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

JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING

In the Matter of the
2025-2026 EXECUTIVE BUDGET ON
HUMAN SERVICES

Hearing Room B
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY

February 12, 2025
9:43 a.m.

PRESIDING:

Assemblyman J. Gary Pretlow
Chair, Assembly Ways and Means Committee

Senator Liz Krueger
Chair, Senate Finance Committee

PRESENT:

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

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

Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi
Chair, Assembly Committee on Children
and Families

Senator Jabari Brisport
Chair, Senate Committee on Children
and Families

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PRESENT: (Continued)

Assemblywoman Maritza Davila
Chair, Assembly Committee on Social Services

Senator Roxanne Persaud
Chair, Senate Committee on Social Services

Assemblyman Rebecca A. Seawright
Chair, Assembly Committee on Aging

Senator Cordell Cleare
Chair, Senate Committee on Aging

Assemblyman Steve Stern
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

Assemblywoman Grace Lee

Senator April N.M. Baskin

Assemblywoman Jo Anne Simon

Senator Jake Ashby

Assemblyman Brian Maher

Senator Dean Murray

Assemblyman Chris Eachus

Assemblyman Billy Jones

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PRESENT: (Continued)

Assemblywoman Monique Chandler-Waterman

Assemblywoman Sarah Clark

Senator Bill Weber

Assemblywoman Emérita Torres

Assemblyman Andrew M. Molitor

Assemblyman Brian Manktelow

Senator Rob Rolison

Assemblywoman Marcela Mitaynes

Assemblyman Chris Burdick

Assemblywoman Jessica González-Rojas

Senator Alexis Weik

Assemblywoman Marianne Buttenschon

Senator Daniel G. Stec

Assemblywoman Jenifer Rajkumar

Assemblyman Steven Raga

Assemblywoman Larinda C. Hooks

Assemblyman Jordan J.G. Wright

Senator George M. Borrello

Assemblywoman Phara Souffrant Forrest

Assemblyman Harvey Epstein

Assemblywoman Jodi Giglio

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PRESENT: (Continued)

Assemblywoman Gabriella A. Romero

Assemblyman Demond Meeks

Assemblywoman Karines Reyes

Assemblywoman Mary Beth Walsh

Assemblywoman Judy Griffin

Assemblywoman MaryJane Shimsky

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CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Good morning, everyone. I'm Assemblyman Gary Pretlow, chair of the New York State Assembly Ways and Means Committee.

Today we begin the eighth in a series of hearings conducted by the joint fiscal committees of the Legislature regarding the Governor's proposed budget for fiscal year 2025-2026. These 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.

With us we have the chairs of the relevant committees: Assemblywoman Seawright, chair of Aging; Assemblyman Hevesi, chair of Children and Families; Assemblywoman Davila, chair of Social Services; and Assemblyman Stern, chair of Veterans' Affairs.

Also with us we have Assemblymembers Rajkumar, Torres, Lunsford, Mitaynes, Burdick

and Eachus.

Assemblyman Ra?

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: We have with us right now Assemblyman Brian Maher, who is our ranker on Children and Families, and Assemblyman Andrew Molitor, our ranker on Social Services.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Hi. I'm Senator Liz Krueger, chair of Finance, and I have with us today Chairs Brisport and Persaud, and Senator Liu.

And my guest ranker, pending Tom O'Mara's arrival, will introduce the Republicans.

SENATOR WEBER: Thank you, Chairwoman.

We have Senator Ashby, the ranker on Veterans' Services and Aging; Senator Rolison, ranker Children and Family Services; and Senator Murray, ranker on Social Services.

Good morning.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: And I think I neglected to mention Assemblyman Anderson and Assemblywoman Clark as in attendance.

I'll go over some of the rules of the road now. All governmental witnesses are allotted 10 minutes for their testimony. Nongovernmental witnesses are allotted three minutes.

The chairs of the relevant committees to each governmental witness will get 10 minutes to question the witness and an additional three minutes at the end of the first round if they so desire. Ranking members of these committees will each get five minutes and no follow-up.

All other members of the relevant committees will each get three minutes.

To all witnesses, all written testimony has been submitted to the Legislature in advance, so we ask that all witnesses please do not read your written testimony to us. Instead, please summarize.

All legislators, please let myself or Senator Krueger know if you wish to question each witness or panel of witnesses. After the witnesses' panel has been closed, the request for questions will be closed.

To everyone. Please notice conveniently placed around the room are time clocks. Please pay close attention to these time clocks. They will be strictly enforced.

When you see the yellow light, that means you have 30 seconds remaining in your allotted time.

To all legislators asking questions, please be cognizant of this because don't start a question when there's less than 30 seconds left because you will not give the witness time to answer those questions.

Now we want to give everyone -- and like I said, the time will be strictly enforced because we have a lot of witnesses and a lot of chairs.

With that, I wish to commence this hearing, and I will call our first witness, Dr. DaMia Harris-Madden. Oh, we're doing a panel: Dr. Harris-Madden, from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. And from the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, Acting Commissioner Barbara Guinn.

Begin.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Good morning, Chair Pretlow and Chair Krueger, Children and Families Committee Chairs Hevesi and Brisport, and distinguished Members of the Senate and Assembly. I am Dr. DaMia Harris-Madden, commissioner of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. I appear before this honorable body for the first time with the privilege of presenting Governor Hochul's state fiscal year 2025-'26 Executive Budget.

OCFS oversees a continuum of services across New York State aimed at promoting the safety, permanency and well-being of children, youth and families. OCFS is the steward of nearly $5.8 billion and supports 24/7 operations and more than 3,000 employees. The agency is an epicenter of extremes, serving New Yorkers from twinkle to wrinkle -- the most innocent children to the most elderly of our communities.

