the toolkit and the question and answering.

Again, the 24 million and the cuts that everyone is talking about, those are legislative adds that are not expressed in the Executive Budget. That looks like a cut, but they will be put back in through your own negotiations for the final budget enactment.

SENATOR WEIK: So I appreciate your rose-colored glasses approach to this, but it's still a cut. And we still need more money. Our veterans have been neglected and underfunded for a very long time.

And I appreciate that you've formed relationships with our federal partners in order to bring in more of those federal dollars for our veterans. But we need you to be asking for an increase in Dwyer. And we need you to be asking for an increase to the budget this year. And we're not going to

accept no for an answer.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much for that.

And again, there has not been any cuts for our veterans. This Governor is very well aware of the dignity and what our veterans have earned and deserve. We have gotten that money for Dwyer. Dwyer has more money. Again, the 150 percent increase for our veteran service officers across the state; the testimonies and the changed lives of our veterans, whose homes I'm now going in from New York City, Bronx, to Buffalo, is a testament, as well as the money that we're bringing in, testament to what this Governor has done.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much, Commissioner.

Assemblymember Alvarez.

ASSEMBLYMAN ALVAREZ: Thank you all for your testimony today.

I'm honored to serve in the Assembly Committee on Aging. I have a couple of questions for each one of you. I'm going to

speak with the commissioner of Veterans' Services first.

What if any services are available for our veterans, our heroes, at the New York State Division of Veterans' Services office in the Bronx, which is located in my district at the VA Medical Center in the Bronx.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I'm sorry, could you repeat the question? I missed a portion of it.

ASSEMBLYMAN ALVAREZ: Yes. What if any services at the DVS offices in the Bronx -- in the Bronx, located in my district. What if any services are available in that division?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you for that question, Assemblymember Alvarez.

And again, thank you for your service.

We've been happy to say we have been working with the Bronx, the J.J. Peters and the Bronx, period. We have veterans benefits advisors that are on-site there. We are part of the food distribution program. We are a part of the Operation Baby, where baby

clothes are coming out of that office. We just did movies across the state, and the Bronx was one of those sites where we had the movies for our veterans for Veterans Month. The FreshConnect checks are being given out that our Governor increased from $20 to $50, and a host of other services.

ASSEMBLYMAN ALVAREZ: How the cuts that we are right now discussing on the Governor's budget is going to impact the VA office in the Bronx, if any?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I'm sorry, say it --

ASSEMBLYMAN ALVAREZ: So we're talking about the cuts, right, the Governor is proposing for the Aging Department {sic}. So the question is, what of those cuts is going to affect my veteran office in the Bronx?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, Assemblymember Alvarez.

Let me say again, just so that you know, there is no cut. What we're -- when we're saying cuts, people are referring to what's known as legislative adds that are not

in the Governor's Executive Budget. But those are the things that would be formulated that are being discussed now to be in the final -- final budget. They look like a cut to you; there are no cuts to our veterans. Their services, especially in the -- I'm a Bronx girl, the boogie-down Bronx -- to Buffalo is secure with all of the services being given to veterans.

We are working with folks like the diaper banks. Just to let you know, some of our diaper banks where we were volunteering are running out of diapers themselves, and this is why it's important that this clarion call be given now, because we have active-duty servicemembers who are coming to us requesting diapers because the diaper banks are running low.

ASSEMBLYMAN ALVAREZ: Thank you.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I think it's my turn. I think the first question will be for both

commissioners.

So yesterday we had the Workforce Hearing and we had the various state agencies, Civil Service and Labor and others, and quite a few unions all saying we desperately need people to apply for state jobs. And I must admit, I was thinking, well, are we reaching out to older New Yorkers and making sure they know that there are state jobs? Because I'm an older New Yorker, and I have a great job working for the state, just for the record, and I think there are a lot of older New Yorkers who would actually love the opportunity. I hear from them all the time. They were laid off in their fifties, they can't seem to get back into the labor market, they need to. They have great skills, great experience. And the same story for veterans, whether or not they are older veterans or younger veterans.

So what are both of your agencies doing to help support New Yorkers who happen to be veterans or older or both to know about

and be encouraged to apply for state jobs?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: You mind if I go first?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: No problem.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, thanks, Senator. I'm an older worker in a state job too.

Senator Cleare's going to be thrilled with your question and my answer. So Senator Cleare's had a bill two years in a row that has passed to create an older worker workforce development project. That bill is now being implemented administratively between -- in the Labor Department, which is the right place to do that, in consultation with us.

So we have met twice, we're developing our action plan. And I'll tell you the three general things and then a couple of other things, and I'll turn it over to the commissioner.

You know, with the one-stop shops we oversee the Title 5 program, the federal workforce program for 55-plus. There's

obviously a recognition that older adults, whether you're 50 or over, experience discrimination. So part of this office is going to address workforce discrimination. We have a lot of data on what the positives are for hiring an older worker. But we live in an ageist society, so we've got to deal with that.

It would be the ability to skill, re-skill or up-skill older workers. That absolutely can use technology. I know Beth is following me from AARP, and one of the things I love about them is their data. For the first time in history, a report just came out from them that older adults use technology at the same rate as everybody else. We shouldn't be surprised -- I see everybody here who's over 50 using technology just like I do, exactly. So we're excited about that.

One of our partnerships is with the GetSetUp, and they have a national partnership with Easter Seals, who is one of the national Title 5 providers. So what

they've been able to develop is 83 different --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: (Mic off; inaudible.)

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Sorry. Oh, I'm sorry. GetSetUp has a workforce training platform we want to expand. Sorry about that, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: (Inaudible.)

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, Senator Krueger.

We've been working also with our civil service to get the information out about our 55-c program. We actually just had a LinkedIn event for our 55 and over, Staying Alive and Rocking Your Profile, in which they were able to learn about the many jobs and opportunities and the testing requirements for that.

In that wise also, our veteran benefit advisors, because DOL has been such a wonderful partner in giving us the available list on an ongoing weekly basis of jobs that are provided, we're able to work with them.

Also going back into our houses of worship with our Faith in Service, where our older population is, this is the information that we've also been getting out to them that many of them were not aware about with this 55-c program. And they're now taking that opportunity, because one of our veterans who hadn't worked in 35 years is now employed.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Exactly. That's great. Thank you.

So back to you, Greg.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Sorry.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: That's okay.

So Assemblyman Hevesi brought this up before with social services. But with the previous Governor, I forget his name --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Me too.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: -- he didn't like the previous mayor, and so New York City kept getting cut. So I don't feel that way about the current Governor's attitude towards my home city.

But 40 percent of older New Yorkers live in New York City, but we're only getting

35 percent of SOFA funds in New York City. Is that like just an accident we haven't fixed yet?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Senator Cleare had raised that before, and that is not my understanding. And I've been around a long time. It's usually 43, 44 percent. I will verify that and get back to you both.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Will you, please? Okay, because that's -- I'm getting different messages even after Senator Cleare asked the question.

Do we know the numbers of people on county by county EISEP waitlists?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes, we do. But it's not EISEP. Again, we have an in-home program that EISEP is one funding stream. So the answer to that is yes.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. Can we get that, then, from you?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Sure.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And same question for case management services for older New Yorkers by county.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yup. Absolutely.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Do we also have a home meal waitlist?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: So I'd love all those waitlists.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: You got it.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Oh, my goodness, I finished my questions early. I should have let you go on about the --

(Laughter; overtalk.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: The Assembly will take my time. Thank you very much, both of you.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: You've known me; you know you had to cut me off.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes. No, thank you for your work.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Senator.

Assemblymember Buttenschon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Good

afternoon, Commissioner and Director.

Commissioner DeCohen, thank you for your service and to all the veterans here, and those listening today.

Commissioner, the demographics of my district in the Utica-Rome area have many veterans with children. So as you look at the housing initiatives, I wondered if children -- or families with children are considered within the rubric as you are looking at this money and its being allocated.

I also -- I'll put in all my questions because I think you're probably going to have to answer in writing, so thank you to both of you.

Regarding the capital funding program that was initiated last year, many of the nonprofits that I work with struggle because there's working boards and possible issues with some of the information that they've had through transfers of those working boards.

So how much money have you actually allocated out or secured to those different

individuals that have requested capital funding? And do you have staff directly working with these nonprofits to help support their efforts, as this is new territory for many of them.

And Director Olsen, regarding long-term care, is there a clear discrepancy across the State of New York in regards to the reimbursement rates, or is that a standard rate across the state?

And finally, as you look at the budget that has been presented to both of you, can you identify what's missing and what you think is needed to ensure that you can provide for those that you serve?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you for those very thought-provoking questions.

First of all, family members of our veterans have always been a part. That's why it's always been veterans and their families. And again, because we have expanded into a department, when our veteran is sitting in front of us, our veteran and their families are sitting in front of us.

And so we've been able to extend the questions as far as the needs of the family members: Do you have school-age children? Do they need book bags? Could they utilize clothing?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: I'm sorry, I just want -- I'm referring to housing with our homeless veterans. That in my community, they're coming to us with concerns that the housing is needed not only for them but their children.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Oh. Yes. Yes. In fact we've been supporting those supportive housings that have already been going up for our veterans and their families. This includes our veterans who are dads with children as well.

And then working to your other question, 39 veteran organizations have been awarded. The 2.6 million -- we have the other 2.6 million to be given out. And this will be in increments from 25,000 to 75,000. And they're able to utilize the grants gateway that has a revolving video on there

with step-by-step questions to them.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Commissioner. I appreciate it.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Can I just let the Assemblywoman know I'll follow up in writing on her question to me?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Thank you very much.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: You're welcome.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And all questions in follow-up should come to Ways and Means and Finance for distribution to everyone. Because even if we didn't individually ask, we all want to know.

Okay, Senator Stec.

SENATOR STEC: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon.

A question for Commissioner DeCohen.

There's about 700,000 veterans living in New York State, and your budget is looking at a $2.4 million reduction at the same time we're -- the same budget proposes sending $2.4 billion to New York City for illegal

immigrants.

How does that jibe for the veterans, the 700,000 veterans? What kind of message do you think that sends to our veterans?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Once again, you know -- please forgive me, but again, the 2.4 million is not a cut. We're responding and referring to legislative adds that again, once you come together and formulate, will be in the final -- the final budget.

SENATOR STEC: If I could talk about those legislative adds. So the spreadsheet that I have in front of me, I count 18 legislative adds that have been zeroed out, all over the state, some having to do with Helmets to Hardhats; one in particular relevant to my district, North Country Veterans Association; Vietnam Veterans of America; the Outdoor Rx Program; VFW. You know, these are all legislative adds that total $3.4 million.

Why were they all zeroed out?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Right. Those are the ones that are initially zeroed

out, again, because they don't go into the Executive Budget. But those are the ones that are always renegotiated -- I know you're going to do a great job in doing that, to bring them into the final budget.

SENATOR STEC: Why do we have to fight with the Executive to get this funding put back in? What game is this that we're playing?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: There's no fighting. And, you know, again, we know that once the final budget comes out, you're going to do a great job of, you know, getting those back in. As you always do.

SENATOR STEC: All right, so homeless veterans' housing. In the enacted 2024 budget there's $1.1 million for homeless veterans. Again, this is near and dear to my heart, because we're talking about $2.4 billion to New York City for illegal immigrants' housing. One-point-one million dollars in the enacted budget, and the Executive's proposed cutting that more than half, to 500 million {sic}. Did we solve

veterans' homelessness in New York State?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Again, that's -- that's not being cut. We're getting the --

SENATOR STEC: It's a cut. The 2024 enacted budget is 1.1 million, and the Governor's proposed 2025 budget is 500,000. How's that not a cut?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Again, these are -- again, these are the legislative adds that are usually -- usually cut out of there. The one -- the one --

SENATOR STEC: Who cut it? Did the Legislature cut that? This is the Governor's budget. This is your department's budget that a lot of us fought to create this department, and I think a lot of us are a little disappointed in what we're seeing from it.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: You should not be disappointed. You should be very elated with the work that's been done across this great state with what this Governor has given.

And again, when we're talking about qualitative, forget that. The quantitative numbers are proving themselves. What this Governor has given under this administration, you have not seen these numbers before.

SENATOR STEC: Thank you, Madam Chair.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We're on a beach with sand, and we don't dare say the beach doesn't have enough sand. We have enough sand.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: In case anybody's missed it, I believe you've answered that question four times now.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yes.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: So no more asks of that question. Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember González-Rojas, please.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you so much.

Thank you both for your service and for being here.

Director Olsen, I just want to share that I'm personally navigating a system which feels disconnected even as a member of the Legislature, to try to get home health service for my mother, whose cognitive function is rapidly declining, but she does want to stay in her home. So I really want to give a shout out to the wonderful folks at the Association on Aging in New York that have been a lifeline to help me navigate it. It is very difficult to understand the patchwork of support that exists.

Can you talk about -- I understand that older people make up and spend about $72 billion in this state, right, contribute to our economy. And I just think about the waiting lists and the challenges and the barriers that they often have to face in getting care.

I also understand that the Aging budget is less than 8/10ths of 1 percent of the entire New York State budget.

I just want to make sure that we're doing our job to advocate for our older New Yorkers. So can you talk about how -- what kind of clients are served by NYSOFA and what is the cost of that care versus Medicaid or nursing home placement? Because most people want to age at home.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, no question people want to age at home. And, you know, none of this is our fault, but we have to recognize we live in an ageist society. And we keep talking about "them" as they're not going to be us with 10 years, right?

So, you know, just getting that through my head, it's been difficult. We've been -- you know, some of the data you cited is data that we've aggregated to really make that case, that 75 percent of older adults consider themselves very healthy, they're active, engaged, volunteering, working.

It's that 25 percent. We don't really have a system. We have a crisis-driven -- you know, when somebody needs something, it's

usually in a crisis, because as families, you're talking about your mother, you know, you're going out of your way to do what you can do until you can't do it anymore. Right?

So, you know, the cost of our services are cheaper because we intervene earlier, and that's the key. So I think what we want to do, in addition to our private pay for individuals that can afford it, or people like me that can buy it on behalf of my parents -- which we're the only state in the country that has to implement that -- to develop a front-end system that focuses on prevention so that Medicaid, hospitalizations, rehab, nursing homes are the last resort. I think that's what we're trying to get at with the Master Plan as the mechanism to get there.

Growing older is not the problem. How we've organized our caring economy is the problem. And that's what needs to -- that's what we need to fix.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: And back to the Master Plan -- and my colleague

asked about dedicated funding for it, and you said it's about the implementation. At what point do we imagine that we're going to have to ensure allocation for not just the process but the implementation?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, so the funding now, our 2.5 million if that million goes through, and then the recommendations are going to come to everybody, and then there's decisions that are going to have to be made --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: -- above my pay grade.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senate Ranker Tom O'Mara.

SENATOR O'MARA: Good afternoon. Thank you for your time today and your testimony. I want to thank Commissioner DeCohen and Counselor Fishbein for coming to

New York State's first and only Veterans Cemetery, in Seneca County at Sampson, for the Wreaths Across America. It was a great event, and your recognition of that and being there was very important. So thank you for that.

And in regards to -- I wasn't going to have any asks for you, but since we've confirmed that there is no cut to the budget, we'll -- there is a need at the State Cemetery for grounds personnel and equipment. Currently right now I believe they're relying on a private contractor for burials, which should that not be available, then burials would have to stop.

So if you could look at that and prioritize there's some personnel and equipment there, now that we're proud --

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: It's already in the works.

SENATOR O'MARA: -- the proud owners of -- it's already what?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: It's already in the works, Senator.

SENATOR O'MARA: Excellent. Good to hear.

Next on PTS and treatment of PTS. I've been a champion for years of the Research and Recognition Project, which is a RTM protocol. It's accepted nationwide. The New York State and national American Legion is advocating for this. And the New York State Legion put up $100,000 to train I think 30 counselors for that. And they're dispersed around the state.

The Research and Recognition Project needs help with referrals, getting veterans to take that step to come into treatment. I know there's been efforts underway to get more funding for that.

But what can you do with the current programs you have going on -- you mentioned mobile services here -- to highlight that program and those options? Because that really is an effective treatment and puts PTS in remission for many, many veterans and other PTS sufferers.

So what do you have in the works to

help foster funneling veterans that need that to it?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you for that question, Senator O'Mara.

We've known Dr. Bourke now -- I think I've known him, oh, gosh, for 10-plus years, and his work is widely known.

Since we've become a department, you know, we've been working more heavily within our partners or with OMH and SAMHSA and we've had several virtual programs that we've had with our partners. We just recently had one for the PTS with one of our women veterans program organizations. It was a "lunch, learn and laugh" program where information was given with that.

And again, just working more closely with our state partners to ensure that those things are built in. That's part of what's on our form now when our veteran is sitting in front of us, to ascertain the need and to stem the tide of loneliness and things from PTS.

SENATOR O'MARA: You know, I've worked

with this for a long time. There's certainly a reluctance of many veterans to engage in the treatment, and I think it needs to be fostered a little more to encourage that, because we have trained these counselors around the state, and I believe they're in the major areas of like Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse -- 30 of them that have been trained, and they're providing services for PTS patients. Not so much veterans at this point, but other causes of PTS, and it's effective.

So please put that into your arsenal of referring people to these things.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Absolutely. Yes, sir, we'll certainly look into it, Senator.

SENATOR O'MARA: Thank you very much.

And just to follow up on federal aid, following up on Senator Ashby's -- you know, what are -- what is the department doing to try to leverage federal aid for many of these programs for veterans, whether it's suicide, whether it's PTS?

I mean, what's in the works to seek out those funds to bolster the budget of the New York State Department of Veterans Affairs?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: You know, right now we're still in continued conversations. We've had a couple of them personally with the Honorable Denis McDonough. We have a return visit back next month as well, to foster these things.

We know that there's also a backlog in the claims being processed for our veterans. And we know that also so many of our veterans don't have access to their medical records; that's causing them even more stress and PTS. So ascertaining those records and ensuring that we have a high-quality claim, as well, you know, as continuing talks with Washington.

SENATOR O'MARA: Thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Commissioner.

Assemblymember Burdick.

ASSEMBLYMEMBER BURDICK: Thank you.

And for the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs, thank you for your work.

There's some interest in a veterans cemetery in Westchester County, and I'd appreciate your letting me know the process and let me know who I can email on that. That would be terrific.

Second thing, a situation was brought up with a woman veteran who's on an advisory committee of mine, about the VA in Montrose. And it was brought to my attention that there's really no woman doctor, no obstetrician, gynecologist there. And I would just ask that you take a look at it. It just to me is not serving the needs of women veterans.

Last, homeless veterans housing. And while I recognize the additional 500,000 that's mentioned, I'm still quite concerned about the adequacy of the appropriation for homeless veterans. And to what extent are you working with OTDA on this and feel that

that need is being addressed there instead?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Well, again, that's the program that's being rolled out.

I do want to also go back to let you know that I just had a meeting with Director Ryan Ashe and Deputy Director Kevin King for Montrose, for the veterans housing. And this was one of the topics that we spoke of, and they are on that program.

And we are going to be working more closely with them as well to have seminars on boards and lunch-and-learns for them as well, to be able to ensure that our veterans across the state -- but that was one of the topics, just so you know. We just met a week ago, and we're going to be hand in hand helping them the more to increase our leverage for the veterans and their families throughout all of the state homes -- St. Albans, Montrose, all of them. Batavia.

(Overtalk.)

ASSEMBLYMEMBER BURDICK: And in particular as well is addressing the needs of

women veterans, correct?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: That's correct.

And just to let you know, Assemblymember, we were one of the people that were on the original focus group -- before Assemblymember Alvarez left -- for the Bronx, where there were no women's services prior to that. Now there's women's services, there's a mammogram machine, there's women's health with GYN and all of those same things.

That was why we were able to step up and say that this is something that we can certainly assist with, because we've done it before and the needs for women veterans continue to be a concern.

ASSEMBLYMEMBER BURDICK: I appreciate that. And if I could, you know, offline, send you some additional questions on that, I'd very much appreciate that.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much.

ASSEMBLYMEMBER BURDICK: Thanks so much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

We have a follow-up three minutes from Chair Cordell Cleare.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

I want to go back to the Aging and talk about a very important topic. I see it here in your testimony, and I'd like you to expand a little bit on senior housing. They are the fastest-growing population. Rents, particularly in New York City, are unaffordable to the young, the middle-aged, and definitely to the older New Yorkers.

What are we doing for seniors in housing?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I mean, housing in general is a huge issue. The Governor has a $25 billion, five-year Housing Plan. It's equally as important to our population. I mean, whether in the city or upstate New York -- the housing stock upstate is 60 years old. You could be evicted because of frailty or a shut-in because of that. It wasn't designed for older adults. It was designed for men in

their twenties.

So we need the 800,000 housing units. A lot of those decisions, as you know, as a home-rule state are local decisions. And hopefully, you know, this body and the Governor's office and others can come to an agreement and start building safe, affordable enabling housing stock. We need it.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. And also you mention here expanding access to oral health and dental care. I have a bill calling for the state marketplace to offer a dental plan, which it does not currently.

I also have a bill saying that seniors should have free dental.

What is -- how are we expanding --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: So that proposal's in the Medicaid budget. I can follow up with you on that.

But you're absolutely right. In terms of all older adults, it's dental, it's hearing and it's vision.

SENATOR CLEARE: Yeah. Well, particularly with the dental, because, you

know, that affects them eating, getting proper nourishment. Oral health is related to so many other parts of senior health.

If I could just go back to, you know, this math problem we have between each other. I think that -- you know, I got a question from DFTA: "Why is the administration supplanting state funding commitments for older adult services with federal dollars, rather than increasing state funding to meet the growing older adult population in New York?"

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: So this is a -- there's a question from DFTA to me?

SENATOR CLEARE: Well, it's a question to me, to --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: To ask me.

SENATOR CLEARE: Yes.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: And so the question is why are we going after federal funding?

SENATOR CLEARE: Apparently we are supplanting state funding commitments for older adult services with federal dollars.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: No, that -- I mean, that could not be so off.

So there are four funding streams for our suite of services. The federal, which is the least amount of money we get, which is why we literally -- our office, with the association, organized the nation to try to get a $1.8 billion increase because we get so little from the feds --

SENATOR CLEARE: We've got 10 seconds, so I think that you are --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Then you've got the state, then you've got the counties, and then you've got the individuals themselves.

We do not supplant anything. A hundred percent of our funding goes to the counties by population. Period.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Simon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Yes, I'm over 50 and using technology.

(Laughter.)

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: I know, crazy, right?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: I would really love that report, because I can't get my husband to text, and he's like way older than me, so.

Thank you.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: You're welcome.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Yeah, it would be very helpful. I have to --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Sure, happy to do that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: -- shore it up a bit. So -- thank you.

So, Commissioner, thank you for your service as well. And let me just ask a quick question about World War II veterans.

What are we doing to identify them, to recognize them, to help their communities know who they are, what they've done? You

know, we've done a small level in my district. We have the one World War II Veterans Memorial in the city in my district, and quite a number of World War II vets still with us, although fewer and fewer. What is your office doing in that regard?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, Assemblymember Simon, for that question.

I am also wearing a bra that is older than a lot of people on this panel today.

(Laughter.)

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: And so I think you know that my background is also in gerontology. And so this is one of the reasons that our "find and serve" program, but also our Faith in Service, which goes back to the houses of worship. Pew Research shows that our houses of worship are occupied by this generation. And so our Faith in Service has gone back to these houses of worship to identify them.

We've been ensuring a few things that I'm very proud of, ensuring that those who are Purple Heart recipients have been

inducted into our Purple Heart Hall of Fame in Windsor. And we have taken the busload back there to see it for the first time. The Assemblymembers with our chair and Senate right behind you have ensured that our Korean War vets and our World War II veterans were recognized right here at the Capitol with programs. We've been having -- attending events and participating again throughout the Bronx to Buffalo, where they're recognized. Getting them on the Honor Flights has been our heart's desires. Our going back to recognize their birthday.

But going in with proclamations from our Governor to recognize them for the monumental services that they have given -- not just in Veterans Month, but all year long we're there. I'm so glad and sad to say I'm attending many of their funerals. But also some of our older veterans who are getting married are now calling upon us, and I've performed now 21 marriages of our 70-and-over veterans.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: God love 'em.

What about women? You know, women veterans in that era weren't really military in some ways -- but --

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We'll get back to you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. Thank you both.

Senate.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: -- you can tell us about that.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And Senator Scarcella-Spanton for her three-minute follow-up as chair. Thank you.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you.

And thank you for answering all the questions today.

My question is -- and we've discussed this before -- about a veterans resource registry. It's unfortunate to say, but it's true; I've learned more sitting on this side than on the other side when my husband got out of the military and we transitioned back to civilian life.

Everything is not in one neat way as

it should be. That means jobs for veterans and their spouses, housing opportunities, housing incentives. That's not always clear, even pointing to -- and I would encourage you guys to move this maybe front and center, because a lot of times ways that veterans get help are through their family members.

And I think the word about a veterans program sounds wonderful. I would be more interested in how you connect that veteran or the family member of that veteran to services. And also I would encourage you to maybe bring that more front and center to the website so people are aware of it.

But I think it's really important to have that available for family members. And I would just want to hear more about that program and what it does to connect those veterans and their family members to services they need.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much, Senator.

You know, we look forward and we're grateful for being able to work with you on

this, and we can continue to have continuing discussions.

We know that oftentimes it is the spouse who is encouraging those who have served to go and get their benefits. I want you to know when we hosted the NASDVA conference -- again, the largest in 75 years -- right here in New York, one of the things that we were able to do with the best practices was look at one of the programs that one of our partners is doing for our spousal program. We just had a meeting just a few days ago, and that's something that we're going to be incorporating as well.

Again, to still stress, though, that we still want to see those who served. The website is great for resources but, you know, we still want to see them. But we're looking forward to working on this with you.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: And I just have one more quick question because we're running out of time.

Could you please give me what the cost

would be to implement a veterans registry on the New York State DVS website so everything is in one spot? That's something we really want to advocate for and help you obtain.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We're still formulating those numbers from our last meeting, so we'll have that to you very shortly. Excited to work with you on that.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you so much.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember De Los Santos.

ASSEMBLYMAN DE LOS SANTOS: Thank you for your time here today. I have a few questions related to funding support.

On the 2.4 billion allocated to migrant funding, how much of that funding has been allocated to the National Guard? And can you tell us what that covers and what the National Guard is exactly doing with the funding?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I have to get back to you on that, sir -- Assemblymember.

ASSEMBLYMAN DE LOS SANTOS: Okay.

And in terms of funding for nonprofit organizations, how much of the funding will be provided to the nonprofit organization for legal services and transportation services?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Which --

ASSEMBLYMAN DE LOS SANTOS: From the 2.4.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Are you talking about the legislative adds and the allocation of those dollars?

ASSEMBLYMAN DE LOS SANTOS: Correct.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Again, that will be part of, you know, your determination in the allocation for the final budget.

ASSEMBLYMAN DE LOS SANTOS: All right, thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Commissioner.

I have two more, but I'm going to ask one quick question myself. The legislative add process -- I've been here for 19 years. Almost every year Governors have zeroed out the legislative adds. It's par for the

course. Am I correct?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: That's correct.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So there's no reason to believe why the numbers being at zero in the Executive Budget is going to translate into any kind of cut at the end of the process. Is that correct?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: That's correct, Assemblyman Hevesi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: All right. Thank you very much, Commissioner.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, sir.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Chandler-Waterman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: Thank you so much. I like the details and the wit, and the outfit.

I have -- my father-in-law, my father all served, and I have a lot of young people as well that's veterans in my district. And a lot of questions that come up -- and I know it's been echoed here by my colleagues a

lot -- about the housing for senior veterans and non-seniors, and then where the Department of Aging and also the Veterans Department, they work together to support them so they don't fall through the cracks.

And then also with the non-seniors, making sure they don't fall into the cracks. Because they could be 20-somethings coming home, and then sometimes they're overlooked.

And then of course we've got to talk about the mental health services, the wraparound services. We have older adults' centers where we could also capture and maybe work in partnership with.

So like where's the collaboration? And then the housing situation is such a big deal, as we talked about, and the mental health services and supportive housing too, right, where we have those built into those housing for the senior veterans and non-senior veterans.

I know I said a lot, but it's all entangled and works together.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Good.

Good. I do -- I do want you to know that we have our veteran benefits advisors that are inside many of our supportive houses now, our SSSV housing.

As you know, all of our veterans, those who served don't always check the box when they're coming in. And again, it's educating on and going in and saying "for those who served" so we are capturing them right there so that they can get the HUD voucher and they can get all of the resources.

Also now we're working with our schools where we're going back in, because not only do women -- are the ones who incentivize their husbands to go and get the benefits, but also children, we have children. So now we're working with our boards of education to get back into the schools to ensure that our children know about resources that they're taking home in their book bags to their family members. And the response has been wonderful, wonderful with this.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Did you want me to respond?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: Yes, the older adult centers, is there any partnership --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I think you're spot on. That's exactly right, is all of this stuff is connected. There's not one system, and it's an all-hands-on-deck, right, to leverage the resources that we had.

With DVS we've done a lot of cross-training of our case managers with their folks, knowing what we do, what they do. As I mentioned earlier, we screen for veteran status, we could make that handoff.

I think the challenge we have, whether we're in New York City or anywhere else, is, you know, you have 59 triple As, area agencies on aging, New York City being the biggest one, and then another 1,200 community-based organizations that we work with. And that doesn't include towns, municipalities, 5500 faith organizations. So there's a lot more that we all could be doing

to make sure that whether you're a veteran or a child or a family, there's a ton of resources out there that are desperate, and how we pull those things together to help.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Commissioner.

We have two more Assemblymembers. I'd like to return to Chair Jean-Pierre for her second.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. I just want to thank you again and just clarify what I said earlier.

So from the veterans benefit advising program, last year the agency reported 7,656 benefits being -- payments. And this year, 35,034. So that's just a huge difference in allocations. So I just want to know if you can just jot it down, just to clarify, when you get the answers back to me -- back to all of us.

And the next question I have is in how many of DVS's 111 FTEs are veteran benefits advisors, and how many claims does each advisor actually work on? And how has DVS

been able to ensure that the claims are being handled in a timely and efficient manner, given the increase in the number of PAC-related claims? PCAP claims, sorry.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yeah, we can get back to you on that as well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay, perfect.

And with the increase of women veterans -- we've seen an increase of women veterans, and unfortunately women of color have been disproportionately receiving lack of -- connected to lack of resources. How -- what mechanisms, what outreach, what boots on the ground is DVS doing to reach out to women veterans?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you. Thank you so much --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Particularly women of color, too.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yes, thank you so much for that question.

The Governor's budget has allowed us to hire a veterans -- women veterans

engagement coordinator. We currently have a women veterans virtual systems across the state with our women veterans organizations and the foundations, where we're bringing holistic approaches.

We're getting ready to have our Black History Program coming up this month, and we have our Governor's appointee for our faith-based, Pastor Cora Washington, who is going to be on that program along with Minister Conrad Washington from D.C.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Perfect. I saw that program.

Just for the lack of time, what is the current percentage of veterans across New York State utilizing programs within the department? Because we went from a division to a department.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yes. Yes. Currently we can get back to you with that as well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay, please. Those numbers are critical to the budget process. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

And Assemblymember Chair Kim to close for his second.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Greg, do you have the updated -- any updated data on the unmet needs?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes. We started a formal process, so every September we're collecting electronically, and that's public information.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Do you have like a general lump-sum number of people on the waiting lists?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: It's not people, Assemblyman, it's services waiting for. Because we have many people that get multiple services.

So we have services. I believe it's about 18,500.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Eighteen thousand five hundred, okay.

Yeah, I just want to close by saying, you know, when I was driving up here I was on a call with a local constituent, her name is

Martha, a 75-year-old, lives in my district. And she qualifies for Medicare, but she's not qualified for Medicaid. And she is living by herself and is actively looking for some solutions around home care.

And, you know, if she were to call NYSOFA or any of the affiliate providers and programs, what is the most likely outcome for a 75-year-old non-English-speaking immigrant woman living by herself, Medicare but non-Medicaid, looking for some sort of community and home care solutions in the State of New York?

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, so what we would recommend, Assemblyman -- I'll get this for you -- is our Queens, New York, Connects Coordinator. I have one in each borough. What this individual will be able to do, using the language of the individual -- we require a language line for all the counties, including our agency as well, so we can communicate with people that aren't English-speaking -- and start going through a screening process, see what the

individual needs.

If she needs, you know, PC Level 1 or a home-delivered meal and is eligible for those types of things, then they can work within the local resources in Queens to try to identify that service.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Okay. But at this point, with the lack of the fully funded program, or of all the services and people on the waiting list, the likely outcome of this person -- she's not entitled. This isn't a right that she has, right? So --

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes. Our --

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Unless we, you know, as advocates, as elected officials, do whatever we can to lift any layers and try to connect them, most likely, as a consumer, if she's making all these calls, taking all these steps, as you said, she's going to be put on a waiting list for services.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Not necessarily. So it depends on where we are in the state. There's more home care aides in the city. Obviously it's a nationwide

crisis; I'm not debating that.

But the nuances of the people that we serve -- we have people coming on and off programs all of the time. Because of their age, their frailty maybe changes. So I wouldn't necessarily say, you know, she's automatically going to go on a waitlist, because I can't say that that's true at all.

But that's the process. And I'll make sure that I get you the right place to go, Assemblyman, to help this woman. And if you need help from me, let me know.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. That is it for this panel. I'd like to thank both commissioners and everybody in your agencies for all the work you do on behalf of our seniors and veterans. Thank you very much.

NYSOFA DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you guys, and thanks for your longstanding support. I really appreciate it.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you. Thank you so much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Again, anyone who

wants to ask questions of these commissioners as they leave, please take your conversations outside so the next panel can be called down. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: And at this time I'd like to call Panel C. From AARP New York, Beth Finkel, the state director; New York StateWide Senior Action Council, Gail Myers, the deputy director; Essential Care Visitor, Marcella Goheen; and Lifespan of Greater Rochester, Ann Marie Cook, president and CEO. Thank you all.

(Pause.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. I'd like to remind everyone, both members of our panel and our elected officials here, that we all get three minutes. In a moment, when we are settled, we'll get started.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I've got to remember that one. That's pretty good. Okay. All right. We're ready to go with this panel. I think we should go in order. Ms. Finkel, if you are prepared to go.

Yeah, you've got to hold it down.

MS. FINKEL: Okay. Thank you so much. Thank you, Senator Krueger, and thank you so much, Assemblymember Hevesi, and I want to tell Senator Cleare -- who I see has stepped out for a second -- but I want to thank her and I want to thank Assemblymember Kim, the Aging Committee chairs. And they're just really outstanding.

New York's aging population is exploding. We all know that. Between 2010 and 2020, 65-plus went up over 30 percent. And we have to really be cognizant of those numbers and how they're changing so rapidly.

Right now, as everybody heard, there is waiting lists. That number varies because there are questions about how that gets -- the numbers come in aggregate, and so you're going to hear different numbers. The numbers I have, we believe, is 16,000 individuals. But I think it's back to that service number that's important that Greg mentioned.

So there are -- those families are waiting for non-Medicaid home and

community-based services, and those services obviously include transportation, adult day home, delivered meals and respite. And where all these families are waiting on waiting lists, we have -- we do not have the public information down to the county level of these people that are waiting for EISEP services.

So I really appreciated that question about getting the county data in, because that's what can help us determine where we need to go. There are 2.2 million family caregivers in New York State statewide. And you know that if they're not in place and supported, then those people are going to end up on Medicaid and end up in institutions which we all pay so much money for.

So AARP is asking for $51 million. That is the 42 million that we need to get rid of the current -- the waitlist, plus we have to make up the 9 million that we got cut from last year. So that's where we are at, the 51 million.

I also just want to second -- on the Long Term Care Ombudsman, I know we've been

talking a lot about that. You all know about it, so I'm not going to go into detail. But we know that's where our most vulnerable older adults are, in these institutions, and we learned the hard way during COVID that we can't ignore their needs.

So the Governor's budget cut 2.5 million. We were saying we need 15 million for long-term-care ombudsmen to get that one visit per nursing home every single week, which is exactly what CMS recommends. We are so far from that, as the data just came out earlier, with only 12 percent getting a visit.

And the only way we can get that -- and so agree with the director that we need to professionalize it. We value our volunteers. We always want our volunteer component, but we can't be totally reliant upon it. So the FTEs and the proper training are absolutely crucial. And we can't be stepping backwards, which is what it seems is happening. So again, 15 million for that.

I want to talk about data matching.

Last year we got data matching on utilities and EAP, and we were thrilled about that. Now we're going to the next increment. We want to see data matching on EPIC and HEAP data so that people can get help paying for their pharmaceuticals.

And we know that --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. I apologize.

MS. FINKEL: Oh, okay. One more plug for the food stamps increase on -- that Representative Rojas mentioned, because AARP is very much in favor of that $100 amount.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

MS. FINKEL: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Ms. Myers.

MS. MYERS: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of New York StateWide Senior Action Council.

We have a number of requests, the first of which is to restore the funding for our Patients' Rights Helpline. That program had a $200,000 legislative add over the last

several years. We ask you to do that once again; otherwise, we are facing a cut.

We also are asking you for an expansion of funds for the Managed Care Consumer Assistance Program to reach more eligible New Yorkers who have not yet applied for the Medicare Savings Program, when you so well increased that.

All that has been said about the need to reduce waiting lists and to improve the capacity for the future. I also wanted to point out to you, however, that the State Comptroller just issued a report on the personal income tax, monies from the checkoffs that have not been allocated throughout state agencies, and for NYSOFA the Senior Wellness and Nutrition Program has accumulated a fund balance of $341,886. So let's please put that into meals for the elderly.

On the EISEP program, I implore you to consider the impact of the cuts that are going to happen in Medicaid because of the previous MRT's recommendation that went into

statute that changed the number of ADLs and changed the community Medicaid lookback. That will be going into effect shortly. And we would like you to say, Get rid of that.

There will be an impact if Medicaid stops providing the services for future eligible people on the EISEP program, which is 100 percent state-funded. Wouldn't it be better to have that funded under Medicaid appropriately? Also because that cut is going to eliminate, in many cases, housekeeping services which the EISEP program would otherwise provide. So please look into that.

On the EPIC program, we have a couple of recommendations for you. One is our bill that the chairs have introduced on improving benefits and transparency. But we also support the bill to increase -- to allow the EPIC program to provide people with credible coverage, not a Part D plan.

And then a new piece. The Governor has done a good job in eliminating -- if you agree -- the copayment for diabetes. We

would recommend that the EPIC program also guarantee a zero copay for people under EPIC for that -- for insulin, excuse me.

There are a number of cuts in the Medicaid budget that we are incredibly disturbed about -- not even having seen yet. But we also would encourage you to remove the asset test for the non-MAGI adult who's applying for Medicaid. And we support the Home Care Savings and Reinvestment Act.

On quality of care, we do not support allowing nursing home aides to administer medications and we do not believe in the change in oversight for the assisted living facilities.

Three quick things on economic security. We support the SNAP benefit increase to the minimum SNAP benefit. We applaud the medical debt positions in the Governor's budget; we'd ask for a few extra changes to that.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

MS. MYERS: And we love the dental care provision that Senator Cleare has put

out.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Ms. Goheen.

MS. GOHEEN: Hi, I'm Marcella Goheen, wife of Robert Victor Viteri, who's entering his eighth year of aging in place in a nursing home. It's good to see some familiar faces who were helpful to us during COVID. So thank you, Senator May and Ron Kim.

We executed care for two years prior to this at home to medicate his rare neurodegenerative disorder. There was a crisis point where I had to surrender him to a long-term-care facility. During this time at home I spent $30,000 a year on private caregivers just to keep him safe, because we didn't qualify for anything.

I founded essentialcarevisitor.com as a platform in Robert's name to help families advocate during COVID to best advocate for their loved ones that we were separated from. Today we triage emotional trauma, confusion, loss and grieving that a caregiver might go

through when they have to make that decision to institutionalize their loved one.

We are a peer-to-peer model. We offer two care jobs a week, and with service to family caregivers statewide and nationally.

Robert -- what I really want to testify about is Robert and the over 100,000 vulnerable New Yorkers aging in long-term-care facilities are living under disastrous limitations of the care system right now. In his own words, before disease took his speech -- he's nonverbal now -- he told me "I never want to be a burden." I remind him to this day that his aging and illness is not his fault and as his wife I will honor my oath to serve him. I wish New York State would feel the same about the members of this population.

Robert and I are not anecdotal evidence. We are two people of nearly almost 10 million folks in New York, 5 million over 60, and 4.1 million caregivers to New Yorkers who are aging and identify as a caregiving family, whereby the five to seven hours a day

represents a portion of over $4.1 billion of uncompensated care. This data is reflected in the Aging Association of New York's testimony that cites also that my husband is one of those contributing to the $72 billion a year that this aging population contributes to both city and state taxes. So where's the money?

I'm currently -- I'm freaked out.

(Laughter.)

MS. GOHEEN: They may call it caregiver stress, but I'm not understanding the budget proposals that reflect random allocated cuts to Medicaid that will impact the lifeline of my husband's services and supports.

I have 50 seconds. I've never understood the litigation of how we can't serve care when the dollars and the money keeps flowing. And the solution, I believe, is what has happened with my husband is we've developed a person-centered care system around him that includes a holistic approach whereby, over the past eight years of him

being in a long-term-care facility, he's been to the hospital two times. And that's during COVID.

So what does that tell you? That New York State must invest in the aging population that's only going to get more and more dense, and that we need to provide overhauled programmatic innovative transformation. I sit on three subcommittees of the Master Plan on Aging. We need to invest in that plan when it's finished, and invest now -- not wait till 2026, not wait till 2025. But there are 400 members of talented individuals who are amazing at this work and who need to be heard.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you for the testimony, and perfect timing as well.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Ms. Cook.

MS. COOK: Yeah, good afternoon. I'm Ann Marie Cook. I'm president and CEO of Lifespan of Greater Rochester.

We serve a lot of older adults each year, but really what I am, I'm just an aging service provider. I've been at Lifespan over 28 years, and I've seen this new convergence of issues unlike I've ever seen before. And I'll run through these briefly, but they're all important: Dramatic increase in the older adult population; dramatic increase in poverty of older adults. I heard you talk about childhood poverty -- no one talks about older adult poverty.