OCFS is charged with the oversight and operational responsibilities that spans

across almost every domain. As a state supervised and locally administered system, our responsibilities include oversight of local social services districts for child welfare, domestic violence and adult protective services, Youth Bureaus, foster care agencies, family and child care centers, and after-school settings. We also provide direct services to blind New Yorkers.

With several months' tenure in my role, I am in awe of the work that is accomplished by this agency. I have seen firsthand the tangible impact it has on communities across the state. OCFS manages upwards of 6,000 contracts for a wide range of interventions and critical supports, operates nine residential youth justice facilities that require 24/7 supervision and programming. Last year the Statewide Central Register for Child Abuse and Maltreatment handled over 280,000 calls, while the Human Services Call Center fielded 1 million calls on behalf of its 11 customer agencies.

I am proud to share that OCFS has

distributed more than 9,000 cribs across the state to promote safe sleep, provided over 2,700 duffel bags statewide to children leaving their homes and entering foster care, and launched the Heartline, a prevention service for youth who are currently in or have recently left foster care.

The work that OCFS performs is far too exhaustive to enumerate today. Yet it could not be done without the commendable budget of our Executive, Governor Hochul, and through partnership with you.

The Executive Budget underscores Governor Hochul's commitment to the most vulnerable, making our great state more affordable for children and families. The Governor's Get Offline, Get Outside 2.0 initiative in this year's budget includes an investment of $15 million in increased funding for youth programming, $7.5 million for Youth Sports and Education Opportunity funding, and $7.5 million to increase base funding for the Youth Development Program. This is just one of the Governor's many

proposals to better engage youth and disrupt social media addiction.

In addition to the other educational features included within this budget, there is $7 million in funding for the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program, aimed at increasing literacy outcomes for children ages zero to five.

This year's investment in Runaway and Homeless Youth Services is to be applauded. The $10 million included in the Executive Budget reflects a doubling of the allocation over the last three years. This critical funding aids vulnerable youth who need stable shelter, transitional housing access, and tailored comprehensive services.

Evidenced by the $9.2 million increase for Child Advocacy Centers, Governor Hochul is committed to the protection of victims of unthinkable crimes, including those involving young children.

Since taking office, Governor Hochul's Executive Budget has included a targeted inflationary increase. This year's

2.1 percent increase will once again benefit the families and voluntary agencies who care for New York's children in foster care, and adoptive parents.

The budget also includes a roughly $4.1 million increase in funding -- more than $14.1 million overall -- to raise the minimum wage of employees of OCFS-funded contractors.

Governor Hochul has invested in childcare in a way no governor has. Unwavering in her dedication to expanding access to high-quality care for New York's children and families, there has been a $7 billion increase over four years.

This historic commitment has resulted in the largest expansion of the Child Care Assistance Program in New York State's history. Now more than half of New York's families are income-eligible. Under the Governor’s leadership, income eligibility has been increased to the federal maximum of 85 percent state median income, which is currently more than $108,000 per year for a family of four. And family copays have been

capped statewide at 1 percent of a family's income above the poverty level. Families have also been stabilized for 12 months through this process.

Governor Hochul has more than doubled the amount of funding for the Child Care Assistance Program during her time in office, from $832 million in state fiscal year 2022 to nearly $1.8 billion this year.

The Governor's comprehensive strategy has also included supporting essential childcare providers. New York is one of the few states that sets payment rates for childcare assistance at the 80th percentile. In addition, market rates have been increased by an average of 12 percent with the most recent market rate survey, and have increased by an average of 48 percent since 2019.

The Governor's proposal linking mental health supports to after-school environments expands upon last year's commitment that increased childcare providers' access to early childhood mental health consultants.

As part of the Governor's efforts to

increase competency, OCFS partnered with DASNY to award $50 million in capital grants to create an estimated 5,500 new childcare seats at 45 sites across the state. This year's budget doubles that investment by providing $100 million in new capital funding to further expand availability.

A portion of these funds will be accessible to counties and municipalities for childcare construction, maintenance, and/or repairs. The budget also makes $10 million in federal funds available to improve the safety and quality of home-based family childcare programs.

It was an honor to serve alongside Commissioner Reardon as the cochair of the Governor's Child Care Availability Task Force, which yielded the Roadmap for Universal Child Care, a set of recommendations to meet the goal of universal childcare.

This year's budget proposal includes the task force's recommendation for a substitute pool in the amount of $3 million,

which will afford childcare providers with access to qualified individuals that can cover classrooms so not to jeopardize operations and daily staffing ratios. This pool can also serve as a potential pipeline for the workforce.

In furtherance of the goal for universal childcare, this year's Executive Budget includes the creation of the New York Coalition for Child Care, which builds upon the work of the Child Care Availability Task Force and leverages the expertise of business leaders, labor unions, tax and revenue experts, providers, and other stakeholders.

As a New Yorker, I am proud that this year's Executive Budget embodies synergy and innovation across multiple disciplines and systems, making transformational investments that will change the trajectory for many children and families. We must continue to advance the progress made by lending a comprehensive approach to critical services that span across the entire spectrum of life

from infancy to adulthood.

Under the Governor's leadership, OCFS looks forward to operationalizing this budget to ensure that New York is the quintessential state, filled with promise and opportunity.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today, and I welcome your questions and comments.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Doctor.

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

My name is Barbara Guinn, and I'm the commissioner of the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. I am pleased to be here today to talk about Governor Hochul's 2026 Executive Budget and its support for the critical benefits and services our agency provides on behalf of residents of the state.