The workforce shortages that are going on today. The dramatic increase in scams, almost always targeted toward older adults. Workforce shortages, and I would say the stress on the family caregivers. It is incredible, as families have become smaller and more geographically dispersed, what it's doing to those family caregivers that remain today.

So when I looked at the proposed Executive Budget, I have to be honest with you, what I said is this budget in no way will meet the needs of older adults who need

our help right now. And I was very disappointed.

I just want to reiterate one thing Director Olsen said. Our aging service network saves Medicaid dollars. On average, we serve people 6.5 years, less than $10,000 per person per year. If they were in a nursing home it would be $140,000 per person.

Most of our clients are over the age of 80, and almost all of them have multiple needs for activities of daily living help. And we're supporting them in the community.

The other thing I have to say -- I talked about scams, but elder abuse is alive and well but still a very hidden problem in this community.

They talked about -- I'm so thrilled about the focus on enhanced multidisciplinary teams, but in the process both the Senate and the Assembly have always supported direct intervention for older adults being abused. That legislative add was cut from the budget, and I respectfully request that that get added in too. That's how we get the cases to

the enhanced multidisciplinary teams so those social workers are out there working.

And finally I also want to talk about the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. I think it's a travesty, quite frankly, that we don't support the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program and have those advocates in every long-term-care facility here so that those individuals receive the quality of care and quality of life we have promised.

And finally, I will just have to say one of my dear friends, Becky Preve, who isn't here today -- but she said to me, "At what age do you think older New Yorkers become irrelevant and we don't care?" And I said, "We have to make sure that answer is never."

Thank you so much for all of your support and for allowing us to speak today.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Any Assembly?

(Discussion off the record.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Senator May.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Rachel May.

SENATOR MAY: Sorry. Hi. Hi, everybody. Wonderful to see you all, and thank you for your persistent and creative attention to these issues, and Marcella, for your just -- everything you do.

I guess I wanted to follow up about the LTCOP program with you, and we heard from Greg Olsen that there's progress happening. Is that your sense? And it sounds like you don't feel like it's happening fast enough, if --

MS. COOK: I don't know if it's happening fast enough, Senator. But the $2.5 million from last year made a huge difference in our ability to not only recruit additional volunteers but also hire additional staff, and that's what we need to professionalize this. It was a great first step -- I would say a first step of several steps we need to take.

But it was very disheartening, quite frankly, to see that 2.5 million eliminated.

SENATOR MAY: Thanks.

And then talking about poverty, as

many of you did, I do carry a bill to raise the minimum SNAP benefit from $23 to $100. My understanding is it's mostly older New Yorkers who are at that minimum. Do you have a sense of how many people that you work with would benefit from the increase?

MS. COOK: I'd have to get back to you. But that bill would be huge for us.

And we can even see in our senior centers the last week, last 10 days of the month, they have to come in and take bags of food with them because they've run out of food for the month.

MS. FINKEL: I would just add, a lot of older adults don't bother to even apply because it's not easy applying for SNAP. And one of the reasons they don't apply is because the benefit is so low.

And I would say one more thing is yes, and it's particularly for older adults it really hurts.

SENATOR MAY: Yeah. Okay. Thanks.

And then I guess my last question was about the Medicare Savings Program that we --

AARP especially worked to put in place. Can you tell us how that's going? Are people participating?

MS. FINKEL: Yes. The numbers are significantly going up. But there's still a lot of room for improvement. We've been working with DOH to get the word out more and also with New York City. And we'd like to do more of that. So yes.

SENATOR MAY: Do you need help? Is there anything we should be doing to help you with that?

MS. FINKEL: Well, I think, you know, absolutely more publicity about it. And then the basic thing is the data matching. Right? And that's what we've been talking about. We got the data matching last year on utilities. This year we're looking for it on EPIC, against HEAP, because the benefit is similar.

And I think you're hearing that again and again. So often we're hearing -- looking at providing these services for women and children, which is absolutely needed, but why are older adults being asked to wait? And we

keep asking ODTA, what can't you do what you're doing for family and children, do it now for older adults?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

SENATOR MAY: Thank you.

MS. FINKEL: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Chairman Kim.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you.

I just want to say, Marcella, I just find your journey and just being here just very inspiring, and turning so much of your pain as a caregiver into finding a purpose in your advocacy to be very inspiring.

Unfortunately, I think there are so many other caregivers that are sandwiched between older adults and their own families that have given up, that are completely traumatized and feeling unproductive, don't want to participate in anything.

And I'm just -- do you -- I just wonder, do you also see that in your own communities? Because there's something --

there's a phenomenon that's happening, I feel like, with productive members of our community all of a sudden just tapping out, saying, I'm not -- I just don't want to work, I can't do this, I feel paralyzed. And I wonder what the impact of that is to our -- not only our society but to our economy.

And I bring this up because we framed the investments of your services as a moral duty, but I really think there's a huge economic impact of underinvesting and allowing working middle-class families to say: You're on your own taking care of your older adult. What does that do to our morale? What does that do to our productivity?

MS. GOHEEN: So I love the question. And I didn't get to my paragraph about the PTSD and the trauma of caregiving and the post-COVID experience that we're seeing with formal caregivers on the frontlines, in collaboration with the informal caregivers -- where there's a disassociation. There's four responses to trauma: Disassociation, numb,

and perfectionism and then hypervigilance. Which is me.

(Laughter.)

MS. GOHEEN: But on the front lines right now there's a disassociation in nursing homes whereby the caregivers formal are actually not taking people out of bed. And their rationale is, Well, we can't take one person and not the other, that's not fair, so we're not going to take anybody out of bed.

So that's the conditions of the nursing homes right now.

In terms of family caregivers, we're mortified. I keep advocating for them to Zoom out and be there five -- as much as they can in order to collaborate with the care. But there's a big missing gap that's not being treated. I don't know where it might be in the budget for Governor Hochul. But there needs to be addressed the PTSD of what happened during COVID for both the formal caregivers, the families, in order to recalibrate. That's a scientific fact.

Like if you don't take that space --

just like veterans coming back from war -- then there's no place to start. And the way it is manifesting is in terms of family advocates like you mentioned. If they've lost their loved ones during COVID, they don't want anything to do with it, but they know there's still not a resolve. Because there's people aging in New York that are going to need these long-term-care services in nursing homes.

Aging in place in a nursing home is aging in place. That's what it is for my husband. That is his home. And we need to do the work to serve them where they are.

ASSEMBLYMAN KIM: Thank you.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thank you.

I'll use my three minutes, and I believe I'm the last of the Assemblymembers to speak.

So first, Ms. Goheen, thank you for your testimony. I really do appreciate it.

I'd like to share that my father recently passed away. Over the last couple of years of his life he had Lewy body dementia.

So the difficulty for caregivers, I believe, even as dramatic and poignant as your testimony was, is even understated. It is brutal to see a family member slowly being stripped away from you, and then you look at the resources that are available to you -- almost nonexistent. So I hear you, and I appreciate it.

And thank you for all the programs you do for caregivers. That means a ton to me and many of my colleagues.

And I do want to touch on one other point -- with the limited time I have -- as well, about the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program.

So I've been to a lot of facilities over the last couple of years. That's just part of the process. And while we have a sign on the wall on every one saying "Call the Long Term Ombudsman," the fact that we're

not funding this program -- and it's at 12 percent, it's -- they're able to hit 12 percent of the nursing homes in the state? You're right, that is a disgrace.

And particularly when you're talking about people who are in desperate need, desperate need of advocates on the ground. I can't get this. I need that. You need the Ombudsman Program.

I am so grateful for all of your testimony and all of the work that you do. It's just greatly appreciated. I don't have a question, I just wanted to opine for a minute. So thank you for all your work and your testimony here today. Thank you.

MS. GOHEEN: Thank you.

MS. MYERS: Can I just take 30 seconds on that point? The Ombudsman Program is vital, and it is not in every facility. Generally for our Patients' Rights Helpline, we tell people what their rights are and then we tell them to call the ombudsman to be on-site and help them uplift their rights. And they call us back and they say, they just

are not available for -- and, you know, great programs, but they're not available.

Three weeks ago I had that happen in Albany County, and someone was being denied coverage for an extended stay that was within Medicare, and told to apply for Medicaid, which she's not eligible for, in order to get services. And we had to spend hours to tell them that they were using the wrong standard to tell her she was no longer eligible for Medicare. Hours of time doing that, saving her tens of thousands of dollars, and she finally, successfully, was able to transition to home.

So people are not being able to hold up their rights because the ombudsmen -- because there's not enough of them there to be present. And also because, you know, we're all stretched as thin as we can be.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I wholeheartedly agree. Thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Ashby.

SENATOR ASHBY: Thank you for being here.

In regards to previous comments for staff and mental health and nursing homes, are you aware of any peer-to-peer programs that are going on, whether they're internally driven through the setting or from a larger stature?

MS. COOK: I mean, our ombudsman region's a nine-county region in the Finger Lakes. And oftentimes in several homes there are, you know, resident councils and those kind of things, those kind of informal peer-to-peer helping, if that's what you mean.

But on a statewide basis, no.

SENATOR ASHBY: How about from a staffing level?

MS. GOHEEN: Oh, can I?

MS. COOK: Yeah, go ahead.

MS. GOHEEN: So I just -- how do I do this?

So we actually, at our home, we have a 150-member family council and we have a family essential program that we'd love to get funded, whereby we have a peer-to-peer

model where we collaborate with the formal caregivers. We have social workers giving them our phone number, family caregivers who can't navigate the system. And it's amazing because it is a Me Too movement where -- forgive that word -- that, you know, you know, coming from another family member, exactly where that particular consumer is, whether they're in the first three months of admitting their loved one in a long-term-care facility, or they're in their six-to-12 month, or when they're a month and leaving or a year and leaving, or whether they're going to be a long-term stay like my husband, who's been there for eight years.

So we have an informal program going on, and it works magically, especially during this disastrous staffing crisis where nursing homes aren't even answering their phones, but yet they're still getting reimbursed Medicare, Medicare dollars every day, which we don't understand.

SENATOR ASHBY: And you've seen that as effective?

MS. GOHEEN: It's amazing. And we have just started shopping the program to various people in New York State because we want it to be funded.

It stands before the ombudsman program. We're not professionals. But it actually deescalates a lot. And we have a system where we're going to try to work with the social workers on how to formalize it and document it so that family caregivers within long-term-care institutions never have to be alone.

You're talking about people being dropped off from the hospital and you have a stack of papers and you have nowhere to go. And we do see those signs of the ombudsman program, but we didn't -- I didn't know where our ombudsman was during COVID, had no idea. No disrespect.

But that's very real, and we need the systems and support on the frontline.

SENATOR ASHBY: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Eachus.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Thank you, Chair.

I just wanted to comment also about the ombudsman program. I think we need education. We especially need education in these nursing and caring facilities. This is the least punitive way that we can communicate with the folks that run that and those programs, and they don't understand that.

I think they think that, you know, everybody's there just to pick at them and point things out. And yet, you know, what -- what comes after this? After this is the Department of Health that comes and slams you with penalties and fines and so on like that.

So on my committee, with Aging, I will talk with them about, you know, if there's some program we can't get out there, informing the nursing homes -- because there's a limited number of nursing homes out there -- that they should understand that this program benefits them. And it really does.

MS. COOK: No, I agree. And I do

think the name, a lot of people don't even know what that word means, "ombudsman." So we need to be there. That's when you really begin to pick up the quality of care and quality of life issues, is when you're there all the time. And that's why we need this critical program to ensure we're in every facility in New York State every single week.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Cordell Cleare.

SENATOR CLEARE: Come on now. All right. Thank you. Thank you all for your testimony.

You heard me ask the commissioner questions related to the 16,000 waitlist. And you heard his response. And I want to know what -- your thoughts are on that, as well as -- I'm sorry, I just came back from getting something. I know you all spoke about the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. If there's anything you have to add to that, let me know.

And also he talked about the report

that was due to the State Legislature and that it has been filed already, so if you could confirm or --

MS. FINKEL: I'm sorry, could you -- I'm having trouble hearing you.

SENATOR CLEARE: The State Office for the Aging, there's a report that's due to the Legislature.

MS. FINKEL: Right.

SENATOR CLEARE: And I know some of you had asked about that report.

MS. FINKEL: Yes.

SENATOR CLEARE: And I just -- you heard his answer to that question, so I just want to know.

MS. FINKEL: Thank you. Thank you for giving me that opportunity to clarify that.

So he's giving you aggregate numbers. He's not giving you those numbers by county. What we need is to understand it by the county. And so that would be very, very helpful. And -- yeah, so we can all consistently have the same numbers that we can all understand, and then we can all plan

appropriately that way.

MS. COOK: Senator -- oh.

MS. MYERS: If I may. I'll be fast.

We also need to know what are the barriers. Are there capacity issues? Why can't -- if the money isn't being spent on one thing and it's moving to something else where there's a need, that's -- that's a good thing. But it keeps hiding what the barrier is to why it isn't being spent.

So if it's EISEP home services, what is the barrier? That the money might be going to congregate meals or transportation, that just shows more money is needed there. But what are the barriers?

So if you can add that into your request for a report -- sorry, one minute.

MS. FINKEL: So can I add one more thing?

We've been actually -- AARP has been starting to ask county execs individually, what is your -- because we want to get the information. And we did hear Nassau County is now moving from a five-day-a-week home

delivery to a four-day-a-week home delivery. What does that mean? It means that they have to deal with the budget that they have, and that's their solution, which we all know is probably the worst possible solution.

I know you all talked about isolation quite a bit. And sometimes that's the only person that those people see at their door, and that's the only person who can check and say, Mrs. S. is not looking so good today, we'd better get, you know, some help out here for her.

So I think that's important. And that's again why we have to get this county-specific data, so there's total transparency.

MS. COOK: I will have to say I think Director Olsen was correct. There's about 18,000 older New Yorkers waiting for services, and we estimate it would take about $51 million to serve them.

SENATOR CLEARE: We said those numbers, too.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. I think I'm the last questioner, and just one question. And it's controversial, I get it. I'm exploring whether we should have the Justice Center oversee nursing homes.

Some people love it, some people hate it. See, I got a yes and a no just on this panel. And so it's not going anywhere very quickly. But when we originally proposed the Justice Center years ago, there was a discussion about including nursing homes. It was to address people in vulnerable institutional settings not being watched over carefully enough -- or for us, the government, to be doing something since we were paying for it.

So I'm going to embrace it again at the Mental Health Hearing where the Justice Center comes. But -- I don't even know if there's time for any of you to jump in and answer, but I just wanted to throw that out to you for now.

MS. GOHEEN: I'll answer that. I've worked with the Domestic Violence Justice

Centers with Michael Bloomberg. I wrote some curriculums for them way back. And in terms of it being borrowed to a structure in a long-term care facility, I think it's brilliant for a lot of reasons.

Because on the frontlines, especially now, post-COVID -- and I want to remind the State Legislature that we're in a post-COVID environment, which is very different. These caregivers are stressed, dissociated, numb. The administrators are numb. They're not here right now. So in order to put a structure, any structures on the frontline that would have justice systems and supports, is what I'm going to say, for the vulnerable New Yorkers that -- Bob has me, my husband Robert Viteri has me to the day he takes his last breath. But there are, you know, 684 other people in my husband's nursing home that don't have a Marcella.

So I think that those checks and balances, the way Safe Horizons works, a center would be brilliant. Because it would be interdisciplinary, it would be

multigenerational. It would also open up space for people to get into this kind of workforce.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

MS. COOK: Senator, I just wanted to comment. I obviously shouldn't play poker, because you read my face immediately.

(Laughter.)

MS. COOK: But I would really have to think about it. I have seen the Justice Center as we work with older adults with developmental disabilities. And of course those situations go there and, honestly, get bogged down in a lot of bureaucracy.

So I do think we need to do something with nursing homes and really investigate quality-of-care issues better than we do today. But let me think about your suggestion --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Please.

MS. COOK: -- and get back to you.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Please. Thank you. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. I believe that's it. Thank you to this panel for your testimony. It's greatly appreciated.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I would like to call up Panel D. From ECE On The Move, Shanita Bowen, the chief operating officer. From the Chinese-American Planning Council, Jessica Hsieh -- I hope I pronounced that right -- respite coordinator. From the Early Care and Learning Council, Meredith Chimento, the executive director. And from All Our Kin, Steve Morales, New York State policy director.

Please come on down.

Thank you. Thank you all for coming. Let's go in order, if we can.

Ms. Bowen, the floor is yours.

MS. BOWEN: Thank you to the Senate and Assembly chairs for the opportunity to testify, and especially to Senator Brisport

and Assemblymember Hevesi for their outstanding leadership in childcare.

Good afternoon. I'm Shanita Bowen, 16 years as a family childcare provider and chief operating officer of ECE On The Move, representing the voice of the family childcare workforce in New York City.

Family childcare is a childcare business in residential settings, the second largest modality of care, second to legally exempt, and among small businesses that are systemically set up to fail financially.

We are paid by a faulty market rate system that is so low, it paints the picture of Black and brown women working for pennies on the dollar to take care of children in her neighborhood while miraculously offering quality service, and knowing full well that she is juggling the usual small business expenses like worker's comp, taxes, business supplies -- the list goes on.

And now, effective this month, the minimum wage just went up, which means that her assistants' pay goes up.

Family childcare in New York City will continue to do what they've been doing, which is go without or go with little.

Gladys Jones, founder of ECE On The Move, says that childcare should be as effortless and accessible as breathing: We have it for all who need it without consideration. Which is why family childcare providers and parents care about universal childcare and being paid by the true cost of care model.

We want fair, equitable wages fit for early care educators who are proud of their work, their resources, their pay, all resulting in children who go on to be autonomous citizens who give back, such as you all as Senators and Assemblymembers.

But once again, early care educators in residential settings are not among those to be let into the middle-class door, forgetting that childcare is the cornerstone of economic development. Accessible and affordable childcare enables parents, particularly mothers, to participate fully in

the workforce. This, in turn, boosts productivity, increases tax revenues, and reduces dependency on social assistance programs.

Also forgetting that a strong childcare system reduces the reliance on social assistance programs as families become more self-sufficient. Moreover, with parents actively participating in the workforce, there is an increase in tax revenues, providing additional resources for public services and infrastructure.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Ms. Hsieh.

MS. HSIEH: Okay. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jessica Hsieh, and I'm speaking about the Chinese-American Planning Council today -- CPC.

CPC provides vital resources to more than 80,000 people per year in the five boroughs, from daycare to afterschool programs to senior services and home care. I

used CPC service as a child with immigrant parents. I used CPC service as a teenager for the Summer Youth Employment Program. And as an adult, I joined the Undo Poverty Initiative, a community-led plan to combat poverty and promote economic mobility in Flushing.

Through my participation in this group, I was able to secure a full-time job at CPC as a respite coordinator, where I work directly with community members with developmental disabilities. And I allow them to socialize and have, like, a social hour.

As you can see, CPC has been an integral part of my life, as being on the side of providing the service to me and me providing back to the community members who I serve.

Human service workers make 70 percent of what government employees make for the exact same role, which we do in more languages, in a culturally responsible way. Fifty percent of my colleagues in the home care sector are eligible for SNAP and other

public benefits.

Each year you hear from providers who struggle due to the underfunding of governmental budgets balanced on the backs of low-income neighborhoods and BIPOC communities. Yet each year the state perpetuates poverty-level wages for human service and home care workers, who are predominantly immigrant women of color like myself.

As federal COVID-19 relief funding is quickly running out, our community members' needs have only continually grown. The food lines are longer, not shorter. Half of the Asian households in New York are rent-burdened. One-third of AAPI seniors live below the poverty level and cannot get home care and other supports needed to stay in their homes safely.

The state must invest in our social net by allocating a 3.2 percent COLA for all human service workers and passing the wage board bill; expanding the AAPI equity budget to provide long-term healing for our

community; investing in the home care workforce through Fair Pay for Home Care and the Home Care Savings and Reinvestment Act; uplifting our immigrant communities through the Unemployment Bridge Program; addressing the housing crisis by passing good-cause eviction and the Housing Access Voucher Program; increasing SNAP benefits; and tackling the climate crisis by making our public transportation accessible and affordable.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Ms. Chimento. Good to see you.

MS. CHIMENTO: Nice to see you. Nice to see all of you.

There's the microphone.

The Early Care & Learning Council is the membership organization for the 35 childcare resource and referral agencies located throughout New York State. You heard a lot about them today.

I'm here to thank you. For the first time in close to 15 years, CCR&Rs will realize a 20 percent contract increase. It's incredible. We are grateful. I have sat here for six years saying, please, have this -- you know, make sure this takes place, and it did.

We are beyond thrilled about some of the investments in childcare. There's still a need for more, of course. We support the addition of after-school funding, $5 million for Staffed Family Child Care Networks to expand the business supports for family and group family childcare providers, and of course the liquidation of the unspent Workforce Retention Grant funding.

We of course have an ask. We are looking to increase -- we're looking for an increase with our Infant Toddler Mental Health Services, $4.5 million annually.

Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultation was launched in 2019. We have 42 consultants around the state that provide critical supports to childcare providers,

looking at the social-emotional supports necessary to run quality childcare. There's not enough consultants.

We are asking with that additional 4.5 million to focus on New York City, an addition of 12 Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultants. Over 50 percent of children under 5 are located in New York City, and four Mental Health Consultants are not enough. We're asking for 14 in the rest of the state, so that would be Long Island and throughout the rest of New York State.

Mental Health Consultants look at reducing the expulsion and suspension of Black and brown boys in childcare, who are suspended and expelled at a rate much higher than their white counterparts.

Coupled with that increase in mental health funding, we request $1.5 million annually to start to add seven equity positions, or equity officers, located in the seven OCFS regions. This program will create anti-racist curricula, culturally responsive early care in education, and work closely

with the Office of Children and Family Services' DEIA committees to eradicate systemic and institutionalized forms of discrimination.

Mental health consultation, coupled with these DEIB positions, will ensure that the early childhood field will provide much-needed support programs to ensure that the sizeable federal investments made throughout the pandemic are not wasted.

We must continue to enhance the social emotional supports that educators and children desperately need. To me, Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultation, coupled with DEIB programming, will move mountains in increasing the quality of early care and education.

As a member of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, Raising New York, and the Child Care Availability Task Force, we ask you to prioritize continued investment in the childcare sector, raising wages for our educators who struggle immensely just meeting their most basic needs.

Thank you.

MR. MORALES: 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 nonprofit organization that trains, supports and sustains home-based family childcare educators in New York City, and we are also proud members of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care.

I want to talk a little bit about what family childcare is, though my colleague Shanita said it really well. Family childcare is paid care that takes place in the home of a licensed childcare professional, and it is one of the most common childcare arrangements in our state.

There are roughly 10,500 providers across the state with the capacity to care for over 140,000 children. Family childcare programs offer not only family stability, but they offer children opportunity: the opportunity to explore, the opportunity to

build strong relationships and develop skills that will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

I encourage each of you to think for a moment about your early childhood, about the caregiver who you knew you could trust. I hope that we all have fond memories of that person or many people in our lives who helped us grow into the people we are today, and that is what childcare offers. And that is what this essential workforce means to our children.

The reality is that educators are taking money out of their own pockets to make up for our state's broken childcare system. According to a New School study, family childcare educators in New York City earn only $10.61 per hour. And I worry that because many educators have managed to hold on by the skin of their teeth, that we are taking their sacrifices for granted.

If the pandemic taught us anything, it taught us that childcare is essential for working families, for our economy. And over

the last few years, the Governor and the Legislature have stepped up and expanded childcare access, and that's great. But unfortunately, pandemic emergency funds are expiring and the Executive Budget offers no new investments in the childcare workforce, which is going to put all of the progress we've made at risk.

That is why we are calling for an investment of $1.2 billion in a permanent Childcare Workers Fund. This is the most crucial investment that we can make to ensure that this essential workforce can continue to serve our communities. Without it, educators will continue to be forced to leave the field for more reliable jobs in retail and food services, and that will mean families lose access to the care that they need.

We also call on the state to fund the bipartisan childcare decoupling legislation that passed overwhelmingly last year but was vetoed. I think we can all agree that making sure families can access care when they need it is a commonsense reform for our modern

economy.

And finally, we're encouraged by the Governor's proposal to pilot family childcare networks, which are the gold standard for supporting family childcare educators. We want to see those funded and implemented well.

In conclusion, we all know the importance of childcare. It's time to permanently invest in the childcare workforce so that they and families across our state know that they can stay here to thrive.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Well, thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you to our panelists for coming here today, but also for the great work you do.

My questions are for ECE On The Move and All Of Our Kin. They're about the stabilization grants. You can answer all of them or whichever ones you want. But have you observed any difficulties in accessing those workforce grants? Were they enough to

stabilize the childcare sector? And would you consider the childcare sector stable now?

MS. BOWEN: We are very grateful for the stabilization grants. They help keep doors open. That is now over. So childcare providers are facing decisions on whether to take work in retail or work in fast food. So people are making decisions right now as to whether -- stabilization is a band-aid. It's just a temporary fix on a very long-standing problem. And so we need a permanent solution.

And I meant to mention -- I didn't know about the buzzer -- but ECE On The Move supports Empire State Campaign for Child Care in the ask for a permanent workforce fund to stabilize the family childcare sector and all childcare sectors. We don't need to worry about instability in receiving pay and taking care of children.

MR. MORALES: I don't have much to add to that. Absolutely. The stabilization grants were good for what they were supposed to be, and they're gone. And we need a

permanent solution.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Great. And with the remaining time, we also heard a bit about reimbursement rates. Do you think the practice of reimbursing at 80 percent of the market rate is sufficient? And if not, why not?

MR. MORALES: I think it's pretty well documented. There have been a series of studies how the market rate does not reimburse nearly enough, up to ten to $15,000 a year per child less than it actually costs to an educator to provide that childcare.

So increases are always good, but if we're not paying that full cost, educators are taking that money out of their pockets.

MS. BOWEN: Family childcare providers would like to be paid for what it costs to offer care. They must be able to pay their assistants good rates for educating young children and then have a salary for themselves. Right now they're not taking home pay. Right now they're paying their assistants and they're doing above and beyond

to assure quality in their programs and they are not pocketing any money for themselves.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. No more Senators? Okay.

Hi, everybody. Thank you for your testimony today, all of you. One quick question, I guess, or a question for all of you.

Is there any way in New York State that our childcare system would be successful without a permanent workforce fund?

MS. CHIMENTO: No.

MR. MORALES: No.

MS. BOWEN: Absolutely not.

MS. HSIEH: Definitely not.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Cool. Great. I appreciate that. And that's what we need to remember -- we'll get to -- that's what we need to remember going forward. And I think you'll notice that some of the questions for the commissioners earlier -- we started with the workforce, we're going to end with the

workforce, this is all about the workforce. So we totally agree.

I do want to say thank you to Ms. Hsieh for her testimony for CPC, which is really powerful in that you were receiving services and are now helping others to receive services. And I wholeheartedly agree about the COLA, the cost of living for the human services workforce. Not only do we need to increase the COLA, but first we need to make sure that everybody's in the COLA.

I am -- I'll opine for two seconds. I'm tired of having COLAs get done in the New York State budget and then 50 people coming to me after and saying, But you forgot about us. It is bad government.

And I guess my questions are -- only for Ms. Chimento, if I can -- the Governor did put in some money for the infant and toddler mental health, which I thought was a very good start. Am I right that that's a good start, or are they off-topic? How can we do it? Please.

MS. CHIMENTO: Sure. Thank you, yes.

So it's $1.7 million for the seven Infant Toddler Mental Health Resource Centers, which have been flat-funded since 2019, since the inception. That 1.7 million will allow for cost-of-living adjustments for the 42 mental health consultants; travel; professional development; overhead for the organizations that operate them.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: But this is not the addition of any new -- of these workers.

MS. CHIMENTO: No. What was referenced in the State of the State -- which was a doubling of Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultants -- was not accurate. It's actually just the addition of 1.7 million.

Which is why we're asking for the additional 4.5 million, to add more Mental Health Consultants.

New York State is a model state with Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultation. We should be very proud of this program. We need more consultants. We need more consultants in New York City to serve 50 percent of the children, but we need them

around the rest of the state. And that's what the request is for.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: That's exceptionally helpful. Because I actually briefed my colleagues and said that the Governor had taken a first step towards the asks from the CCR&Rs, and apparently I was wrong. So this is very helpful --

MS. CHIMENTO: There is -- there is an increase, yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: No, no, no. There is an increase, but not for what we're looking for out of this budget.

MS. CHIMENTO: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So we appreciate the increase. So --

MS. CHIMENTO: Exactly. We're on the same page.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: We're on the same page.

MS. CHIMENTO: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I think we're talking a weird language, but we get it.

MS. CHIMENTO: Yup.

(Laughter.)

MS. CHIMENTO: We're always in sync.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. And then I guess with the two seconds I have left, Mr. Morales, if you could tell us, at some point in the future --

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: -- how the Governor's pilot for family and group childcare would -- is being rolled out. And if you think it's a good use of that $5 million.

With that -- is it 7 or is it 5?

MS. CHIMENTO: Five for staffed networks.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Five for staffed -- that's correct.

Okay, thank you all. We very much appreciate your testimony.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Oh, I'm sorry. We're not done yet. My bad.

Ms. Mitaynes, Assemblymember Mitaynes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

We keep talking about the need for revenue to fund our very important programs. So the question is for all of you. Do you support revenue-raising proposals to finance public goods and services that improve the quality of life for New Yorkers? Do you support taxing the rich?

Mr. MORALES: I will let you all handle the politics for how you raise the funding. But I -- what our -- my perspective and our perspective is that we have to find the funding. So that could take whatever shape it takes.

But there is an essential need to fund this childcare workforce and to make sure that every child and family in this state who needs childcare can access it. And so that takes money, and I'm happy to help, you know, think of ways to find that money.

MS. HSIEH: Yes. Because it's only a portion out of their money that's coming back into the communities that we serve, the under -- the low-income population that we serve.

Why not? We're all people. At some point of life, tomorrow you can go bankrupt and need that service. So why not help today? Thank you.

MS. BOWEN: Family childcare believes that childcare should be a public good. So by any means necessary, however you can get a great quality education for our young ones, pursue it. It is a public good. It should be available to all who need it.

MS. CHIMENTO: Yeah, I agree. I think there's got to be creative ways to generate revenue. We talked about it with the launch of the $4.8 million Tri-Share program, which would be the public-private partnership to invest in childcare.

I think there is a new project, it's a million-dollar Business Navigator project, to speak to businesses about underwriting the cost of childcare.

Increased taxes always work too.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay, thank you. I think that is the end of the questions for this panel. Thank you all. I very much

appreciate your testimony today.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

I'd like to call down Panel E. We'll keep rolling right along. From the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, Dede Hill, policy director. From the Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab, Steve Peraza, who's a senior research and policy associate. From the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals, we have Therese Daly, the interim executive director. And from COFCCA, the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, Michelle Newman, the associate executive director.

Thank you all.

Which one of you is from Cornell?

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Sorry. It was just too easy. Sorry.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Sorry. Ms. Hill, please, get us started.

MS. HILL: (Mic issue.) It's not --

Oh, there I go. Thank you.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am policy director for the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. We are a nonprofit dedicated to improving public systems that serve low-income and disenfranchised New Yorkers, and we are laser-focused on ending child poverty and establishing universal childcare in New York. We are also proud members of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care.

Turning first to childcare, we welcome the Executive Budget's increased investments in the state's childcare assistance program. This is building on the historic investments New York has made over the past two years that has made tens of thousands of New York families newly eligible for assistance.

However, and I'm going to echo what my colleague said in the last panel, those expansions will mean nothing to families if they cannot find a childcare program with capacity to care for their child. And childcare programs are shuttering classrooms

and closing their doors altogether because they cannot recruit and retain staff due to low wages. And I'll join the chorus: What we need is a permanent line of funding for childcare workforce wage supplements. We also need a rate increase for family, friend, and neighbor providers.

And to be very clear, the Executive Budget allocates no new funds for the childcare workforce, it just directs that leftover federal pandemic funds that were allocated in last year's budget that were intended to be paid out in full to the workforce last year. That is all that is in the budget.

Also missing in the Executive Budget is funding to end the state's inequitable practice of tying childcare assistance to the exact hours a parent works, and the practice of excluding children from childcare assistance due solely to their immigration status. For any parent or caregiver who needs to work, childcare should not be a barrier.

Turning to child poverty reduction, I want to urge inclusion of the MILC pilot in the final budget to create a cash transfer program to parents of infants at a critical period in their development.

With respect to the Executive Budget proposal to address concentrated poverty in three communities, it is important -- we're excited to learn more details. It is important to note that the proposal is supported by one-time funding, yet we know that to truly turn the tide on child, family, and community poverty requires sustained public investment over many years.

Thank you for your fortitude. I look forward to your questions.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Mr. Peraza, please.

MR. PERAZA: My name is Steve Peraza. I'm a senior research and policy associate at Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab. We study the world of work, and we provide partners, practitioners, and leaders -- like you guys -- with actionable intel to help

workers.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on the 2024-2025 New York State Executive Budget. I'm here to report findings from a new study published by Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab, and it's called "The Status of Child Care in New York State."

Number one, the policy changes in the fiscal year 2021-2022 have had uneven results across New York State. In our report, Buffalo Co-Lab has shown that the initial influx of New York State funding helped to stabilize the childcare industry during the pandemic, but since the pandemic there has been little progress in the availability and accessibility of childcare across the state.

Our research shows an unevenly changing childcare landscape with minor gains in aggregate capacity and meaningful losses in many areas across the state, particularly in upstate counties and low-income communities where childcare deserts and near deserts already existed.

Number two, childcare capacity is ticking up, but the industry diversity is on the decline. Data from New York State's Office of Children and Family Services show that statewide both the number of licensed childcare providers and the number of slots available through these providers increased modestly since 2021.

In the aggregate, New York State experienced a net gain of 75 licensed providers from 18,731 slots. The increase was driven almost wholly by growth among group family daycare providers, which increased by 501 providers and 7,829 childcare slots. These trends did not spill over to family daycare providers. This class of providers lost 381 establishments and 2,938 childcare slots since 2021.

And number three, childcare's economic return on investment is really high. We found that if you invest $1 billion into the New York State childcare industry, you'll see back $1.8 billion in economic activity, 20,300 new jobs.

Finally, a childcare compensation fund would raise wages for all childcare workers. Per our analysis, if all childcare workers earning below $23.55 per hour were elevated to that level, and if those workers earning at or above that level were given 20 percent retention raises, then the median annual subsidy per worker would be on the order of $13,000 per year.

If the model called for a minimum wage of $23.55, then the total cost of raising wages for childcare workers would be nearly $800 million per year.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, sir.

Ms. Daly, please.

MS. DALY: Testing. Hi.

Good afternoon, Chairpersons Krueger, Feinstein, Persaud, Davila, and Assemblymember Hevesi, as well as the distinguished persons of the Senate and Assembly. Thank you for allowing NYATEP this opportunity to testify before you on this important topic.

My name is Therese Daly, and I'm the interim executive director of NYATEP. We're the statewide workforce development association representing New York education, job training, adult education, postsecondary, and employment providers.

NYATEP's members serve over 1.2 million New Yorkers annually in education and employment services, and support thousands of businesses in the region as they train and employ talent. We greatly support your -- we greatly appreciate your support and efficacy of the fiscal year 2024 enacted State Budget that included a one-time income disregard for individuals completing an approved employment program.

We have some concerns, though, with the language requiring individuals are only eligible for those whose income does not exceed the 200 percent federal poverty level. We believe that this language limits the number of people who are able to participate because of the cap. This excludes individuals in New York City and Long Island.

We are asking the Legislature to include in their one-house budget proposals Senator Persaud's Bill S8374, which would remove the federal poverty level requirement for recipients where it concerns one-time disregard of earned income.

And as you know, Governor Hochul launched the Office of Strategic Workforce in 2022. The office has since announced only $35 million in funding released to the several projects of the $150 million set aside for grant funding. Despite the hope, this funding is highly inflexible and includes zero for the grant program. Without a state-dedicated investment, the only workforce funding that the state has is from the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act -- which has been, honestly, on the chopping block as of late.

Our success as a state will be measured by how well we support these New Yorkers as they recover from the pandemic. So our ask: We urge the Governor and the Legislature to spend down the

$150 million in grants that will provide much-needed flexible funding into the workforce system.

We also ask that you remove the policy barriers that make it difficult for poor New Yorkers to access good jobs.

And NYATEP strongly recommends both the one-house budget proposals include S8374, as above mentioned, and it would remove the federal poverty level requirement for recipients where it concerns the one-time disregard of earned income.

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Ms. Newman.

MS. NEWMAN: Hi. My name is Michelle Newman. I'm the associate executive director at COFCCA. We represent over 100 nonprofit organizations providing child welfare services in New York.

We were encouraged to see the Governor's State of the State highlight the significant mental health needs of youth. Her Executive Budget, though, falls short of

providing the immediate supports needed in child welfare, a critical component of the behavioral health system in a few key ways.

First, I want to strongly emphasize the sectorwide ask for additional investments in human services. The COLA, funding it at 3.2 percent instead of the proposed 1.5. We also strongly encourage inclusion of the Hevesi-Persaud bill to apply the COLA equitably across the sector. For our members, that means including prevention programs and health homecare managers serving children.

Second, the network of providers offering behavioral health services across New York is at risk unless we take state action this year to create a Child Victims Act settlement fund.

In 2019, the Legislature passed monumental legislation establishing the Child Victims Act, which provided a mechanism to give victims an avenue to seek justice against their abusers. However, without state intervention, some individuals may

never receive their due compensation, and thousands more children will be negatively impacted due to the loss of essential services.

A recent independent study from SeaChange notes that child welfare providers do not have the fiscal reserves to fund awards to victims where there is insufficient insurance coverage. Unfortunately, we have found that insurance coverage cannot be found at all in almost 40 percent of the cases in this sector. The study concludes that child welfare providers are at risk of either discontinuing essential services or failing completely.

In addition to their child welfare programming, our members offer a broad array of programs and services designed to prevent adverse childhood experiences and to promote child safety and well-being. Those are at risk. Examples include migrant services that support over 7,000 families in New York City alone; homeless services, antiviolence programs that have had a demonstrated impact

in reducing gun violence in communities statewide; mental and behavioral health services like HCBS, CFTSS, and Article 31 clinic services.

Unfortunately, the prospect of filing for bankruptcy has now become a reality for one of our programs on Long Island, where cases are moving the fastest. We see this as a sign of things to come later this year when cases move in the rest of the state. We need a path forward in this budget cycle.

Finally, I want to flag a provision we've learned more about in the health budget impacting our members -- a proposed $125 million cost savings in health homes serving children. Over 35,000 children and adolescents, primarily young people in need of support with mental health treatment, will be impacted if this goes through.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Let's start with Senator Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Great.

And thanks again for being here and

for all the work you do. I'm not sure if I'll get all those questions in in three minutes, but I'll just start with -- one's to call back to earlier, with the decoupling bill, we heard testimony from OCFS this morning indicating they expected it to cost in the neighborhood of $140 million. We've seen articles in the press calling that number unrealistic.

Do you think that the estimates of this number look accurate?

MS. HILL: I can jump in.

So our understanding of the assumptions underneath that estimate is they are assuming that every child who is in part-time care now receiving childcare assistance will go to full-time care.

We think that that is an overestimation, particularly given that many children are in publicly funded pre-K and they get childcare assistance for the before- and after-care. And so clearly those children will not go to full-time. And then we also know that families make different

decisions.

I would also just -- one other note, which is there is a real question as to whether it even needs to be lined out in the budget. There is a proposal to increase -- to do a quality increase in rates, and that is not lined out in the budget. It's just going to come out of the 1.8 billion for childcare assistance.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

And I have some follow-up questions for Schuyler Center and for Cornell.

I think I want to start by -- well, for Schuyler Center, in your 2024 State of New York's Children report, you note that childcare educators are less than 96 percent of occupations in New York State. I'd love for you to elaborate on how those low wages currently impact efforts to restore the childcare sector.

And for Cornell, I would love for you to elaborate on how the childcare crisis is currently impacting different populations in New York differently. I know in your report

you said that slots are up less than 3 percent from the lowest year of the pandemic, and that you noted that in 22 counties around New York the number of slots have actually declined.

So I'll just have those two questions to you in the time we have.

MS. HILL: I will just say really quickly that the state has expanded access to childcare assistance to a really great degree such that, you know, more than 300,000 children are newly income-eligible for assistance. But we are not keeping pace as far as capacity, and that's because of the workforce crisis.

MR. PERAZA: In areas where there are childcare deserts, there is an increasing loss of family daycare providers. We're just expanding a problem there.

Additionally, we did find a positive note in places like St. Lawrence County, where there were increases in providers due to childcare-desert grants.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much.

Ranker Assemblyman Ra.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you. Thank you all.

For COFCCA, regarding the CVA fund. In addition to that, what issues are your providers having in terms of getting reasonable insurance rates now as a result of all these past claims?

MS. NEWMAN: So yes, there is a very significant issue in the sector with obtaining liability insurance for our foster care providers. The CVA impact is undeniable in our ability to achieve coverage in the future.

Most if not all of our insurance companies are really bailing on providing foster care coverage, period. It is a mandated requirement of the counties and the state that we have that insurance coverage, and it is a real struggle. We have asked in the past for the state to help us in developing a risk pool to address that issue

going forward.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay. And then there is another issue, I know was in your written testimony that I don't think you got to, so if you want to talk a little bit about the maximum state aid rate in ensuring (A) that the COLA goes through the end of the provider year, as well as the COLAs building on top of one another.

MS. NEWMAN: Yes, thank you for raising that.

We understand language in the Executive Budget to extend the COLA through the fiscal year for our providers. Our foster care providers funded through the MSAR, that rate year goes through June 30th. However, in the past the state has dropped out the previous year's COLA, so we received, you know, 5.4 percent and then 4 percent, which inherently was a reduction after that was dropped and then the four was added.