OTDA is responsible, in conjunction with local social services districts, for the delivery of benefits that provide economic assistance and support to eligible

individuals and families. This work includes helping very-low-income New Yorkers meet their essential needs, such as housing, food, and other basic necessities.

At OTDA, we are focused on improving customer service and program access for each program we oversee. We are dedicated to making accessing social services as seamless and supportive as possible.

We are excited about the many proposals contained in Governor Hochul's Executive Budget. Governor Hochul is committed to helping make New York more livable and affordable for all New Yorkers, and she is particularly focused on families and children.

This focus includes making sure that we are taking action to help residents raise a family in our state. In collaboration with the Legislature, Governor Hochul has already expanded the Empire State Child Tax Credit to include children under the age of four; provided extra food assistance to families with school-aged children through the

Summer EBT program totaling approximately $250 million, delivered to over 2 million children; significantly expanded assistance to childcare, so that more families can access safe childcare and benefit from reduced copays; and, importantly, increased the minimum wage and indexed it to inflation so workers' purchasing power is not eroded as prices rise.

With these steps and others, the Governor and the Legislature have put in place policies, reforms, and investments that are improving families' economic security. According to the expert analysis of the Urban Institute, the permanent policies implemented by this administration over the past three budgets, when fully implemented, are estimated to reduce child poverty in New York State by up to 9.5 percent.

Governor Hochul's FY '26 budget builds on this progress. The budget includes a historic expansion of the Empire State Child Tax Credit, a continued focus on making sure families can afford safe childcare, and new

initiatives to improve maternal and infant health, along with a variety of other investments to provide a better future for New York's families.

The proposed expansion of the New York State Child Tax Credit will support more than 2.7 million children, giving 1.6 million New York families an annual tax credit of up to $1,000 per child under the age of four, and up to $500 per child from ages four through 16.

In addition, this proposal eliminates the wage phase-in so that households with the lowest incomes will now receive the maximum benefit.

As OTDA commissioner, I also have the honor to serve as the cochair of the New York State Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council. In December, the council released recommendations for reducing child poverty in New York State. Expanding the Empire State Child Tax Credit tops the list of this council's recommendations.

Evidence has shown that the child tax

credit is one of the most effective ways for us to lift children out of poverty. Once fully implemented, the proposed expansion of the child tax credit is estimated to reduce child poverty in New York State by 8.2 percent for all children, and by more than 10 percent for children under the age of four.

Building on Governor Hochul's strong record of support for pregnant New Yorkers, new parents and infants, the Governor is advancing another nation-leading legislative proposal to improve maternal and infant health through the provision of a birth allowance: The New York State Birth Allowance for Beginning Year Benefit, or BABY Benefit.

The BABY Benefit will improve the economic security of some of New York's most underresourced families. This proposal will provide a $100 per month benefit during pregnancy and an additional $1,200 payment at birth for families in receipt of public assistance.

In addition, the Executive Budget proposes providing maternal health and newborn supply boxes and diapers to new mothers. This work will be achieved through a partnership with Baby2Baby, a national nonprofit that provides essential items to children living in poverty. This proposal is estimated to reach the families of approximately 100,000 babies at full implementation.

Funding is also included in our budget to implement the second year of the Summer EBT program, which provides food benefits to help cover the cost of groceries during the summer months when school is out of session and children may not have access to free meals.

The Executive Budget continues the Governor's commitment to address the housing shortage and increase affordability. The proposed budget increases capital funding to create and preserve more supportive housing through our agency's Homeless Housing and Assistance Program.

The Executive Budget includes an additional $25 million, bringing the total to $153 million in capital funding to help meet the ongoing demand for supportive housing and maintain existing units that provide a safe place to live for some of our most vulnerable New Yorkers.

The budget also provides the most significant investment in the New York State Supportive Housing Program, or NYSSHP, since its inception. The NYSSHP portfolio includes New York State's first supportive housing programs. This budget increases the state's investment in NYSSHP by $17 million, or approximately 40 percent.

Additionally, the budget supports a substantial increase in funding available for the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative, or ESSHI.

Combined, these two programs, NYSSHP and ESSHI, support nearly 30,000 supportive housing residents. The increases are tremendously important to ensuring our supportive housing stock remains viable and

accessible for those who need it most.

Reducing child poverty and helping our fellow New Yorkers meet their basic needs and advance economically is at the core of our agency's work. We seek your support to implement the investments included in the proposed 2026 budget. We look forward to our continued partnership with the Legislature.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today, and I welcome your questions and comments.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you very much.

Assemblyman Hevesi, 10 minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, my colleagues.

Good morning, Commissioners. How are you?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Good morning.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Good morning.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Good morning. It's good to see both of you. I thank you

for your work on behalf of the people of the State of New York, but also I'm grateful to see both of you, because I get to see all the Assembly staff that you guys poached over the years.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So it's -- hi, guys.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: So thank you for all of your work. Dr. Harris-Madden, my questions are going to be primarily for you.

Please forgive me. If it's okay with you, I'm going to ramble for about a minute, and then I have a couple of questions.

So let me start by saying thank you for this Executive Budget from Governor Hochul. There's a lot of good stuff in here, in both areas. I'm going to focus specifically on OCFS.

So first, a huge thank you to the Governor for doubling the amount of money in the CACs, the Child Advocacy Centers. That is crucially important to save abused

children. I'm incredibly grateful.

Also, thank you for the increase of 1.5 for Runaway and Homeless Youth. Thank you for the Get Offline, Get Outside; I'm interested in that. And I'm even grateful for the Dolly Parton Library, although I shouldn't be, for some advocates.

And then let me move on to the other parts of the budget where I'm going to -- where I have some questions for you.