So in every other sector we understand that that COLA is stacking and that it is reinvested year over year. It is intended

for staff, which is a year-over-year cost. We think that that should be applicable to our programs as well.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Great. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Good afternoon. Thank you. I just wanted to thank all of you for your support as we are trying to -- for the income disregards. You know, we've done some of it already, and you're all so supportive in getting us -- you know, getting us to that point. I just encourage you to keep fighting with us so that we can keep removing those blockages and that families can be lifted up.

I also want to ask you about legislation that we've introduced, what's your thoughts about it, where we're asking for an increase in SNAP benefits, cash payments and utilities payments, and also matching it to inflation. What is your thought on that?

And there's also another bill that another Senator -- a couple of others have

where they're asking for the increased SNAP benefits just to extend to $100 minimum. What are your thoughts?

Any and all of you.

MS. HILL: I'm happy to start.

Absolutely support all of those proposals. First of all, we know that cash supports are one of the most effective ways to reduce child and family poverty, and we need more of them, and particularly in the areas that -- you know, SNAP benefits and home heating.

We also know that food insecurity is on the rise, and this is due largely to the lapse of the federal -- you know, during the pandemic there were different federal supports that expanded SNAP assistance, also dramatically increased the federal child tax credit. And as a result, now that all of these have been pulled back, what -- you know, families are having to make choices again. And we know that families typically will pay their rent before they'll fill the refrigerator. And so we're seeing food

insecurity through the roof.

We are also really supportive of the School Meals for All, which also addresses this issue.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Yeah. We also know that School Meals for All and the Summer EBT is not going to cover all of the children because of the way the federal guidelines are. And so we're asking for a way to fix that. We'll see what the federal government says.

And just to be clear, SNAP is already adjusted for rate of inflation. It's the others that are not.

MS. HILL: Thank you.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you all very much. And again, thank you for your support.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Maher.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Hey, everybody.

So first I wanted to ask a question for Ms. Newman. I just wanted to say thank you for your testimony, all of you. And I was curious what you thought about some of

our providers, our childcare providers, that have come to me, to other offices of my colleagues, to say look, there were issues with our own expenses, with how hard it is to provide childcare.

They could really use waivers in terms of increasing that ratio where it is appropriate. Is that a problem that you've run into? What have your experiences been working with the agencies necessary to try to accomplish that?

MS. NEWMAN: So while some of our providers do, you know, engage in, you know, and provide childcare services, I would probably defer to, you know, my other colleagues at the table to weigh in on the, you know, specific issues facing providers.

I represent them on the child welfare side of the world, so it's -- I'm just not the expert there.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: No problem.

Does anybody want to touch that one?

MS. HILL: I will just say that childcare in New York State is highly

regulated for a very good reason. You know, as a parent of children who are long past their childcare days but spent their first years there, I wanted it to be highly regulated.

We also know that quality is tied really closely to close interactions with your caregiver, particularly for young children. And so high ratios means much better quality.

Obviously we'd be interested to see some of the details, but that's generally -- I just want to be clear.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Okay. No worries. Yup.

MS. DALY: And I was just going to add to that -- that was so beautifully said -- that we found -- NYATEP issues a report on the workforce, and we just released ours today, actually, on the state of the 2023 workforce. And I can tell you childcare is the biggest concern. We have childcare and transportation.

But the problem behind it is that one

of the parents ends up -- cannot afford -- they can't afford childcare, so then one parent must give up a career and one parent must stay home. And if our goal is to have a more equitable workforce, it starts with childcare, it starts with transportation for those individuals to get to the jobs or to drop the children off at the childcare.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Thank you. I agree.

And I just want to make sure that our conference and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle just also keep in mind the providers, because we need to do more for those folks that are doing the work. But we also have to be mindful of that business model of a provider so we can encourage more individuals to own and run those businesses in the future, because we need to do that as well.

Thank you all for the work you do.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Senate?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Murray.

SENATOR MURRAY: Thank you, Chairwoman.

And thank you all for being here. I appreciate everything you do.

But I want to target this quickly to Ms. Newman.

I met with a group -- representatives from your group earlier in the week. You had mentioned a couple of things that are impacting you such as Child Victims Act, trouble getting liability insurance, things like this. But there's another one that's looming big as well: Labor Law 191, regarding manual labor and frequency of pay.

Many of the agencies are having suits filed against them. There are claims being made. And this is happening to companies all across New York. But they're being claimed against them saying that damages -- and they take it back as far as six years that they -- damages were imposed, but there were no damages. As far as the frequency of pay, they were getting every penny they were

supposed to get, whether they were manual labor or not.

Our problem is we have no clear definition of manual labor right now. So they were going on the site that -- yes, they were manual labor, they should have been paid weekly. They were paid biweekly. They got every penny, didn't lose anything. However, they have these massive lawsuits. And I was told that lawsuits facing some of the agencies that you represent were in the numbers of 30 million or so.

What would happen -- right now the good news is the Governor put language in -- our Article VII language in the ELFA section that says they won't have a private right of action, they can't file suit and get damages. The courts agreed a couple days after that language came out. Looks like that's good, but appeals have been filed.

If those appeals go through, what could that do to the agencies that -- I mean, what is the damage we're looking at?

MS. NEWMAN: So I would have to check

back in with some of our providers to get you details on, you know, the suits that they're facing and the impacts of those.

But I will tell you, you know, the study that was done by SeaChange has looked at the fiscal viability of the entire sector, and the surpluses don't exist. There isn't additional funding, you know, in our programs.

But I would have to, again, check back in with our providers on that particular issue. And we are looking at those provisions within the Article VII.

SENATOR MURRAY: Yeah, I've heard a number somewhere in the area of $30 million, could be the number.

But if this language stays, which I'm strongly urging and hoping that the language stays, it would be okay, they wouldn't have the private right of action, because there were no damages. So -- but if that were to happen, the impact on small businesses -- but I'm concerned about your agencies and the services that are provided -- they couldn't

exist. So we --

MS. NEWMAN: Thank you for your support.

(Laughter.)

SENATOR MURRAY: Yeah, we're urging everyone, keep the language, please, because we need that protection.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Mitaynes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

The Cornell ILR survey participants in the childcare sector have indicated that providers only have half their classrooms open. Could you say a bit more about how the childcare sector is having difficulty staffing childcare slots and making them actually available?

MR. PERAZA: So we're finding that there just aren't enough workers for these providers to service all of the customers or parents that are coming to them. And this has been a major crisis. In a qualitative study of providers in Erie County, a major

crisis has been that there have been a lot of subsidized families coming. And because those subsidies aren't meeting the true cost of care, and because workers are leaving, childcare providers, to work in service industries and other local competitors, they have to leave -- our group family providers, family daycare providers are leaving spots open in order to profit. In order to keep, you know, their business balanced.

It's been a -- this is one of the -- the number-one criticism among providers is that they're unable to actually fill capacity because they cannot pay for the workers that are -- that they employ.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Yeah, and I see the rest of you nodding your head, too. Thank you.

I yield the rest of my time.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Assemblymember.

Assemblyman Manktelow.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you.

What we see up in upstate New York,

where I'm from, we see a lot of businesses that are moving to providing childcare at their businesses as one of the perks or benefits of working there.

I was just wondering, what are your thoughts on that?

MR. PERAZA: I think it's a fascinating approach, one that needs to be studied carefully. Because we do see that there are other alternatives. For example, the Governor's kind of approach to Micron and -- so we really want to see -- we need to have both, I think, multiple ways of addressing this problem. Particularly the workforce is the largest one that providers are talking about.

But it is particularly interesting to see what this enterprise model will yield. It's not necessarily one or the other, though. I think that's an important designation to make, that we're seeing through this research and then also from the work that our colleagues are doing at Empire State Campaign for Child Care.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Yeah, yeah, I agree. I don't think there's one-size-fits-all here, I think it's got to be from both sides, of course.

If businesses choose to do this, what it does is it allows the business owners, the companies, to know they have a good solid workforce. It allows the workers to know that they have a place for their children to go.

And my other thought is businesses that do this, would you support them having a tax break for doing so?

MR. PERAZA: I think that -- you know, I don't really know if I would support -- I'm not really thinking about it that way, as much as I'm thinking about multiple approaches and economic activity growing as a result of investing in workers.

I think the business enterprise model doesn't necessarily directly address the workforce compensation issue. It does address providers, which I think is a very important constituency in this industry. But

right now the number-one crisis is workforce. And so my only concern about that particular policy is that it doesn't directly address the workforce.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Well, I think part of it does, because the workforce -- if they don't have a place for their child, you're not going to have the workforce. That's what we're seeing across the board.

And just asking you really quick -- take your hat off as who you are now. But as a taxpayer, would you support the tax credits for the businesses?

MR. PERAZA: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Perfect.

Thank you so much for your testimony, and thank you all for being here.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. Thank you very much.

I'm going to close with my last three minutes. Thank you to Senator Krueger.

Okay, very quickly, because I'm mindful of the time. Yes or no question: Is

there any way to have a successful childcare system in New York State without a permanent workforce fund?

MS. HILL: It sounds like a double negative or something. But no, there is no way.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Say it the right way.

MS. HILL: Can I be very clear --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Did you say it the right way?

MS. HILL: Yeah, I'm going to say it in the affirmative. We need a permanent Workforce Compensation Fund for the childcare workforce.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Do you agree with that?

(Laughter.)

MS. DALY: Yes.

MR. PERAZA: Yes.

MS. NEWMAN: Who could not?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay, great.

Ms. Daly and everybody, thank you for

your testimony.

I don't have a follow-up for you. I do have other follow-ups, so please forgive me. And I'll ask them quick. So you know what, I'm just going to list them out and see what we can get.

So, Ms. Hill, if you could at some point, either during this testimony or after, explain the rate increase for family neighbor childcare, that would be very helpful.

Mr. Peraza, I would like to know more about the uneven benefits and what -- who are we hitting? Is this rural, is this minority communities?

And then one other thing for Cornell, if I could ask. I'd like to know, potentially long term, how many childcare workers are on public assistance? Because there's a logic to just redirecting that money and paying the darn workforce. Sorry for my language.

And then, Ms. Newman -- and I'm sorry about the time -- what would happen if your agencies don't have liability insurance?

Those are my questions. So, Ms. Hill, go. Lightning round, I guess. Thank you.

MS. HILL: Really fast. With respect to family, friend and neighbor childcare, which we -- it's also referred to as legally exempt childcare -- they have typically not been included -- well, they have not been included in the stabilization grants.

And when we think about a workforce fund, the permanent workforce fund, it will likely follow a similar model. A very direct way to raise rates for family, friend, and neighbor is through a rate increase.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Mr. Peraza?

MR. PERAZA: Uneven benefits of that bundle of policies, 2021 to 2022, we see 75 licensed providers that are new, 18,731 slots that are new. But we have seen 388 establishments gone among family daycare providers.

And then, look, in Erie County we've lost providers, we've lost slots. And our providers are saying, We need more money to

help our workers.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

And Ms. Newman, with your 26 seconds.

MS. NEWMAN: Oh, it's much shorter than that.

Without liability insurance, we can't provide services.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Which means that we're violating the law, hurting those kids, and can't provide services.

Good. Okay. Thank you all for your testimony. I greatly appreciate it.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Wait, you didn't let the last person answer.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Oh, Ms. Daly, I'm so sorry.

MS. DALY: Oh, no, I was just going to say thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Oh. Well, thank you.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. Thank you to everybody on this panel.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Panel F.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Is that me?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, it's you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. Actually, it's Panel -- yup, Panel F. If I can call down Raising New York, Jenn O'Connor, the coalition lead; the New York State Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs, Justin Reuter, the CEO. The Bridge Project, we have Stephanie Silkowski, director of policy and strategic initiatives. And the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance, with Kate Ryan, the director.

Thank you for coming down.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I just got very good advice from another colleague that we're on F, but if people who are on G want to head towards the front, you can get into place more quickly once Panel F is done.

Not that I'm pressuring you at all, you're here. So thank you. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Sure.

Ms. O'Connor, please.

MS. O'CONNOR: Hi. Thank you for having me. Jenn O'Connor, director of partnerships and early childhood policy for

The Education Trust-New York.

The Ed Trust-New York runs the Raising NY Coalition, and that's a diverse statewide coalition of parents, early childhood education, business and health organizations.

A number of our members have already testified here today, so I'm not going to reiterate what they said. But our focus is on improving long-term outcomes for infants and toddlers who are low-income, children of color, and from underserved populations.

I'm going to read you a number here: New York State spends $23.9 billion on all early childhood programs, but of that $23.9 billion, only $5.26 billion is spent on childcare, family support, and prevention programs. So I'm going to focus my remarks to those issues.

We've got a couple of high points for the Raising NY Coalition. One is to invest in the childcare workforce -- you've heard that over and over again today. New York State has greatly increased capacity, but

increased capacity to what? Programs are closing. Providers don't want to be providers, can't be providers anymore because they're not being paid enough.

So again, increasing capacity is fantastic, but it doesn't matter if there are no programs for kids to be in. We need to revisit and adopt the decoupling bill. Dede already told you it's probably not going to cost what the state thought it was going to cost, and so we need to look into that again. And we need to support a move toward utilization of a cost-estimation model away from the market rate.

We have done a cost-estimation model with Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies, which is a national group. We have spoken to OCFS about using that cost model to influence their cost model. They seem very open to that. And so we would just like your support in again moving away from the market rate and towards a cost-estimation model.

Our other big issue is home visiting. The state spends about $46 million on the

Healthy Families Program, and that program serves every county in the state at this point. The state also spends a little over $4 million on the Nurse-Family Partnership program -- that's at the Health table, so I won't bore you with that -- but I will bore you, they want a $1.5 million increase.

But I'll focus my remarks on the Parent-Child Plus program, which only gets a couple hundred thousand dollars. They're asking for an increase to $500,000 this year. And that expansion is important because they are primarily an early literacy program, they focus on reading. They hire graduates of the program, so folks who work -- who live in the community go back to work in the community. And they also, over the last couple of years, have used expansion dollars to connect with home-based childcare programs.

Really, really briefly, Raising NY -- also it doesn't sit at this table -- but supports the Working Families tax credit, evidence-based investments in early literacy. We launched the New York State Campaign for

Early Literacy yesterday --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. Thank you, Ms. O'Connor.

MS. O'CONNOR: -- continuous Medicaid coverage for children aged zero to six, and then an 11 percent increase in Early Intervention.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much.

Please, yeah. You've just got to hold it.

MS. RIVENBURGH: Sorry. First time.

Good afternoon, Chairperson Krueger and Children and Family Chairpersons Brisport and Hevesi and the rest of the committee. My name is Lori Rivenburgh, and I'm with the Town of Wallkill Boys & Girls Club, serving Northern Orange and Sullivan counties in the Hudson Valley.

I'm testifying today on behalf of the New York State Alliance for Boys & Girls Clubs, to speak to you about the important role after-school plays in communities across the state, ensuring kids feel safe, valued,

and respected. Thank you for this tremendous opportunity.

The New York State Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs represents 118 club sites across New York State serving 92,000 children annually. While this is a substantial number, the fact is every day over 580,000 kids in New York leave school with nowhere to go. They risk being unsupervised, unguided, and unsafe.

Kids today face many challenges, including gang and gun violence, substance use and abuse and other unhealthy behaviors. Ensuring that they have a safe place to go after school where they feel protected and supported is critical to the future of our young people.

For more than 160 years, Boys and Girls Clubs have fostered hope and opportunity by cultivating the potential in every young person. Clubs offer homework help, career readiness, and programs such as arts, sports, and financial literacy -- all in safe and nurturing environments.

Everything offered at the club has an educational component which helps children and youth at school, build character and leadership skills, and engage in healthy behaviors.

Historically there have been two major funding streams in New York State for after school: Advantage After School Program and Empire State After-School Program. The Executive Budget proposes to combine these two funding streams into a single program in order to create efficiencies and streamline differences between the two programs.

We are encouraged by the news that the Executive and OCFS are working on a new RFP for this funding stream, but strongly encourage the timely release of the RFP. And also we hope to see that the RFP is fair, flexible, and allows Boys and Girls Clubs across the state an equal opportunity to apply. In addition, I hope it takes into consideration the differences in communities and size of providers across the state, as a smaller, rural Boys and Girls Club

sometimes -- competitive processes have been prohibitive in the past, and our rural communities still see the same challenges as our bigger metro communities.

Lastly, we encourage the Legislature to continue to champion additional funding for after-school. Typically the Legislature adds funding for one or two of the previously mentioned after-school programs, and we encourage you to do the same this year. As I mentioned, there are many underserved children and youth across the state who could benefit from additional funding.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I'm happy to answer any questions that you may have.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you so much.

MS. SILKOWSKI: Okay. Hello, everyone. Thank you all so much for being here. It's nice to see so many faces still here late in the day.

I'm Stephanie Silkowski, and I'm the director of policy for The Bridge Project.

We are a cash transfer program for expecting mothers. We have 1200 program participants scattered throughout the five boroughs, and have recently expanded to Rochester and Buffalo.

I'm really thrilled to be here to talk about the economic hardships that many of the moms in our program face, and many of your constituents. Poverty and in particular child poverty, as you know well, is high and will likely continue to worsen if economic trends continue.

Half of the top six cities in the entire U.S. with the highest child-poverty rates are in New York State. In Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse, one in two children lives in poverty -- and New York City isn't far behind, with one in four children living in poverty. Additionally, a recent report showed that almost half of New York City residents can't actually afford to live there, can't afford basic needs, and you need to be pulling in six figures to afford childcare and housing and food.

And we can't talk about any of these issues without really centering the disproportionate impact on communities of color. This inequity is also reflected in New York State's really significant disparities in maternal health outcomes across racial lines.

We can't continue to turn a blind eye to both child poverty and maternal health. And while some progress has been made with philanthropically funded programs like ours at The Bridge Project, and the now-expired child tax credit, there is really little progress to address the need statewide.

So I'm really proud to be here in support of the MILC bill, the Mothers and Infants Lasting Change Allowance bill, which would create a publicly administered and adopted cash-transfer program particularly for low-income moms during the last three months of their pregnancy and throughout the first 18 months of a child's life.

There is a ton of research and data that I could point you to on the efficacy of

cash transfers, particularly for such a targeted population like the one that the MILC bill addresses. And the MILC bill, I think, is particularly special in addressing two issues all at once in a relatively simple, cost-effective way.

If you care about solving child poverty, if you care about addressing maternal health, I would really urge you to support this bill. This would be the largest cash-transfer program of its kind to exist across the country and would really be a bold step for New York State to lead here. So we urge the Legislature and Governor Hochul to include the MILC bill in the budget.

And happy to answer any questions about cash-transfer policy, our program, or the bill.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Well, thank you.

MS. RYAN: Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Kate Ryan, and I'm the director of the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance, a coalition of childcare providers, employers,

community organizations, and parents across the Adirondacks and the North Country.

The alliance is focused on connecting resources to those in need, assisting our community, collaborative opportunities, and supporting policy and funding for young children and their families.

The Adirondack region is home to approximately 7,000 children three years of age or younger. Our population density is less than 1/10th of the state average. Our landscape presents unique challenges. Families often need to travel over an hour to access employment, resources, healthcare, and very often childcare. We require an array of options for care such as family, group, and center-based childcare. To do this, our region requires varied strategies for recruitment and retention of providers while also ensuring quality, affordability, and accessibility.

Careful consideration is needed for policy and funding to positively impact our communities. Rural regions require childcare

beyond our deserts. Although nearly 70 percent of our region census tracts remain childcare deserts, this isn't the full story.

Families often require childcare in higher-population-density areas not deemed to be deserts, as this is where parents drive to work. Unfortunately, these population centers are sometimes left out of funding opportunities. Increasing capacity in these areas is critical to community and economic success.

We need investments in the childcare workforce. I would like to share our support for the Empire State Campaign for Child Care's agenda. As a member of the campaign, we too support the need to invest in the childcare workforce. There is simply not enough capacity until we recognize those in the field must be compensated for their work. We will simply never stabilize the sector decoupling childcare assistance from direct hours of parents' work.

The alliance also supports fully funding the policy adopted in 2022 to do

this. This simple policy recognizes that family life is dynamic, and if we want people to stay in the Adirondacks, we need to help them do the simple things we all take for granted: Going to the doctor, running errands. When going to an appointment may take several hours of travel, knowing you can access childcare is a blessing and a benefit that will develop in healthier, happier, less-stressed lives.

We require continued support of childcare resource and referral agencies. Because we have and require a higher percentage of home-based childcare, our community relies on our CCR&Rs to skillfully target resources to support new providers to become licensed and offer technical assistance and professional assistance to providers. It is critically important that CCR&R's funding formula recognizes the time and effort they need to build capacity in an environment relying on family and group family childcare. Yes, the federal support helped in a time of crisis, but we need

continued investment in access, quality, and affordability.

Recently the state increased the childcare assistance eligibility threshold, and this has helped families who can find healthcare. But we need to do more to recruit and support childcare providers. We can't forget that these are businesses, many owned by single mothers. We need to invest in their capacity to maintain and grow their businesses.

We also need to invest in QUALITYstarsNY to ensure it will provide high-quality childcare. My comments today and the specific recommendations included in my written testimony only address a fraction of the issues faced in the Adirondacks and other rural regions of New York State.

I appreciate the opportunity to share these thoughts and hope to work with you to identify strategies to support the families living and working in the Adirondacks.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Okay. Sorry, you guys -- oh, yes, perfect.

Assemblymember Mitaynes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

This question is for Ms. O'Connor. Can you tell us what sets ParentChild+ apart from other home visiting programs?

MS. O'CONNOR: So like I said, there are three main home visiting programs in the State of New York, and then a number of local home visiting programs. They each serve specific populations, so eligibility is different for each of those programs.

Like I said, ParentChild+ really likes to hire graduates of the program to go back and work as home visitors in the community, so that's number one. Number two is the focus on early literacy and language development and reading. And number three is their very unique partnerships with childcare programs, with home-based childcare programs.

So they have a curriculum that they use to go into those home-based childcare programs and work with those providers like

they would work with parents, which we just think is a really great model and a great continuum.

So we need all of the programs, but ParentChild+ has been historically underfunded compared to the other programs, and so that's why we're asking for that increase and that expansion.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

MS. O'CONNOR: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Senator Cleare. Ask and you shall receive.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, Chair.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Sure.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. So first of all, I have to -- I agree with -- you know, you've got to pay people. It's -- that's it, that's the bottom line. People have to get paid.

But I want to know more about some of your services in particular. Are they across the state? Where are the services you spoke about? Jenn, I'm sorry.

MS. O'CONNOR: So I talked -- so Raising NY is a coalition. So the services that we are supporting are childcare workforce, home visiting workforce, Early Intervention workforce. When we talk about the workforce, we're really talking about the caring community as a whole.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay.

MS. O'CONNOR: Statewide.

SENATOR CLEARE: All right, thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great, thank you.

I think that's it except for me, so please put two hours on the clock for my next round of questioning.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Sorry.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I'm noticing. I'm watching.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Yeah, I know. I'll never be here again, so I'm going to enjoy it.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So, Ms. O'Connor, let me start with you. Can you explain the

importance of early childhood literacy, particularly when you focus on the "serve and return" -- that's correct, that's what I'm asking -- and how that prevents adverse childhood experiences and trauma. In less than 30 seconds, please.

(Laughter.)

MS. O'CONNOR: So when you're talking about the zero to three or zero to five population, you're talking about attachment. You're talking about language development. You're not talking about reading, right, at that point in time.

So "serve and return" is me talking to you, you talking to me. Me reading to you, you hearing my voice. You're learning words. And that strengthens the nurturing and strengthens the relationship. And we know that adverse childhood experiences can be mitigated by a relationship with a caring adult.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thank you very much.

For the Boys and Girls Clubs, a quick

question for you. Very interesting to hear about the timely -- importance of the timely release of the RFP. Please know that we are a resource. If that doesn't come down or the RFP is not where you'd want it, please let us know and we can intervene.

One quick question; I think it's a yes or a no. Do you support the After-School Network's ask for ALEP, for the 219 million that is above and beyond what we've got -- 100 million -- in this year's budget?

MS. RIVENBURGH: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thank you. That was easy.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Ms. Silkowski, I just want to tell you we hear you about the bill and -- the MILC bill. I don't know what else to say about that except Senator Persaud is right again.

And then Ms. Ryan, could I ask you a question? Because this has been bothering me for a while. Because I had the luxury of visiting the Adirondacks; we went to an

outdoor childcare center. It was the coolest thing I've ever seen. But part of the problem for childcare in the Adirondacks is transportation. Can you speak to that a bit and how we address that, you know, perhaps in this budget?

MS. RYAN: I think the general support of building the workforce around childcare. I mean, the reality is that to break the barriers of transportation, we need childcare close to where the families are. And so that needs to be -- that's often family and group family childcare. And so we have to build the capacity, and we need the providers to do it.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: It's not easy, like, you know, buy a couple of buses to take kids -- no, you've got to fix those deserts.

MS. RYAN: I don't think -- yup. Nope.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Got it. I very much appreciate it.

Thank you all for your testimony here today. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you all very much.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay, Panel G. From the Albany Damien Center, Perry Junjulas, the executive director. From SAGE Advocacy Services for LGBTQ+ Elders, MJ Okma, senior manager for advocacy and government relations. And from Equality New York, Erin Brigid, community organizer.

Thank you all for being here tonight. Feel free. Anybody who wants to jump in, thank you.

MR. JUNJULAS: I'm Perry Junjulas, I'm the executive director at the Albany Damien Center and also a person who's been living with AIDS since 1995.

I can definitively state today that I am alive today because of the investments New York State has made in HIV and AIDS services in New York State, for which I am extremely grateful.

I speak to you today on behalf of very-low-income persons with HIV who are homeless and unstably housed outside of

New York City who do not have access to rental assistance. Numerous studies have shown that housing is an evidence-based HIV health intervention that enables persons with HIV to take their medications, which extends their lives and stops the spread of HIV to others.

Now, since 2016 in New York City, New York State and the city have ensured that every single low-income New Yorker with HIV has had access to housing with the rate cap of 30 percent of their income. This is not the case for persons with HIV outside of New York City.

Now, for the past five years, the New York State budget has contained the intent to fix this issue. But the language has not housed one single person with HIV outside of New York City. This year's budget contains the same language that will not help anyone. This language allows but does not require local departments of social services to provide meaningful HIV housing assistance and provides no state funding to support the

cost to local districts outside of New York City.

To finally provide equitable statewide access to HIV housing supports, we need to correct the relevant Aid to Localities language on public assistance benefits and enact Article VII legislation to do three things: Ensure that every local department of social services provides low-income persons with HIV access to the New York State HIV Emergency Rental Allowance Program to support 100 percent of HUD fair-market value, as it is in New York City. Number two, make affordable housing protections available statewide to cap the share of rent for a low-income person with HIV at 30 percent of income. And number three, recognize the fiscal reality of counties outside of New York City and have the state pick up 100 percent of the cost of providing the shelter allowances.

Now, providing this assistance is cost-neutral. An analysis by OTDA fiscal staff has determined the costs in the first

year would be 3 million, offset by Medicaid savings of 4 million. In the outyears, Medicaid savings would exceed housing costs by as much as 13 million annually.

Furthermore, OTDA Acting Commissioner Guinn has expressed support for this change in the budget language.

I thank you for listening to the testimony today.

MR. OKMA: Hi. Good afternoon. My name is MJ Okma, the senior manager of advocacy and government relations at SAGE.

SAGE has been serving LGBTQ+ elders and older New Yorkers living with HIV for over four decades, providing comprehensive social services and community-building programming through a network of LGBTQ+-welcoming older adult centers across New York City. We also engage in partners in the Hudson Valley, Long Island, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo.

New York State ranks among the top 10 states in terms of percentage of the population that identifies as LGBTQ+, and

one-third of LGBTQ+ New Yorkers are over the age of 50. Additionally, the number of New Yorkers aging with HIV is also growing rapidly, with 73 percent of all New Yorkers living with HIV estimated to be over 50 by 2030.

LGBTQ+ elders and older people living with HIV rely more heavily on community service providers due to thin support networks, yet they're often distrustful of providers after a long history of stigma and discrimination. For many of those elders, New York State is their lifeline.

It is because of them I'm here today asking for your support in this year's budget, including a renewal of 300,000 to support LGBTQ+ residents and community members in and around New York State's first LGBTQ+-welcoming affordable elder housing developments; a renewal of 150,000 to increase our multilingual services and programming; a renewal of $2,000 for the SAGE Veterans Program; and a new funding designation of 150,000 to help meet the

growing demand for services among New Yorkers aging with HIV.

With your support, SAGE has been able to evolve and expand to best address the widespread disparities facing these populations. We've worked with prominent developers to directly address the housing insecurity experienced by the communities. We grew the upstate footprint of the SAGEVets program. We launched food pantry initiatives to help participants in and around our centers -- that are open for all -- which further integrated them in their community. And we expanded our multilingual programming into Spanish, Mandarin, and Cantonese.

Additionally, our SAGEVets program supports the unique needs of LGBTQ+ veterans, aiding in their overall health and wellness and providing referrals to counsel regarding discharge status upgrades. We provide this life-changing support while saving New York significant amounts of funding by ensuring veterans access all their federal benefits instead of relying solely on state programs

to address their housing and healthcare needs.

This year we're also seeking a new funding designation to expand the SAGEPositive program that connects the growing population of New Yorkers aging with HIV to a wide range of services, including sexual wellness workshops, social events, HIV and STI testing, case management, caregiver support, educational forums, and more.

I also want to echo Perry's remark about the urgent call to action to end homelessness among New Yorkers living with HIV by ensuring all New Yorkers have access to the meaningful rental assistance that has been available in New York City since 2016. As currently written, the budget language has not successfully housed a single person with HIV despite being in the past five budgets. This language must be corrected.

SAGE also supports the inclusion of A6214 and S7663 in the active budget to increase the SNAP minimum benefit to $100.

Thank you so much.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

MS. BRIGID: Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Erin Brigid. I serve as the community organizer for Equality New York, the only statewide advocacy organization dedicated to advancing equality and justice for LGBTQI+ New Yorkers and their families.

In 2023 we faced an alarming surge of over 500 anti-LGBTQI+ bills nationwide, including in New York State. This wave poses a serious threat to the progress and safety of our community.

Equality New York has been at the forefront working relentlessly to protect and promote the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals and their families. Our organization represents over 120 organizations and 5500 members deeply invested in direct community engagement and empowerment, and it is this diverse and vibrant community that I represent here today.

Recent data from the Williams

Institute at UCLA indicates that 5.5 percent of New York State's population, equating to approximately 853,000 people, identify as LGBTQI+. Our work has highlighted the need for safer environments in schools for trans and nonbinary youth, improved access to health and legal services, and the rectification of systemic issues that lead to the misgendering and disrespect of our community members.

Despite our progress, there remains much to be done. Through initiatives like the LGBTQI+ Advocacy Institute we have catalyzed over three dozen statewide projects tackling critical issues ranging from educational reforms to healthcare improvements. Notable achievements include the establishment of a transgender peer-support program in Rochester hospitals and the development of a gay/straight alliance in schools across upstate New York.

A significant challenge we have identified is the lack of specialized skills among governmental service-based

organizations to adequately serve LGBTQ+ communities, particularly in the transgender, nonconforming, nonbinary individuals.

Additionally, many LGBTQ+ individuals are unaware of their rights when interacting with human services. This is especially true for TGNCNB individuals who face significant hurdles in accessing these services, particularly among BIPOC communities.

The Gender Expression Nondiscrimination Act passed in 2019 has been a pivotal step in protecting these rights, but there's still a long road ahead. Therefore, we're requesting 100,000 in funding. This amount will make a substantial impact in addressing the physical, mental, and economic challenges facing the LGBTQI+ and TGNCNB communities -- 75,000 to conduct 12 cultural sensitivity training sessions and 25,000 to develop and disseminate a comprehensive Know Your Rights campaign.

Thank you so much for considering our request and your commitment to serving the people of New York.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much.

Okay, you guys are stuck with me. So here goes my three minutes.

So first, Mr. Junjulas, am I correct in understanding that OTDA has a study saying that this is going to save money, and still we're not doing this? How is that possible?

MR. JUNJULAS: {Mic issue.} Sorry. We worked with OTDA fiscal staff on an analysis, and they agreed with our assumptions that showed the Medicaid savings and that we do have backup support from that.

So yeah, I do not understand exactly.

And also, too, it will prevent new HIV infections. And that's one of the big takeaways here, is that when we get people housed, we're able to take our meds, we do not pass the virus then on to others, and so therefore we can actually end the epidemic.

So costwise it makes sense, but also humanwise it makes sense, because we're going to be saving lives through this initiative.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: And that analysis

was done in what year? Just curious. I don't need to know this, I'm just curious.

MR. JUNJULAS: What's -- I'm sorry?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: The analysis was done in what year?

MR. JUNJULAS: The analysis was done this past year.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Oh, this past year.

MR. JUNJULAS: Yeah, this past year we actually --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Ah, so one would have hoped it would have been reflected in this year's budget, but not so far.

Okay. And the language change that you're talking about, it's just a "may" to a "shall," right? That's what you're talking about?

MR. JUNJULAS: It's -- it's really just the -- in the Aid for Localities, and also in the Article VII, you know, just to -- right now the language cannot house anyone because local districts are not required, they can opt in. And nobody's opting in,

because of the money.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Very much appreciate it. We'll look to pursue that in the budget, and I will -- there were a lot of smaller asks for both of those who you gave testimony today. So we'll look to do those.

I do -- the one thing, Mr. Okma, if I can, that piqued my attention was the rapid increase of people living with HIV over 50. Could you expound on that? Is that going to be a problem that continues to get exponentially more difficult to handle?

MR. OKMA: Yes. It's definitely something that New York State has to take action to invest in now, because it is a rapidly growing population, and this is for a number of reasons.

One, just the population as a whole is aging, and thanks to the activism that was born right here in New York State, there's all these medical advances that are allowing people with HIV to live longer lives.

MR. JUNJULAS: (Pointing to self.) Alive. Alive.

(Laughter.)

MR. OKMA: But on top of that, 17 percent of new diagnoses last year were among New Yorkers over the age of 50, because of the combination of ageism and -- ageism and HIV stigma means that PrEP -- PrEP, HIV testing, all of these things are not really targeted towards older adults. Which is one of the reasons why programs like SAGEPositive are so impactful.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: That's great.

And Ms. Brigid, I don't have a lot of time, but you did pique my interest with the fact that the BIPOC community is not familiar with their rights. Is there something that we can do besides the asks in your testimony to address that? Or it's the asks we should focus on?

MS. BRIGID: (Mic off; inaudible) -- a lot of things that had to be abridged because of time was the Know Your Rights campaign that we're planning encompasses both virtual platforms and social media featuring public service announcements, and the distribution

of over 1,000 informational posters. And these materials will focus on rights of individuals in schools, healthcare settings, and other human service entities.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great, thank you. I've run out of time.

No, I see Assemblymember Simon has a question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Thank you. Thank you all for your testimony.

So Erin, from Equality New York. You mentioned a program that was -- if I got it correctly, was a program that helped people get gender-affirming care in Rochester. Or is that -- and I'm curious, (A) did I get that right? (B) Are there programs like that at the other sort of bigger upstate cities? Because New York being different than New York City.

MS. BRIGID: Well, it's a -- well, it's not a gender-affirming-care program, it's a -- the Rochester one is a transgender peer-support program.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Okay.

MS. BRIGID: So it's -- that would be more -- I don't have all the details on it, but we could get you more details on it.

But peer support is generally just -- more along the lines of just like a counseling and being able to reach out to and talk to one another.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Yeah. No, I understand what it is. I just had misheard it, obviously, and I was curious about it.

Thank you. Appreciate it.

MS. BRIGID: You're welcome. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you all for testifying. We really appreciate it.

And -- I'm sorry, that was outrageous and silly. Senator Cleare, I apologize.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: That wasn't outrageous.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Thank you all for your testimony and for hanging in there.

I'm alarmed by the rising rates of HIV, especially in the aging community. And if there's something that we can do, if you

could let us know what we can do to help mitigate some of that -- education-wise, testing-wise. Is there somewhere where we need to be looking to put funding? I'd love to hear it.

MR. JUNJULAS: (Mic issue; inaudible) -- for the rest of state housing, to help people outside of New York City, you know, that certainly will help. Because we absolutely do have persons who are over 50 living with HIV who are homeless. I see them during the day all the time at the Damien Center, and they go out to homelessness.

The second thing is is that we do have an HIV testing bill to make HIV testing a routine part of care. Too many persons are visiting the ERs and some of the health clinics and they're not being tested for HIV.

And so we are looking to streamline the process to make HIV testing a routine part of care. This way we can actually identify new HIV cases, but also if someone is negative, we can get them on PrEP, which can prevent new HIV infections, and also test

for STIs and hep C.

MR. OKMA: Yeah, what I would add on to that is that there's a great need of just building HIV awareness and competency at older adult centers across the state. Just a lot of people in the sector -- and we've been partnering with NYSOFA for this, and they've been -- Commissioner Olsen has been a great partner, but there is a lack of understanding of HIV in the aging sector. And also sometimes sexual health and wellness is seen as a taboo, and that type of programming is not standardly offered in these settings. And it should be.

I think one other thing that would be really impactful is we hear all the time that our participants have not been offered PrEP, or PrEP where they're -- it's not considered, it's not seen as an intervention for them. I think a targeted HIV prevention campaign specifically centering the images and messages for older adults would be incredibly impactful and something that hasn't happened.

And I would also add that the Ending

the Epidemic Legislative Committee also has a budget request this year for $10 million to support these types of programs and services. They've instituted a pilot program, about $4 million for HIV and aging services over five years. That was great. They're really thinking about this. That's not adequate for meeting the growing population.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thank you, Senator Cleare, and my apologies again.

And thank you to everyone in this panel. Very much appreciate it.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Thank you.

PANELISTS: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay, Panel H: Supportive Housing Network, Stephen Piasecki, state policy manager; New Destiny Housing, Gabriela Sandoval Requena, director of policy and communications; Immigration Law & Justice New York, Reverend Paul Fleck; and Center for New York City Affairs, The New School,

Lauren Melodia.

MR. PIASECKI: Shall I get going?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Yeah, you want to start us off?

MR. PIASECKI: Sure, why not.

Thanks to the chair. Chair Krueger, Chair Hevesi, Chair Persaud, thank you guys for hanging in there with us. And thanks, everybody that's still here. This is an amazing turnout for somebody like me.

(Laughter.)

MR. PIASECKI: So appreciate that.

And I'm here to change the subject to something completely different -- not for the Supportive Housing Network of New York, but at least for today's testimony. We're focused like a laser on the NYSSHP program, New York State's Supportive Housing Program. This is a legacy program that dates back to the 1980s. And we have in the last couple of years been comparing this program with the current state program known as ESSHI, Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative. I see Assemblymember Hevesi nodding his head,

because you were a big champion of that.

And the comparison is actually shocking and revelatory. And so this year we formulated a proposal to make NYSSHP more like the ESSHI program, to get NYSSHP to work like ESSHI in a couple of different ways.

So I'll paint the picture for you first. I am from the Supportive Housing Network of New York. We're a membership organization with 200 members that are nonprofits around the state that do a variety of different supportive housing.

There's about 58,000 units of supportive housing in New York. Not enough. The state is doing a great job working on it with this new program, halfway through towards 20,000 units of supportive housing.

NYSSHP also touches 20,000 units of supportive housing in a much different way. NYSSHP is funded as low as $2700 per person per year, whereas ESSHI starts at $25,000, so it's 10 times as large. A couple of other differences to note are that NYSSHP primarily focuses on services -- it's almost totally a

services program -- whereas ESSHI does both services and operating. That's really kind of a state-of-the-art new model that the state created, and it gives a lot more resources to the ongoing operation and supports of supportive housing buildings.

So it's complicated by the fact that NYSSHP works in a lot of different ways all around the state. So we dug deeply and we looked at, you know, what is going on. And of the 20,000 units, about half of them are in New York City, a little bit more than half. And it is a statewide program. But 9,000 of the 20,000, NYSSHP is the only services funding available. And, you know, that really means that that 2700 per person is all that's going to services, which is really challenging.

Then we dug a little bit deeper as we were doing the comparison with ESSHI, and we saw that 7,000 units -- wow, that was fast -- 7,000 units are rental -- lacking rental assistance.

So our ask, in a nutshell, is

$32 million to start a program to make this conversion and start a five-year plan to do so.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

MS. SANDOVAL REQUENA: Good afternoon, committee chairs and members of the State Legislature. Thank you for holding this hearing and for sticking around and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of New Destiny Housing.

My name is Gabriela Sandoval Requena, and I am the director of policy and communications at New Destiny. For those of you who may not be familiar with New Destiny, our mission is really to end the double trauma of abuse and homelessness among domestic violence survivors. And we do this by developing supportive housing for survivors, and shelter, assisting those who are fleeing abuse to obtain subsidies and find housing, and advocating for more resources.

We are also a co-convenor of the Family Homelessness Coalition and a member of the Supportive Housing Network of New York.

So why do we do this work? Because one in three New Yorkers across the state will experience abuse by an intimate partner in their lifetime, and access to safe and affordable housing will determine whether they leave their abuser, survive, and rebuild their lives.

We submitted extended written testimony, so I'd like to use this time to really focus on our number-one priority. That's to protect survivors in the first generation of supportive housing -- that's the New York State Supportive Housing Program, also known as NYSSHP.

We are asking that you help us ensure that once our families move into housing that they can access the supportive services they need to heal and the security they need to feel safe in their homes. Currently, NYSSHP only covers 25 percent of what's needed to provide 24-hour security and deliver the

services that the survivors and the children deserve.

New Destiny opened its first NYSSHP building in 2008, and we're still operating with service rates of less than $4,000 per family per year. That's compared to the $25,000 that the newer program, ESSHI, provides. Additionally, ESSHI also includes an automatic 2 percent escalator in each contract. So really the disparity between the two programs is truly indefensible.

Like the other 120 nonprofits participating in NYSSHP across the state, we are forced to constantly fundraise from private donors to try to bridge the shortfall and pay our staff a livable wage and provide benefits. But it's impossible, really, to make up the difference, and it's not really a sustainable solution. Our staff and our tenants really deserve better.

The supportive housing community proposes a five-year, phased-in approach to reach parity over -- between the two programs, and for this year we're requesting

only 32 million. Additionally, we support Senator Persaud's proposed legislation to increase cash assistance and the legislation to raise the shelter allowance.