For first, I know some of my colleagues are going to be talking about the workforce extensively. I understand that the Governor put in a 2.1 cost of living adjustment in there. We're going to be coming back with a 7.8 on that.

And in addition to the human services workforce, there are three workforces that I'm primarily concerned with that are always left out of the COLA. I just want to list them for you, if I can. First is the foster-care workforce. They have a separate system for them.

Then also the preventative services

workforce, where we've been relying on the 65/35 reimbursement to counties, which we have not been able to increase.

And then finally the last one is the domestic violence workforce. If there's a workforce that needs our assistance, that's where we should be focusing our attention.

And then to my questions, if I can. I thank you for bearing with me. So I know a lot of my colleagues are going to be asking questions about this, after-school and LEAPS. So I thought I would give you the opportunity, Commissioner, if you can, just to go through what happened with our transition and what our next steps are in after-school. Please.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Chair Hevesi. I'm going to borrow this. I'm new to this, so thank you.

Thank you for allowing me to provide the context regarding LEAPS. When I joined the agency LEAPS had already been rolled out, but I was thrilled to see that there had been an increased investment in after-school. As

a long-time advocate for after-school programming, I appreciated the fact that for the first time many after-schools who had been bereft of after-school opportunity now have the opportunity to have children supervised during unsupervised time.

Just as an overview for LEAPS, there was 36,000 seats added, with 239 awarded. LEAPS was a very competitive process. As you might imagine, we had over 400 applicants. And the breakdown of those who received awards primarily went to New York City at 42 percent, 40 for rest of the state, and 19 percent downstate.

I just want to note that New York City was a fierce competition, which we expected. However, there is a structured decision-making process in terms of ranking applications and awarding accordingly.

I'd be remiss if I didn't say that many of the applications were very well done, from what I could glean in a short period of time. Yet 377 applications received passing scores but were not funded.

We did exhaust the 100-plus million dollars that was infused into the system, which again we appreciate that the Governor as well as the elected officials made possible. But the reality is it was a competition.

I think there's a misnomer that LEAPS was -- funding was cut, whereas the program actually was an effort to consolidate existing programs such as Advantage and Empire, Empire having an economic threshold whereas Advantage was for nonprofits that were eligible.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you. And let me jump in to reiterate the point you just made. Absolutely the consolidation was something we needed to do; we've been fighting for that for years.

And the rollout -- I guess the question for me is if the Legislature, which I hope we do in our one-houses, come back and fulfill the 195 million that I think we need to get every eligible LEAPS applicant, you know, access to after-school, I would hope

that the administration would look kindly on that.

In addition -- by the way, I'm sorry, one other thing. You said there was an RFP for the older kids that's coming out as well, is that accurate?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: We do anticipate an RFP to come out. It's a much smaller amount, but it is forthcoming.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Okay. I think all of us agree that after-school is hugely important, so we'll try to work with you on that. But I thank you for outlining that.

Two more areas that strike me as problematic that are not yet addressed in the budget, and just a quick question on each.

The first is Raise the Age. And this does not fall squarely on Governor Hochul. This is a Governor Cuomo issue. But this year we'll be pushing for an innovation fund for $50 million that we think is essential to start that program, jump-start it, to get money directly into the hands of providers for Raise the Age.

Is that something that the Executive would be open to accepting?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: As you know, I'm unable to comment on the policymaking. I leave that to the Governor and the Legislature to do.

However, I would just note that, you know, Raise the Age was an excellent legislative act and we know that children do not belong in adult prisons. So we thank you for the funding that you have already made available to address this population.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I appreciate it. And we're going to need to work with you prospectively to make sure that the close to a billion dollars that has been promised but not delivered. So Raise the Age I think for us is a great victory that has turned into, you know, a black eye for us because we haven't funded it properly. And that's our fault.

But I look forward to working with you to try to fund it appropriately.

Two other issues, if I can squeeze it

in. Yes, I think so.

I'm concerned about, particularly in the area of foster care, our agencies. Some of them are starting to struggle, following California, in obtaining mandatory liability insurance. Is that something that the Executive is looking at to make sure that our foster-care providers are whole and they don't have to go out of business like some other companies in other states have done?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you for that question, Mr. Chair.

I believe we are all keeping that at the top of mind as it relates to our foster-care agencies. Insurance is skyrocketing everywhere, so this system is no different than any other.

However, we are working closely with the field. We are listening to our nonprofit agencies. We are working with our LDSS, our local districts of social services, just to continue to stay apprised as this further develops, particularly in New York State. We're aware of California and what happened

there. So I assure you that this is something that is a priority for us to continue to think about. But absolutely we are connected to the field and listening to what's transpiring.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: That's great, because this is -- this particular issue scares me terribly because it will mean dropping of services for our most vulnerable kids. So I'd love to continue to work with you on it.

And in my remaining time, I'd like to talk about childcare. And I appreciate the Governor's proposals. There's two pieces of childcare I want to focus on.

One is the existential threat to childcare from the Trump administration, and particularly when I think about that, the potential for cutting our federally funded programs that were desperately needed, like our CCR&Rs.

Is there a plan for us to make sure that they stay whole in case the Trump administration starts cutting? I mean, we

need those services to get our childcare providers up and running.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you for that question. Another top of mind issue that we are paying close attention to. At this juncture we have not received any notice from the federal government of threat for the funding under childcare.

I'm not sure of its impact in the last Trump administration, but I don't believe that childcare was grossly impacted.

But we do work very closely with our CCR&Rs. I agree they are a vital resource in our communities. And we do not plan to change course unless, of course, forced to do so. So thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I appreciate that. That's greatly appreciated.

And with my last minute, let me just talk about childcare for a minute.