We also urge members of the committee to double the Governor's investments in flexible funding for survivors of domestic violence to $10 million. That's in the Public Protection section of our proposal.

Thank you so much for your time.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

REVEREND FLECK: Hello. My name is Reverend Paul Fleck, and I serve as the executive director of Immigration Law & Justice New York. We're located in Manhattan and on Long Island in Hicksville.

I want to start by asking, have any of you ever been heckled at a press conference? I see a few nods out there.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Today.

(Laughter.)

REVEREND FLECK: Yeah. Today, there you go.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: That was just me

abusing you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Oh, sorry.

(Laughter.)

REVEREND FLECK: No, when we were unrolling, with the New York State Council of Churches and the Interfaith Center of New York, the Covenant for Newest New Yorkers we received a heckling by one individual out in the crowd. And they said, "What about my community? What about me?"

And being a load of pastors, we had to respond pastorally and say, "This isn't a question of either/or. We agree that you should be entitled to a right to shelter. We agree that you should be entitled to affordable housing. We agree that you should be entitled to stable education. We agree with all those things, as well as healthcare for all."

And a conversation ensued, and we were under the impression we changed a heart and a mind at that time.

But that's -- that's the core of the covenant rolled out by the Interfaith Center

of New York and the New York State Council of Churches, is that we shouldn't have to make a choice between providing these things to New Yorkers who have been here for years as opposed to our newest New Yorkers who've just shown up.

Another thing that the covenant contains is a call for transparency and accountability. We saw that here today in the hearing where Assemblyman Ra and his colleague were just hearing for the first time how the $1 billion had been allocated and spent, and 325 million, in fact, had been spent in New York City.

And now we have 2.4 billion allocated in the budget. And I'll have to confess I'm in the immigration legal services business, and I don't know how that money is going to be spent.

So I think there is a need for transparency and accountability and how that money is going to be spent. We need to know. I, for one -- again, being in the immigration legal services industry -- would hope that it

would go towards the Access to Representation Act, which would provide full representation to individuals in deportation proceedings.

Evidence shows that people who have representation are 10 times more likely to win their case than someone who does not. That's real value. That's contributing to families, it's contributing to the economic well-being of our newest New Yorkers.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

MS. MELODIA: Hi. Can you guys hear me?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Yes.

MS. MELODIA: Okay. My name's Lauren Melodia. I'm an economist at the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I'm going to bring us back to childcare. We've heard a lot about the mismatch between supply and demand in the childcare sector resulting from a

longstanding crisis of low earnings in the sector. And I want to highlight the unique features of the industry and policies contributing to this.

So with the exception of high-income households, most New Yorkers can't afford the true cost of care. And as a result, childcare programs charge parents what they can afford to pay, not what it costs to provide care.

This flawed market is then codified in New York's Child Care Assistance Program voucher reimbursement methodology, the market-rate methodology. It constrains providers from offering competitive wages to their workers, and it exploits home-based providers who I've found in 2021 earned a median $10.61 per hour in New York City, while the city's minimum wage was $15.

We've heard many workers have left the industry for higher wages elsewhere, and I want to give an example of what's going on there. In 2021, the median wage of people with a high school diploma was $18.50 per

hour in New York City, which was $5 more per hour than a center-based childcare worker was earning, and 80 percent of those people have a high school diploma or more.

So I'm here to ask the State Legislature to do two things this session. First, pass legislation to develop an alternative cost-estimation methodology for the voucher program, one that includes competitive wages. This is going to require a multiyear federal approval process and a lot of planning for how to actually fund it for the long term.

And so that's why we need you to do a second thing, which many people have mentioned today, and that is to expand the Workforce Compensation Fund included in last year's budget and make it a permanent feature of the State Budget until a new methodology has been implemented. The Workforce Compensation Fund must be sufficient to solve the problem.

Last year's fund distributed bonuses that were appreciated, but were too small to

actually address the underlying labor market issues. I've estimated that a $12,500 wage subsidy per worker would actually do the job by incentivizing people to continue working in the industry and stabilizing the supply of childcare.

For example, it would increase the median pay of home-based providers to $18.79 per hour -- still lower than what they should be paid, but at least ending the subminimum wage that they're earning today.

And, lastly, I want to say that the state is capable of investing in this adequately-sized permanent Workforce Compensation Fund this year. A report published by my colleagues just this month shows that the state has ample budget reserves, including $13.3 billion for economic uncertainties. I think this warrants use of it.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: All right. Thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senators? No, you don't?

Okay, I do. May I?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Please.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

Thank you, all. I want to go back to the supportive housing two folks.

So some of the confusion that I think happens frequently with legislators and when we're just discussing these issues at home is the fact that there are multiple categories of supportive housing in lots of different contracts, city and state, the old contracts, the new contracts -- you two know exactly what I'm talking about -- whether we should be prioritizing more for specific subcategories of people who are in the homeless system or coming out of the prison system or, or, or. Right?

Does somebody actually have sort of -- or could you prepare a chart showing these categories and the payment differences? Because some of the things that have always shocked me is if you were willing to go into

supportive housing contracts earlier in our lives, you're getting paid at one level, and it barely ever moves, and it does not adjust at all. And then if you're -- if you came in as a building or an organization later, you might start out at twice the reimbursement rate.

And I don't think we all understand this well enough when we are negotiating for better and more supportive housing -- because that's where I would be, in the better and more supportive housing. I think it's the most effective model we have come up with to address issues for large numbers of adults who are homeless but also have special needs.

So do you think somebody could actually provide a chart? You're shaking your heads like you know exactly what I'm saying.

MR. PIASECKI: I do, if my -- and I'm not sure my mic is working, but let me -- there we go.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: There you go.

REVEREND FLECK: So it turns out we're

actually working on a big report, which we're calling "The State of Supportive Housing," that is in process. But I think we can give you those details.

But you're exactly right. It's all different rates at different times. Not much if any of it is funded at the rate that is really needed, given all the changes that have occurred that a lot of people have talked about today.

Workforce is an issue, obviously, across the map. Workforce is particularly an issue with NYSSHP. And like I said, you know, there's all sorts of different levels.

The great thing about NYSSHP is there is a kind of -- it can touch any disability group as long as you have the overlay of proximity to homelessness. And then there are all the other silos that require teasing out.

So yeah, we could prepare something for you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I just feel like both the city and the state, even though we

never are where we should be on the time that it takes to build more, on the amount of money we're actually providing and keeping up with the problem -- I think half of us don't ever understand what the actual universe looks like out there, because it is so radically different for so many different categories.

And I know if I was running one of your agencies, the number of contracts I would have to try to balance and combine would send me off a cliff somewhere.

MR. PIASECKI: We used to think we were very smart by cobbling together all these different resources, and now, you know --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: It's not working that way.

Anyway, my time is up. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Do you have a Senate question?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Is there a Senate question? Oh, Senator Murray.

SENATOR MURRAY: Hi. Thank you.

A quick question, so -- and I apologize, I didn't -- didn't catch your name on the end.

MS. MELODIA: Lauren. Lauren Melodia.

SENATOR MURRAY: Lauren, yes, okay.

Lauren, I agree with you completely that we need to make permanent -- we need to increase the wages of childcare workers and everything to retain the workforce. We need to do that.

We had a discussion -- and I'd like to get your opinion on this. We had a roundtable discussion about that very subject -- well, childcare in general and the different crises we're facing: availability, affordability, and of course the workforce. And we had come up with an idea, what if -- and I've heard the term "glorified babysitters," which I think is a terrible term, but it's how kind of the childcare workers are looked at sometimes.

Are there classes or could there be classes at community colleges or something to certify -- in other words, get them more into

more training, where they're getting into early childhood development and things of this nature, so they're not so-called glorified babysitters but they're offering much, much more? Which in turn could demand a higher salary by the childcare providers maybe asking for a bit more because of the higher quality.

I mean, do you see where I'm going with this? What are your thoughts on that?

MS. MELODIA: I do see where you're going. And I guess I'll make two points to it.

One is that we already do have plenty of training. Licensed and registered programs in the state are required to do extensive training regularly. We have the CDA program, which is an accredited program that people can get this special degree to prove that they are specialized in early care and education.

The problem is the wages never meet those expectations. And so what I was trying to say earlier is that you can have a high

school diploma in New York City and get 18.50 an hour, and you can have more than that working in childcare and be making $5, you know, less per hour.

So I think that the only way we're going to incentivize more people getting trained -- and plenty of people have CDAs and bachelor's degrees and master's degrees in this industry -- is to actually develop a comprehensive workforce career ladder. You know, really think this through on a regional level -- occupations, you know. And it has to go along with -- with wage increases in the same way that we see in the Department of Education.

The last thing I'll say is that this is a very unique industry, and that's why using a market to determine price is absolutely the wrong way to go. And that is because you can choose to see if your family can afford childcare that you pay for out of the home.

But people often rely on rental and, you know, unpaid care within the household.

So that -- the reality of that, which we want people to continue to have that choice, puts downward pressure on wages in this industry. And that's why we need to make sure that we have some -- a wage floor across the sector.

SENATOR MURRAY: Thank you very much. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Do you have any Assembly?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: No.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Cleare.

SENATOR CLEARE: It's just a comment, but -- and I appreciate your answer to that last question.

But, you know, childcare really is children being safe, children being cared for, fed, in a safe environment. And there's value to that as it is. You know, there's value just based on it.

Of course I agree there should be a pathway to a greater career. But being a mother and having to look for childcare, I wanted my children to be safe and taken care of. That was the most important thing. If

you could teach them something else, that's great too. But really the main thing is that. And I think we have to value that, is what I'm trying to say.

There's a value to that that people kind of miss and just disregard people who do that kind of work, that they're putting their heart and soul into this. Most childcare providers I know, these are their children, the way they do the job. I know the real people who do it. And my mother cared -- did a different kind of home -- she did home care. But there were children in that family who remained in touch with my mother throughout their adulthood. This is how close -- it's just not a simple thing.

So I think that we just as a society don't value childcare the way we should. And the same thing with seniors. The same thing. You know, the people who care for our seniors, we say these are the important things to us, but we don't value these people like that. And they should be paid, because it's something that you can't even put a

price on.

MS. MELODIA: Absolutely.

And just in terms of childcare, you know, we need to boost wages in health and human services across the board. But it's really important to note that one of the most popular models of childcare is a small business that largely women of color run in their homes, family childcare. My mom ran one for 20 years.

These people don't have employment contracts, so they don't have any protection or guarantee that they're going to get a wage. And that's why we really need the state to intervene and establish a cost-estimation model that is paying people and guaranteeing that there's a wage floor.

SENATOR CLEARE: I agree.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. Thank you, Senator.

I think I'm going to close here. So Ms. Melodia, I hear you -- this is just a comment. But thank you for your testimony. And I hear you about the permanent Workforce

Compensation Fund, I hear you about the $12,500. And there is a bill, I believe from my colleague Assemblymember Clark, to deal with the market-rate issue, which I agree is a really big problem.

So we'll look to push that. So thank you for your testimony.

Reverend Fleck, so thank you for your testimony, sir. My understanding is just generally, the 2.4 billion for immigration services -- the intent of the state is to try to be as flexible as possible. However -- with that money to the city. But however, you raise a real point about the cost benefit of putting that money into legal representation.

So we will take that back for consideration in the one-house. Thank you.

And then to my two supportive housing friends, let me start with this. What the hell happened to my New York/New York agreements?

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: And why do we

stop funding NYSSHP? When did -- I'm like, I'm okay with ESSHI if that's the way to go, but this is a -- you know, we've been doing this -- supportive housing is a New York invention. It's one of the greatest things we provide. It solves problems, it saves money, it helps people.

How did we get out of the business -- except for the Cuomo-de Blasio fight -- of New York/New York?

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I don't think this governor and this mayor hate each other, so why are we not having another New York/New York agreement?

MR. PIASECKI: It's a great point.

(Pause; laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I think they want us to do that.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So you want us to -- oh, okay. Of course. Of course.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So in the absence of any more New York/New York agreements, you

think this is the way to go. And it's --

MR. PIASECKI: Well, you know, I think, charitably, we're halfway through the ESSHI program. They've been on target at the state level. The New York City response, or the New York 1515 is also moving forward. We have some recommendations to make that better for New York City.

Long-run is there's not enough supportive housing to meet the demand. There's 100,000 people that are homeless in New York State at any given point in time. So, you know, the whole point of -- I think embedded in our message is we don't want to lose the existing resources when -- just to build new. And that's -- that's the trick of the trade.

A lot of the existing resources are in a position where they need rehab, they can't be rehabbed even though the state has funding for it because they don't have -- they can't -- they don't pencil-out on the operating side on the NYSSHP program.

So we want to preserve the existing,

we want to build new, and then we want to double it, which is your idea.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. Understood.

And Ms. Requena, with the last couple of seconds, is it my understanding that most of the supportive housing for DV survivors is NYSSHP as opposed to ESSHI? Or is it a combination?

MS. SANDOVAL REQUENA: No, it's a combination, I would say. Right?

MR. PIASECKI: Yes.

MS. SANDOVAL REQUENA: Yes.

But I would just second what Steve just pointed out, that as we think of newer programs, right, we should not forget about the existing programs that are really underfunded, and the buildings. I mean, they also need that capital improvement push as well that cannot be addressed because the social part is just not being invested on.

MR. PIASECKI: They have -- programs that are NYSSHP, they don't have the safety measures that the new programs can put in the

building from the get-go, and that's a real concern. Safety is a big issue.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Very much appreciated.

We do have one more Assemblymember, Assemblymember Simon, please. To close.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Thank you.

Your -- the most recent conversation just made me want to ask a question about supportive housing. One of the things we've talked about a lot is we need more housing -- how do we produce it, how much of it is affordable, where is it, and the crying need for supportive housing.

But who is building supportive housing, and how do we fund that? Do you have, you know, suggestions for that? It seems to me not-for-profit housing developers are better able to do that, but they don't have enough access to capital. I'm just curious what your experience is and what your thinking is along the lines of how do we actually do it. Because we desperately need to do it.

MR. PIASECKI: I think it's all hands on deck. We prefer, for supportive housing, that our nonprofit members are doing the development. We find that works better across the board.

There is a huge need for affordable housing, which supportive housing is a subset of that, of course. And it's really important that when the Housing Committee meets, that the focus is on the lowest ELI tenancy, zero to 30 percent of area median income. That's where the gap is. And if you can fill that gap, that helps everyone.

Much -- many resources go to higher income bands, and it's not as effective at really addressing the poverty issues around affordable housing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Thank you.

MR. PIASECKI: It doesn't trickle down.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Really?

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Anyone else?

SENATOR PERSAUD: Just one quick

question.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: One quick question. Roxanne Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: You're welcome.

SENATOR PERSAUD: So this is for Reverend Fleck.

We're trying to figure your catchment area, if you could tell us the catchment areas.

REVEREND FLECK: Sure. We're unique in that we do clinics in different boroughs. So we're in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, we're in Flushing, Queens, and we are in Chinatown, Manhattan. We do clinics on Saturdays and Monday nights, and then we take those cases back to the office.

And then of course we have an office in Hicksville too, where two attorneys are working as well, and do a clinic out there on Long Island. So that's --

SENATOR PERSAUD: Can anyone request a clinic, for you to come to a community and offer clinics?

REVEREND FLECK: I'd love that, as long as we had the attorneys and the legal staff. We're kind of maxed out as far as that goes. And that's part of what the Access to Representation Act is talking about, is increasing the capacity of providers like ours to hire and train legal staff. But that's the major impediment right now.

SENATOR PERSAUD: How many attorneys do you have on staff?

REVEREND FLECK: Four.

SENATOR PERSAUD: I just wanted to clarify that, because we did see it's four.

Okay. Thank you very much.

REVEREND FLECK: Sure.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. Thank you, everybody, for your testimony.

PANELISTS: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: And Panel I, please come down. From the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence,

Joan Gerhardt. From Bivona Child Advocacy Center, Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres. Hunger Solutions New York, Krista Hesdorfer. And Hudson Valley National Center for Veteran Reintegration, Gavin Walters.

Good afternoon -- good evening.

(Off the record.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Ms. Gerhardt, please.

MS. GERHARDT: Hi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: The floor is yours. How are you?

MS. GERHARDT: Thank you.

I'm Joan Gerhardt, director of public policy and advocacy at the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Thank you for having me.

NYSCADV is recognized by the federal government as the information clearinghouse and resource center on domestic violence for New York State. The Governor proposed several initiatives in the Executive Budget aimed at addressing domestic violence.

Most importantly, the Governor is

seeking to ensure the continuity of critical victim services in light of devastating VOCA cuts. She's proposed 34.4 million to maintain existing state contracts with these safety-net providers, and 100 million more to support the next round of contracts. It's critical for the Assembly and Senate to accept this funding.

As you know, VOCA, or the Victims of Crime Act funding enables thousands of New Yorkers to access services including shelter, advocacy, legal assistance, counseling and more. New York's federal VOCA grant has declined 121.6 million in the past five years, losing 61 percent of its value. Prior state earmarks covered only 23 percent of the shortfall. The Governor's funding is critical to ensure these providers remain available and accessible for New Yorkers experiencing crime.

We also urge the Legislature to accept $5 million to provide direct cash assistance to domestic violence survivors; the $21 million increase in the ATL budget for

OCFS for adult protective and DV services; and 24.5 million to fully implement last year's Fair Access to Victim Compensation legislation. All great news for DV survivors.

What is lacking, however, is inclusion of DV advocates into the Governor's proposed COLA. New York relies on experienced, trained DV advocates to provide lifesaving and life-changing support to New Yorkers experiencing DV, most of whom are women who live in marginalized or underserved communities. These services come at a cost, and it's incumbent on the state to value the work and fully pay for it.

But once again, these essential workers have been excluded from receiving the Governor's proposed COLA. This has had a disastrous impact on the ability of DV programs to retain and recruit employees. DV and sexual assault programs have lost 1200 employees between 2020 and 21.

Numerous positions still remain vacant across this sector, which is why so many

victims are unable to get the services they need. In fact, on one day in 2022 nearly a thousand people sought services from DV agencies and were told they couldn't get the help they were requesting.

We urge the Legislature to incorporate Senator Persaud's and Assemblymember Hevesi's bill, S7793 and A8437, into the State Budget to right this wrong and include DV advocates in this year's COLA.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much.

DR. LYMAN-TORRES: Thank you, Chairpersons and all members of the Legislature, for the opportunity to address you today.

My name is Daniele Lyman-Torres, and I'm the president and CEO of the Bivona Child Advocacy Center located in Rochester, New York, and serving a seven-county region.

Child advocacy centers, or CACs, were codified into law in 2006 by the New York State Legislature to serve child victims of severe physical and/or sexual abuse. Today,

we state that there are 47 CACs across the state. However, outside of New York City only a few CACs are more than one staff and can provide the multidisciplinary one-stop-shop model, due to a lack of infrastructure and funding in smaller counties.

This pushes services into the large regional centers, like the one in Rochester I represent.

At the time of the legislation in 2006, only $5.8 million was allocated to the Office of Children and Family Services to implement that policy. I have no idea what happened to those funds then or, nearly 20 years later, now the 5.2 million that's included in the budget, but I can tell you it's not being equitably distributed to centers doing the work.

The CAC I represent serves more than 60 percent of the children seen in the entire western part of the state, which includes Buffalo and Rochester and all the surrounding counties -- and our allocation for CAC

services is less than $270,000 a year, and our operating budget is 4 million.

The prevalence of child abuse, severe child abuse, and fatalities has not decreased. One in seven children will experience abuse. In Monroe County alone, in the past three years our child fatalities more than doubled. Seventy percent of the children we see who have been severely abused are under the age of 12.

The trauma is off the charts, and here's how it's showing up. Children who experience child abuse are nine times more likely to be involved in criminal activity. About 30 percent of abused children will later abuse their own children. And two-thirds, two-thirds of the people receiving substance abuse disorder treatment were abused as children.

Our asks: Increase the funding to child advocacy centers to at least 10 million -- heck, today, after what I've heard, I want to double that -- and specifically to ensure that the funding

actually reaches the Rochester region.

I urge the regionalization of child advocacy centers to ensure that even the existing resources can be better aligned to serve both rural and urban areas.

President Obama once said that a budget is more than just a series of numbers on a page, it is an embodiment of our values. If we can't value our children, then we don't value our future. How we treat our children is how we want our world to be. We must do better, New York.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

MS. HESDORFER: Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I'm here representing Hunger Solutions New York, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to alleviating hunger for all New Yorkers by maximizing federal nutrition assistance programs including SNAP, WIC, school meals, and other child nutrition programs.

SNAP is our nation's largest

anti-hunger program, providing monthly food benefits to more than 2.8 million New Yorkers. For over 35 years, through a contract with OTDA, we've worked to maximize SNAP by providing statewide outreach and application assistance through the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program, or NOEP.

Recognizing the need to fully leverage federal resources to alleviate hunger in New York, last year the Legislature allocated an additional $2 million in NOEP funding, which enabled us to add 22 new SNAP assisters in high-need and rural counties. Last year, NOEP reached more than 163,000 New Yorkers. Thank you for your advocacy for expanded NOEP services in last year's budget.

Unfortunately, that added funding is not sustained in the 2025 Executive Budget proposal, and if it's not restored in the final budget, NOEP will be forced to scale back when hunger is on the rise. Services would be reduced in Albany, Broome, Erie, Monroe, Nassau, Niagara, Onondaga, Rockland and Suffolk counties and in every borough of

New York City. Chemung, Cortland, Essex, Franklin, Lewis, Schuyler, and Washington counties would lose all local NOEP services.

To sustain SNAP outreach and assistance through NOEP statewide, we ask the Legislature to restore $2 million in NOEP funding, for a total of $5.503 million. This modest investment brings an outsized return. Every dollar the state invests in SNAP outreach is federally matched. And because NOEP draws down additional federal SNAP benefits into New York, the program provides an estimated 27-fold return on investment to the state.

In addition to ensuring all eligible New Yorkers can connect with SNAP, we also support efforts to make benefit amounts more adequate to meet families' food needs, and encourage the Legislature to provide a state supplement to increase the minimum SNAP benefit to $100 per month.

And I must mention another far-reaching anti-hunger program outside of the Human Services budget, but of great

importance to your work. New York must fully fund universal school meals. We are deeply grateful for last year's historic expansion of free school meals, but with more than 320,000 students left behind, it's time to close the gap and fully fund healthy school meals for all New York kids.

We urge the Legislature to adopt the vital anti-hunger proposals to support food security for all New Yorkers.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

MR. WALTERS: Hello, everybody. Thank you for having me here, and thank you for being here.

I think so much of what everybody says just correlates with one another because we are all advocates seeking so many things within our respective communities.

My name is Gavin Walters. I am a United States Air Force veteran. I received my citizenship after I served in the Air Force. I think that was the greatest

thing, because that's one of the reasons why I went and served in the Air Force.

Now I actually facilitate the Dwyer Program in Ulster County and Greene County. I have colleagues back here that facilitate Essex, Clinton, Franklin, and Schoharie counties. So there's a lot of Dwyer programs, you know, around.

And the reason why I'm here is because -- I don't have to explain about the Dwyer programs, because you guys were able to elevate it to be a 62-county program, which is really amazing. But the issue with that is that so many of the programs, the funding that they receive doesn't equate to the job that they even do day to day.

And for me, that can speak about Ulster County, I can say that from our enactment in 2020, we have not had a veteran commit suicide that had went through our program. And I could bet you so many other programs can say that any veteran that entered their program received care, service, and resources.

We look at the families, because we say nine times out of 10 the families are the ones that is reaching out to us. So we know that part of helping the individuals is connecting the family, caregivers, everybody, to be a part of the process of helping that individual.

And something I always say is that, you know, sometimes we're not around, but we can educate the individuals that's around that veteran, and that's one of the biggest things that we want to help with.

And unfortunately, with the funding that so many of these programs receive -- and I did the math, and I did so much things to break it down, but it doesn't equate to the things that we're seeing day to day.

I work with a veteran that literally had to decide between coming to our program for mental health or getting gas to travel about 25 miles to our program. And that is just a shame where he has to decide between mental health and getting food. So we bring food to him.

So food insecurity, housing issues, so many different things that are affecting our military community is just prevalent, it's out there. We see this day to day.

There's programs that have, you know, full-time staff, part-time individuals, volunteers. You know, we're a community of individuals reaching out to the community to just get help for the things that we see day to day. And our ask is just $2.1 million. And that's -- and I actually equated that to the 10 years of inflation that -- from the program's enactment, from 2012 to this, for last year.

So we're not asking for big, but just something small enough that we could say, okay, we could get a $25 gift card to somebody just to get gas or decide to get food.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly or Senate?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Senate.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. Our Senate

chair of Veterans Affairs.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: If I can get the mic on.

Thank you so much, Gavin, for your testimony. I know how important this funding is.

Could you piece the picture for me of how much of an increase would be beneficial for each of those 62 counties so you can continue to do that great work and fill in the gaps where you can? Because, you know, military families are incredibly important to me. I wanted to thank you for also bringing that up, that often it's the families that will connect the veterans to those services.

We all want to make sure that the program is funded appropriately so it can be efficient and effective. So tell me, you know, do you have a number in mind of what would be helpful with regard to inflation?

MR. WALTERS: Yes. So I can send this to everybody as well, but for every county -- for example, I use the example of Genesee, Orleans, and Wyoming, which has 185 split

through three counties, and if you -- if they do a 4 percent COLA, that's like $2,000. And then we keep breaking that down, $2,000 basically is like 80 gift cards for somebody. And if you say 80 gift cards to just split across veterans for a whole year, that -- one thing is that they don't equate veterans that we usually see, which is other than honorable/dishonorable veterans. So those numbers that we see that they count as -- I just got this data -- 580,000 veterans they say is in New York, and that's in 2022, in the Census.

So if people are saying 700,000, so many different numbers for veterans -- like, what is the real number in our -- you know, in New York State? So those numbers -- you know, I don't really go by those numbers, but the numbers that we see day to day is dishonorable veterans, other than honorable veterans, veterans that, you know, are still looking to get the discharge status that they deserve.

And a lot of -- so that's why I say

those numbers, you know -- I laugh at that, sometimes, when I hear like somebody say like, Oh, 22 veterans, but then they reduce the number -- like, no, are you counting the ones that's dishonorable, that's actually committed suicide, because you didn't equate them to be a part of the process of going into VA?

I tell folks we're better than the VA, we do so much better work, because we are there day to day, reaching out to veterans at 2 o'clock in the morning, going with them to the hospitals. Because we know that if they call the VA, nobody's going to come leave their office and get them from their house. And that's the stuff that we do.

And I'm sorry that the numbers just --

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: No, no, listen -- we want to be supportive. I think the Dwyer Program has proven to work. Nobody understands veterans like a fellow veteran. So we're going to do everything we can to try to get you there, and we'll be putting in a letter on your behalf to request that.

MR. WALTERS: Thank you.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Jean-Pierre.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: If I can get this on. It's supposed to turn green, right?

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Yeah.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: First, I want to say thank you. This -- you know, it's unfortunate that this is the last panel, but this is one of like -- this is the best panel, because this is the boots-on-the-ground panel. We've been talking with agencies, but this is the boots on the ground. This is the folks who are connected to all of the populations, whether it be families, whether it be our veterans.

So I just want to say, first, thank you for what you do for very -- with so little.

But my question is to Gavin. First,

to thank you, which you -- you're working with my office constantly on how we can help make the Dwyer Program work. The Dwyer Program doesn't come out of the Veterans Committee, it comes out of the Mental Health Committee. But we actually support and write a support letter in conjunction with the chair to make sure that we can make the Dwyer Program effective across the 62 counties.

But if we can get more realistic numbers, as the Senator mentioned, and if you can send that document, that would be very helpful to see how we can make -- how effective we can make the Dwyer Program. And how much dollars is needed to make it effective across the 62 counties, that would be helpful.

MR. WALTERS: Yeah, absolutely.

And I can definitely say a lot of programs will benefit from transportation, whether it's having a vehicle -- which we know is one of the hardest thing for rural counties. And I know from my colleagues over

here, you know, helping an individual that's in a situation and needs to get someplace, transportation can be the hardest thing for them. And trying to decide if they have to go to a doctor or, you know, just speak to somebody, and the communication as well.

So there's so many things that is there that could -- you know, that will definitely help when the funding actually do come to the -- especially the rural counties, just having a vehicle that can transport somebody to a hospital or to get groceries. Because that's a good way to connect with somebody within that car, just talking to them and just having a natural conversation.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Absolutely. It's not just the rural counties. You know, I represent Long Island. So when I think of areas in my area where there's no bus transportation or it ends at 6:30, how do we -- you know, how do we get veterans from one place -- but the question I have for you now is, what mechanisms do you use for outreach in the communities?

MR. WALTERS: Resource fairs. We actually -- I facilitate the Dwyer Coalition, so we actually ask the Reserves and National Guard representatives to actually be in our meetings. We go to the Reserves base and we go to -- we actually go to places and talk to individuals. We go to -- have events. We do so much resource fairs. And we actually put up things in the community that everybody can see us.

Unfortunately, we don't have the resources to actually create a website right now, but that is our goal, to create a website, so if anybody wants to look at -- for the Dwyer Program or get connected to resources, like my colleagues right here, they could just go straight there and get it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JEAN-PIERRE: Okay, thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Cordell Cleare.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

So I have questions for two of you.

Number one, we talked a little bit

today about a registry for veterans to know where services exist. And even inside of New York City, you know, my veteran constituents -- I don't necessarily always know all the places that they can go.

Maybe -- is that something that your organization is working on or --

MR. WALTERS: Yeah, we actually are. Our goal is to actually, with the help of the New York Health Foundation, who's bringing out -- who's going to have a needs assessment coming out later this year for veterans, they're going to hopefully be assisting us with actually creating a website specifically focused and geared towards having resources, whether it's looking for the VSA, looking for housing services, looking for a food pantry. Whatever it is, they click on the website, they know it's veteran-friendly -- anything and everything is going to be right there.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay, thank you.

And also for Bivona, I think it is. I know you are talking about services outside of New York City, but it is certainly -- it's

still a concern of ours anyway. And I don't know, have you spoken to your Senator? Because she's fierce.

DR. LYMAN-TORRES: Oh, yeah.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. All right. So I will talk to her to see how we can all be helpful with making sure that those services get to people like you who are on the ground, who are servicing our families.

DR. LYMAN-TORRES: Thank you.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you. Thank you all for your testimony.

(Overtalk.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Don't go anywhere yet.

SENATOR CLEARE: No, I'm just saying thank you all. This is the last time you'll probably hear from me. But thank you. Hunger is important, and our domestic violence. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Assemblymember Ra.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

And thank you all for your patience

and sticking it out to be here and talk about very important issues.

Mr. Walters, thank you for your service. And to your colleagues in the audience, thank you for your service as well.

You know, we had a little bit of a discussion earlier, as I'm sure you saw, about whether you would consider this a cut in this budget. But putting that aside -- and I think we all are very confident that on both sides of the aisle, in both houses, the advocacy is going to be there to put that money back into the budget. But I will say that what that means is getting back to where we started.

We don't want to be just where we started, right? We want to be above that, so that you can do the types of things you're talking about and reach out to additional veterans and do the types of things -- like you said, transportation, things to make sure that people can take advantage of your services.

So can you elaborate on just what some

additional funding would do in terms of being able to serve additional veterans? Because clearly your track record is great in helping those individuals in your community.

MR. WALTERS: Yeah, absolutely.

One thing that we will do actually is help veterans that are in housing crisis. With the little bit of funding our county receives, about $185,000 -- which doesn't equate to nothing these days -- but we're able to at least allocate funds to help a veteran if they come with a family or by themselves and put them in a hotel until we can get them connected to Support Services for Veteran Families, which is SSVF, or any other resources that could help the individual.

Where if a dishonorable veteran can't, you know, receive those type of services, that we'll reach out to DSS and other services to say, Hey, what can you do to help this person? Or help someone with, like I said, gift cards, which is the biggest thing. Food insecurity is a major thing that's

happening for our county. You know, I focus on the rural area, because our county is pretty rural.

So we say food insecurity, transportation. Oh, man. And events, different activities where -- a lot of programs actually will do things where they will take veterans out and do fishing. Or they'll pay -- every program allows a veteran to go there for free. So any veteran that goes there with their family -- we paid for events at a baseball game. We brought everybody out, but also they brought vendors of -- everybody in the community saying, Hey, listen, if you have housing issues, if you have to get connected to food, if you want to get connected to resources, they're there.

Because we know veterans are not going to go look for anything. If you have a luncheon and you have resource fairs around there, a veteran will actually get some food and then go talk to somebody like at the Red Cross. They'll say, Okay, what do you have for me? Or they'll speak to someone

from the Office of Aging or speak to someone that they'll never call. Because you'll say, Hey, call this person because they can help you -- nope, they're too prideful. They're not going to call anybody.

And that's where peer-to-peer has been the absolute best thing for veterans, because so many of us will help a veteran get to the VSA or the department or -- or the VA, because the veterans don't like the VA.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I'm sorry. Senator Roxanne Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: I want to thank all of you for your testimony today.

You know, Gavin, I hear you. We heard earlier the commissioner -- and I think everyone was pushing, saying you should have more funding, you should have more funding. So I'm pleased that you are telling us you definitely need more funding.

And, you know, we will fight with our colleagues to ensure that you do receive the

funding that you should, because no veteran should be left without.

So thank you for -- thank you for your service, and thank you for your advocacy on behalf of all veterans.

MR. WALTERS: Thank you.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Ms. Gerhardt, you know, we work together; I want to just thank you again for everything that you're doing. And I want us to continue to talk about the needs of the DV population.

I think we have gotten lax in getting our messaging across. We have a number of DV victims in shelter that -- they seem to just be languishing. What can we do to assist them? What supports can we offer them?

There are too many of them in our shelters right now, and we're not having the conversations that we were having like a few years ago. You know, we -- it was always DV, DV, DV, DV -- but now we seem not to be having that conversation. I think we need to get back to that, to show them that they're

not forgotten.

So if you can work with us, you know, just to get that message across --

MS. GERHARDT: Absolutely.

SENATOR PERSAUD: -- and get the services into the places where they should be.

And, Doctor, you know, we hear you. We were having the conversation about, you know, the needs -- the child poverty needs in your area. We would like to work with -- you know, with our colleagues to make sure that you get the resources you need.

But we want to also make sure that you're part of the conversation for that child poverty funding that's coming to your community. It's not -- it's great that the money is going there. But if the people who are in the know are not part of the conversation on the disbursement of the money, then we'll have some problems.

So I want to make sure that you are at that table when the decisions are being made on how that money is going to be funded.

DR. LYMAN-TORRES: Thank you.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

(To Ms. Hesdorfer.) And I'm carrying your NOEP letter pushing for that $2 million, and I hope my colleagues will continue to support it.

But all in all, I thank all of you for your advocacy. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Assemblymember Manktelow.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you, sir.

Joan, really quick. Did you say that you lost 1200 employees? Did I hear you say that really?

MS. GERHARDT: Twelve hundred positions across domestic violence and sexual assault programs.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Were they filled positions and you lost that many?

MS. GERHARDT: Yeah.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Where did they go?

MS. GERHARDT: Well, that's a good

question.

I think because they're not paid as well as other human service workers, they left to go to other positions within their umbrella organization, let's say. They might have gone to a government position -- you know, maybe to the local department of social services. They might have gone to academia.

So I can't say where each one of them went, but the fact is we know there are so many of those positions that are still vacant. Because with the inability to pay living wages for domestic violence advocates, we just can't recruit people into those positions. They'd rather go to healthcare.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you.

Gavin, thank you for your service.

I was wondering, how much interaction have you had with Commissioner DeCohen?

MR. WALTERS: On a -- well, I sat on the Governor's workgroup, so I'm able to speak to her representative. Yeah. Yeah.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: As we've talked about earlier -- earlier today we

talked about her budget and the loss of some funding there. We really need to make sure we have that funding. Because I did speak with one of the military -- or, I'm sorry, our veterans up above earlier, and he talked about transportation, as you did.

Transportation for him and his office to go out, is that something we should be looking for funding for as well, as far as you see it?

MR. WALTERS: Yeah, absolutely. I think transportation's one of the biggest things. And for a lot of conversations that I've had with many of my surrounding counties' colleagues, transportation is one of those things that we've always been saying, How can we address it? Where we talked about Uber and Lyft and how do we mitigate money to them to help transport veterans from Ulster County or Orange County down to the city, where they have to get a -- go to an appointment. Where sometimes, unfortunately, our peers, you know, don't get paid enough to travel all that way down there

and then come back where it might be like 8 o'clock at night, when they leave 8 o'clock in the morning. And that's a typical day for just one person getting transported, because it can be a difficult time for that person.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Yeah, I'm very familiar with it. From my district, my county, Syracuse is an hour away.

But I do know that transportation -- who the driver is, that peer-to-peer support with that driver, is so crucial to our veterans.

And you have our full support. We will work on keeping that funding and see what we can do to find the funding for all of you.

And Daniele, thank you for coming down. I was at your place a few weeks ago. Outstanding work, and we'll be there for you as well.

DR. LYMAN-TORRES: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Murray.

SENATOR MURRAY: Yes, closing it out.

Mr. Walters, thank you so much for your service. And to you gentlemen as well, thank you. And to all of you for your advocacy. What you do is incredible.

Ms. Gerhardt, I'd like to -- a couple of questions. One, in my district we have a workforce housing project that is starting now, some affordable housing, but they've set aside -- the developer is setting aside a certain portion for domestic violence victims, for them to start over.

Is that something unique? Or is -- are you seeing that, or is that collaboration happening around the state?

MS. GERHARDT: We've seen that in some communities. I wouldn't say all.

You know, I think the challenge of finding affordable and safe housing is a critical need for domestic violence survivors. So I think that's wonderful that, you know, there's going to be a project in your community. But we certainly need more.

SENATOR MURRAY: Okay. Now, another issue -- I've talked to some folks -- I'm very involved with animals and rescue and all of this. And one of the big things that we've run into is that you have domestic violence victims with pets or animals at home, and they won't leave without them. And I can understand that a hundred percent. They're afraid if they do, they're putting them in danger.

But we have a shortage with shelters that allow animals. Are we -- is there any funding in the budget to improve on that or to help with that problem? Or are you -- again, are you seeing that there are more shelters that are allowing this? Where are we with that?

MS. GERHARDT: Well, there's a terrific new shelter in New York City which opened specifically for survivors who have pets.

But I will say it is an obligation of every domestic violence program in the state to make accommodations for an individual's

pet, whether at that shelter or at another community-based organization in that community.

So it's -- it is very troubling that abusers will, you know, take abusive behavior out on animals as well as humans. We recognize that. It is heartbreaking that survivors have to leave their home and leave so many things behind, including their pets.

So if they are able to take those pets with them, we want to make every accommodation for them to do that.

SENATOR MURRAY: I know space is a problem sometimes as far as at the shelter. Or even an issue where you have to have a separate building, if you're doing it on-site, or finding space at different shelters or rescues. So that's a challenge as well.

MS. GERHARDT: Absolutely. But we try to make it work.

SENATOR MURRAY: Yes. Yes. And I appreciate what you do, I really do.

And finally, Ms. Hesdorfer, I'm with

you 1000 percent on Healthy Meals for All. It's a shame we did not get that completely done last year. I'm praying we do this year.

But thank you all for what you do.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thank you.

And I'm going to use my last three minutes, I will close us out.

A couple of comments. First, Mr. Walters and the gentlemen in the audience, I want to say thank you for your service and your advocacy. I learned a lot today, and I very much appreciate it.

Ms. Hesdorfer, nothing aggravates me more than leaving a federal match on the table. So I appreciate your advocacy with that. And I agree with a lot of my colleagues about universal school meals.

And then I'm going to ask questions, if I can, for Ms. Lyman-Torres and Ms. Gerhardt. The thing that bothers me the most, if I can, is the generational problem that we're not addressing. We just never, ever break these cycles.

So, Ms. Lyman-Torres, let me ask you a question. It was my understanding that there was going to be a shortfall of federal money for the CACs. Can you speak to that? And how -- how did the Governor do it in her Executive Budget to address that? And what else can we do to make sure you're whole?

Because I think I have a limited understanding of just how dangerous it is for children and families without your services.

DR. LYMAN-TORRES: That was the VOCA funding at the federal level. And the Governor's current budget has a stopgap in there of $120 million to kind of protect from that, and that's very important.

All the child advocacy centers do receive VOCA funding. It's about 10 percent of our funding. So it is -- it's really important.

But we need to continue to press beyond that. When I talk about the child fatalities and the complexity of the -- you know, the trauma that's intergenerational, it really has to do with the fact that we aren't

systematically dealing with prevention. We are not dealing with high-risk parents who are in other systems, whether it be DV, mental health, substance use. They are being discharged with children without case management, without supports for those children, and the child fatality rates continue to go up.

I stepped out of this session today because we had another child lost in Rochester today --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I heard.

DR. LYMAN-TORRES: -- another baby, from the same systemic kinds of issues.

And this -- it really is urgent that we put money into prevention.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I very much appreciate it. Thank you for your testimony.

And Ms. Gerhardt, I'm going to close with you. And I don't know if you caught the initial portion for the OCFS commissioner, but I started by asking about the domestic violence workforce. Particularly because it's egregious that we have not increased pay

for the workforce since 2008, is that -- is my number right?

MS. GERHARDT: That's when the human service group was put together. And we were not included in 2008. So we've never received a COLA, period.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: That's outrageous.

And the fact that you've lost 1200 positions -- that is devastating, absolutely devastating. And I think it's incumbent upon us elected officials to make you and all of our providers a top priority in this budget.

We cannot allow not only the services not to be delivered to children and families but, again, we've got to break the cycle so -- as Ms. Torres said, we've got to make sure this doesn't get taught from one generation to the other.

And I've run out of my own time. So I think that is the end of this hearing.

I would like to thank all of my colleagues and this panel, and particularly

Senator Krueger for her leadership and allowing me to participate today.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I'm very glad you participated.

And tomorrow people can come back -- 9:30, the same room, the topic is education.

So thank you all very much for your testimony tonight and for staying with us.

PANELISTS: Thank you.

(Whereupon, the budget hearing concluded at 5:45 p.m.)