Governor Hochul deserves credit for being the champion of the largest single investment in history in childcare in New York State, absolutely credit. This

year's budget, though, however, is not prioritizing what her Child Care Availability Task Force had suggested, which is to pay the workforce.

I am of the opinion that all of our efforts in childcare -- and by the way, over the last four years it's been great. We've been putting money, we've been doing -- we dealt with copays, we dealt with all kinds of other issues, absences. But I am of the opinion that if you're not going to pay that workforce, we're not going to be successful.

So I would recommend, and I hope the Legislature agrees, that we expedite the paying of that particular workforce this year, if possible. And if we need to look to a longer-term revenue source, I'm happy to work with the Governor on that.

And my time is up. Commissioner, thank you so much.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

We've been joined by Senator Baskin,

Senator Cordell Cleare, Senator Weik.

And our first up is our chair, Senator Brisport, 10 minutes.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair (audio echo). Oh, this is resonance going back up a little bit.

Thank you to both commissioners. Commissioner Guinn, you're off the hook from me, at least for the next 10 minutes. All my questions are for Commissioner Harris-Madden.

Again, congratulations on your appointment to this position. It was an honor to support and vote for you in the New York State Senate last year, and you've been doing incredible work. I know it's been a lot, it's been a whirlwind for the past few months. It's a big purview. But welcome to your first hearing.

My first question, I would like to focus on the April 2024 Child Care Availability Task Force report. The cover letter that you submitted for that report, along with Commissioner Reardon, makes the point that we need to focus on addressing the

childcare workforce crisis. The report goes on to repeatedly argue, over and over again, that we need to act with urgency to institute a permanent line of funding to supplement childcare worker wages.

Why is it so important and urgent that New York State stabilize its childcare workforce?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you for your kind remarks and also your question, Chair Brisport.

Yes, we did underscore that workforce shortage is an issue, as it is across all health and human services fields. We recognize the vital importance of our workforce, particularly as they serve as our most young -- the youngest, our most vulnerable in many instances. And so yes, the report did make those recommendations.

However, I'm happy to point out that we are taking a measured approach here. This budget does include some of the recommendations of the task force, which include the substitute pool, which will allow

for further supports within the system, hopefully through our partners such as the CCR&Rs and/or others.

They will help us to vet and find qualified individuals who can step in as substitutes. This has been done in other states, and we think that this is a very good approach to, you know, supporting our workforce. This way classrooms are not closing due to absences of the professionals there.

But, you know, we have other instances as well that OCFS has done prior to me joining, and will continue to do, to include subsidy -- educational subsidies, training opportunities, paid scholarships for the workforce. And also when we introduced in this budget the New York Coalition on Childcare, this is designed for research and fund development opportunities and will be comprised of tax experts, union experts, business leaders, and childcare providers to path-forward how we can create a sustainable system.

Because the reality is that this system is, you know, very costly. But we recognize the importance of developing revenue streams and providing recommendations to bring forth to this honorable body to make decisions on how we proceed.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you. And I do want to say I love hearing the words "substitute pool" and "CCR&Rs" in the same sentence, and hope that that plays out well in the way that the substitute pool is structured in the final budget.

But going back to the workforce, on page 6 the report cites data that all programs were operating below their license capacity due to workforce shortages and that we were serving 28,462 fewer children than current capacity because of these workforce shortages.

The workforce shortage is a big problem when it comes to childcare capacity, right?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: The workforce shortage is present in all systems

that we encounter at OCFS. And so I would agree, yes, the workforce is something that we should be building upon.

But again, with the current infrastructure in OCFS and its budget, we believe that we are supporting the workforce. And of course there's more to be done, but there are number of things that I could point to that suggest that, you know, we are doing well in this area.

Recently we learned that there were 508 new programs that were developed, and I didn't share that with you in our last conversation. That was a just a new development. So that kind of lends to the narrative that we are expanding opportunities. And of course these ratios and staffing is maintained, we are always going out and, you know, reviewing, working with our providers to make sure that they are supported.

In addition to that, we -- I just want to just provide some of the information that we have in terms of our scholarships. I was

pleased to learn that 9,000 members of the workforce received scholarships for training and education, to the tune of $8.5 million.

We are also working with businesses, the Business Navigator, to provide additional resources. We ensure that we have support in the New York State Early Education Career Centers, to the tune of $2 million. And of course we now are able, as of January 1, to make direct payments -- well, not we, our local departments of social services are able to make direct payments to the providers so they can pay their staff in a timely manner.

So, you know, I think that there's a measured approach here and that we are making progress.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

I would highlight an additional claim from the report that says these childcare workforce challenges threaten to undermine the tremendous gains New York has made in expediting access to childcare assistance because these challenges can directly cause a decline in childcare capacity.

The Comptroller, the New York State Comptroller, also released a recent report talking about the workforce shortages and the way that those would undermine our attempts to increase childcare capacity.

I also want to highlight some language from the task force report that you submitted that says we need to act with urgency to implement a permanent workforce compensation fund. And then there was also the roadmap to universal childcare that was released last month.

The roadmap likewise that the implementation of universal childcare will be in jeopardy if the childcare workforce crisis is not addressed. And it recommends that New York establish a permanent workforce compensation fund aimed at increasing wages for all members of the childcare workforce, and indexed to the cost of living.

I agree that this is an urgent need, and we're going to hear from some additional task force members later today. But what did you mean when you stressed that this would be

a permanent line of funding?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you. So in our current budget we have $1.8 million, a notable increase from where we were just a few years ago. And we are maintaining that funding to support the workforce and other, you know, aspects of the program.

So, you know, we are cognizant of the fact that we need a permanent workforce. We appreciate in the Governor's budget, which is not under my purview, but the expansion of opportunities for education, partnering with CUNY and SUNY. Because the key here is really to build a pipeline. If we have a feeder that will allow for our workforce to enter this space -- which has been historically not in parity with other educational systems -- if we continue to advance our education and make tuition free, like what is proposed for CUNY and SUNY, we believe that we will have a pipeline that will support this system.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

And hypothetically speaking, because I know that OCFS has administered childcare supplements for the workforce in the past, if the final budget, due April 1st of this year, manages to include an additional $1.2 billion for a permanent fund to increase childcare workforce wages, would OCFS be able to implement that?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: If the policies make it so, we stand ready to implement.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Okay. Another question is, have you spoken with the Governor herself about childcare workforce wage supplements at all?

And do you know why this recommendation from the task force report was missing from the Executive Budget? Was it an oversight?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I don't know that I would say it was missed, Mr. Chair. I think that there's some key elements from that report that are integrated in this year's budget. Again, the substitute

pool being one of them. The additional work to convene the business and tax experts to develop fund development strategies and resources to sustain the system is another.

So I don't know that it was a miss; I think it's just measured.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Okay. And my last is that on page 12 of the task force report you also recommend limiting restrictions to childcare assistance based on a parent's employment status, hours worked, and minimum compensation.

I've heard that a lot of members of the task force are very unhappy that the Executive Budget left this out. This is very important to restaurant workers, retail employees, construction workers and gig workers, because their hours are unpredictable.

It's not a question, just a request. Please talk with Governor Hochul about getting these items back in the budget.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, sir.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Commissioner.

With that, I cede the rest of my time.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you, Senator Brisport.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Oh, I'm sorry.

SENATOR BRISPORT: You can both thank me, that's okay.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Wait. Did I cut you off, Senator?

SENATOR BRISPORT: No, I just -- you were both thanking me. Go for it.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. And I just wanted to introduce Senator Scarcella-Spanton before I hand it over to the Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Madam Senator.

Before I move on, we've been joined by Assemblymember Hooks, Assemblymember Wright, Assemblymember Lee, Assemblymember Forrest, Assemblymember Raga, Assemblymember Romero.

And Assemblymember Maher for five

minutes.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Seawright for 10 minutes.

Oh, okay. Assemblywoman Davila.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Okay, here we go. Good morning, Commissioners. Thank you so much for being here today and providing testimony.

And thank you to my colleagues as well for being here.

I just -- I'm excited about some of the things that are on the table that the Governor has proposed. But we have still yet a lot of work to be done. I want to talk a little bit about the migrant funding, $2.4 billion that we allocated last year. In mid-December the administration announced that they were going to pull out the National Guard from the migrant shelters.

That same month, both the city and state announced the closing of the JFK shelter, Randalls Island and Floyd Bennett Field shelters. Were there any

savings in the current fiscal year because of these actions? And if so, what is becoming of those funds?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the funding that was authorized in prior-year budgets to help New York City handle the influx of new arrivals that has occurred over the past several years, remains available for New York City to access, as well as other services that are -- some of which are directly operated by the state.

So at this point I wouldn't characterize it as there being savings available. Certainly the city -- we'll be working closely with the city as the city is able to begin to ramp down some of the larger congregate facilities based on the reduction of individuals who are needing shelter at this point.

But certainly there continues to be a great need. There continues to be 46,000 such individuals residing in the city shelter system. And we also know that many of these households continue to need assistance with

legal services and other case management to help them truly integrate into their neighborhoods.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Okay, we have yet to see how much money has been spent through the city through these $2.4 billion. And I'm just curious as to if there was any funding left to carry on through this fiscal year.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: There are funds that remain available for the city to draw down, and we expect that reimbursement to continue in the upcoming several months in the next fiscal year.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Okay, thank you.

With the Home Energy Assistance Program, earlier this winter the state stopped accepting HEAP, which was a little devastating because people were calling into our offices panicking because they were unable to put in applications. Then they were reopened the next day.

When the Governor announced an

additional 35 million for HEAP, can you tell us where this money came from?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So yes. So when the regular HEAP opened this past November, November 1st of 2024, we did expect that we would be able to remain open through mid-March. But due to much higher than anticipated early applications throughout that program, we did get to a point where we did need to shut down.

And we're very thankful that Governor Hochul allowed us to reallocate 35 million to support the program.

I think -- I mean, at this point it's reallocated from within the HEAP program, but there is an effort to work with the Division of the Budget to backfill that amount of money to continue to fully fund all HEAP components.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Do we currently have a backlog of HEAP applications? And if so, will the 35 million be sufficient to get us through the end of the heating season?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So we do

project at this point that the additional 35 million in funds that were made available to support the regular program will allow us to keep that program open through early April.

And we also do expect the emergency component, which is, as you know, critical to make sure that people's heating sources are not shut off, that that also will remain open through early April.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Thank you.

Okay, let's go on to supportive housing. What specific strategies is OTDA implementing to accelerate the development of supportive housing for individuals experiencing homelessness and those with disabilities? Because as you are aware, those numbers keep increasing and, you know, our ability to be able to provide services to these homeless individuals is getting smaller.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah. Right. Yeah. I mean, certainly supportive housing is one of the key solutions to

homelessness. The ability for people to be able to access permanent housing that is both affordable and comes with those wraparound services is absolutely essential, including individuals with disabilities.

You know, as I mentioned during my testimony, we are very pleased that this year's budget includes significant investments in supportive housing. So the additional funds that are available to bolster NYSSHP, that's directly intended to make sure that some of those older supportive housing units have additional resources so that we do not lose them.

The other investment in this budget is significant increases in the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative. And through that we are going to be able to make significant increases in the rates that are available for providers who operate that supportive housing.

So ESSHI right now, and since it was established, has a budget of 25,000 per unit. The Governor's budget will increase that to

31,000 for areas outside of New York City and to 34,000 for areas within New York City. We think that that increase is really important to continue to bring in more providers who are willing to operate supportive housing.

And then I'll also mention just the additional capital investment on our HHAP programs, our Homeless Housing Assistance Program. That $25 million increase is also very much intended to help stabilize some of the older units that need preservation funds in order to maintain.

So it's a combination of investments in preservation combined with new funding to make sure that we're continuing to be able to build additional supportive housing units. And we think that this budget positions us very well to do that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Thank you.

My last question. What steps are being taken to streamline the approval and funding process for nonprofit and private developers who want to create supportive housing in high-need -- because we are aware

how slowly money is trickled down from the state. And sometimes that can cause a trickling effect in terms of the amount of money it would take to build supportive housing.

So what are we doing about streamlining that funding so that we can build quicker and have more availability for people who are disabled and homeless?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So we definitely understand the need to reduce bureaucracy and streamline processes so that developers and nonprofits can establish additional supportive housing.

I think our agency does pretty well in this space. We have a very strong team that manages our homeless housing and assistance program as well as the subsidy programs associated with supportive housing. And we also work very closely with Homes and Community Renewal, because we know often some of the projects that are built are funded both from HCR funds, tax credits as well as our HHAP funding.

So I think that we have done a good job in streamlining, but we certainly are always open to any recommendations that you may have about how we could do even better.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Thank you. And next is just two comments.

I would be remiss if I didn't echo the sentiments of my colleagues during conference. And one of those issues is the Summer Youth Program because it's being cut significantly. This is an extremely important program.

And the next is ESSHI. People were extremely nervous about ESSHI. So we are going to try to fight to restore these programs.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay. So ESSHI is receiving significant increases based on Governor Hochul's budget.

With respect to the Summer Youth Program, it is actually increased over the Governor's budget from last year, but it does remove the legislative add from -- that was included. And that is just kind of a

traditional process where the Executive often removes legislative adds. But we certainly look forward to working with you and other members of the Legislature to do everything we can to support the Summer Youth Employment Program.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DAVILA: Thank you. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Senator?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Chair Senator Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Commissioners. Great seeing both of you.

You know, it's great working with you, Dr. Harris-Madden. You know, I enjoy the conversation we have, and I understand your commitment to the role that you're playing in the agency.

I just have one question for you; it's on Raise the Age in New York City.

Have you had a conversation about

New York City and when will they submit a plan for Raise the Age funds? And if they have no intentions of submitting the plans for Raise the Age funds, how can we divert the funding that's being left on the table year after year to other opportunities for the youth across the state?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Chair Persaud, and it was a pleasure talking with you earlier this week.

New York City clearly has great need, and we have encouraged all of our counties, not just New York City, to provide plans. And although they were left out of the initial legislation, any county can still submit a plan.

So to your question, we do not know when and if New York City will submit a plan, but if it is submitted we will certainly take it under consideration.

SENATOR PERSAUD: But in the meanwhile, what can we do with the funds that are being left on the table? Can we utilize these for other programs for at-risk youth?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Well, if I may just speak a little bit about the plans and the process.

You know, the plans do come to OCFS. And almost every plan throughout the state that we receive, along with our sister agency in DCJS and the Department of Budget, typically approves the RTA plans. We are extremely flexible because it is an incredibly local response. The communities must say what they need. They know their populations best.

We are chronically encouraging -- and I know in my short time I also message that, you know, we want alternatives to detention, we want those interventions that are efficacious in our communities. But we must receive plans from the counties in order to be able to approve and subsequently allow them to spend, then they will claim, and we will promptly reimburse.

But if a county is not doing so then, you know, we -- we work with what we have.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. Thank you for

that.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you.

SENATOR PERSAUD: And now Commissioner Guinn. I am going to continue on the supportive housing questioning.

You know, we know that NYSSHP stock tends to be older, right, than the ESSHI stock. What are we doing to ensure that -- because we have not -- the conditions seem to be, you know, not up to standard. We are funding so that we can renovate and all of that.

Are we at any point at this time anticipating losing any housing stock in NYSSHP because of the conditions?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So at this point we're working closely with each provider, trying to make sure that they maintain the stock that is available. In the past we've worked with them to try to bring in project-based vouchers and other places to bring in additional revenue to those locations.

Importantly this year, as I mentioned in my testimony, you know, Governor Hochul has included a $17 million investment in NYSSHP. And as part of awarding those funds we will certainly be looking at -- to bolster those programs that have the greatest need. Because yes, it's absolutely critical that we keep those supportive housing units online.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you for that.

And touching on HEAP, we understand, you know, that temporary closure and the money that was transferred to cover and reopen the HEAP process.

Are we in danger of having the same thing happen with the cooling funds for summer? Can we say that we have enough funds to cover the anticipated number of applications that we will have?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the HEAP plan allocates $15 million towards the cooling component. Each year we have to balance the available HEAP funding among the different components.

Is $15 million sufficient? We shall

see. But I know that in prior years the applications for the cooling component have also been coming in quite rapidly. So, you know, it's not necessarily intended to be able to address every single household's need.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. What are you doing in preparation of the possibility of the cuts in federal funding?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So at this point we have not received cuts in federal funding. But obviously we're very aware of all the activity taking place at the federal level, both from the White House as well as as the budget process begins to heat up.

You know, we're going to continue to fight for New Yorkers and continue to advocate that federal funding is made available -- in particular, federal funding that's so important in our state as well as in others states to really address the needs of some of the most vulnerable. So we will just fight and advocate as hard as we can to keep federal funding flowing for these

priority areas.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

So over the past few years we've had a benefit cliffs bill vetoed and we continue to push for that bill to be signed by the Governor, because we think -- we know that it's very important that we understand what's causing the benefits cliffs and how do we help New Yorkers, you know.

So the Governor has proposed the Monroe County Ladders Program. And it's -- part of that is understanding benefit cliffs. Why would we -- in my opinion, Monroe County is not -- does not show you what is happening across the state. And why would we not look at what is happening across the state to fix the issues so that we can help those most in need?

Why are we focusing on Monroe County? What was the rationale for that, do you know?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the purpose of the Monroe Ladder demonstration project is not -- it's to really dive in deep and to work with employers to address

real-life situations. So our objective is really to work with employees either through financial counseling and then also through subsidies, if that's appropriate, in the event that they are otherwise unwilling or fearful of taking on additional hours or a promotion.

So it's really like a real-life I guess demonstration project to better understand what ways we might be able to mitigate what might be either real or perceived concerns associated with the fiscal cliffs.

Our agency -- you know, I understand, Senator, that this is a matter that's of great importance to you, and I promise you that our agency is willing to work with you to collect data and to have discussions, because I understand -- I understand why you're interested, that you want to, you know, be able to understand what's happening so that any policy changes could be implemented.

We are happy that over the past couple

of years, under Governor Hochul's leadership, New York State has made some significant changes with respect to both public assistance and childcare. So both of those programs used to be in a place where workers would face a significant cliff. But through policy changes, with the support of the Legislature and additional funding to increase eligibility thresholds, those cliffs largely have been mitigated.

But like I said, I know this is important to you and we're happy to work with you on the project.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Well, thank you for that. Because, you know, we will continue pressing on that.

And in the time that I have left, let's touch on our EBT cards. Could you tell us the status of the chip cards? And what else needs to be done before we can implement the chip enhanced cards?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. So with respect to moving to chip cards, we understand that movement to chip cards is

probably the best path forward in terms of us being able to better protect public benefits from electronic skimming.

Right now we do not have resources within our agency budget to move toward chip cards. That said, we are continuing to collect additional information and see if we can come up with strategies that would produce the ability to move toward chip cards at a cost that's lower than what we are currently projecting based on what we are aware of in other states.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Do we think we'll have chip cards -- some sort of rollout by the end of the year? By early next year? What's the plan? Do we have a long-term plan as to -- a short-term plan, actually, as to when we will roll it out?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right now our best protection for individuals is for them to lock their EBT cards. And so we're continuing additional outreach on that particular issue to make more households aware of the ability to lock.

In fact, we've already started a text campaign to all SNAP recipients this week to increase the awareness of that.

And like I said, at this point we do not have resources in our agency budget to move towards chip cards, but we are continuing to evaluate the situation, because I do understand how important it is.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay, thank you. I just want to thank you for the information that you've been giving our offices to share --

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Of course.

SENATOR PERSAUD: -- with constituents about locking cards. Thank you.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Assemblyman Molitor, five minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: There we go, okay. Thank you.

I do not have any questions for Dr. Harris-Maiden -- or Madden, sorry.

But I do have some questions for

Acting Commissioner Guinn, and I'm going to be asking about fair hearings.

How many fair hearings are held annually?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So over 100,000 hearings are held on an annual basis.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: And how long does it take to conduct a fair hearing, on average? What's the average wait time?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: On average, how long does it take to actually get through the fair hearing?

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Well, to get to the hearing. Like how many days?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right now it's taking longer than is expected. The expectation is that the hearings are completed within 60 days, I believe, for public assistance and 90 days for SNAP, and similar time frames for Medicaid.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Once the hearing is conducted, how long is it taking for the ALJ to issue a decision? On average.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. Once

the hearing is complete the decision should be issued within weeks.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: What is the total amount of, quote, aid continuing, unquote, that was paid out during the last fiscal year?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I do not have that information with me with respect to individuals who retain access to their benefits pending the completion of a fair hearing. I do not have that information with me.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Do you know, what is the total amount of aid continuing benefits that were repaid by beneficiaries after a fair hearing during the last fiscal year? In other words, if they had lost a hearing and they had to repay, do you know how much was repaid by beneficiaries in the last fiscal year?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I do not know the total amount that was repaid if an individual is not successful in the outcome of their hearing.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Okay.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: {Mic off; inaudible} -- but he's not Senator Mattera. Sorry.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: That's all right. I'm not Senator Mattera.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: I got a promotion on the screen.

(Laughter; remarks off the record.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Take the win.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Just going back to the -- I'm sorry, just going back to the fair hearings, do you know is there an average cost for how much does it cost for the agency to conduct a fair hearing? What are you paying? What is the amount that the agency has to pay to conduct a fair hearing?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I do not have that information with me. But I know that we have, you know, over a hundred staff members dedicated to that function.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Okay. I'd like to move to the childcare capital program.

How many providers will the $100 million in new funding assist? Oh, I guess I do have questions for Dr. --

(Laughter.)

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you. I'm glad to answer your question, Assemblyman.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: So, you know, we anticipate approximately 10 -- to double what we had under the 50 million in last year's. So last year we created about 5,000 additional seats. So we anticipate to add approximately 10,000 additional seats.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: And how will childcare providers be selected for that funding?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: For the capital funding they will be submitting for an RFP. Our agency will produce an RFP to which the respondents would reply to that mechanism.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: And is there a particular goal within your agency to

distribute that funding across, you know, the largest geographical area you can across the state?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: We have not determined the exact methodology. But I would imagine we would, you know, hope to have respondents that represent the diversity of this great state, and to distribute of course based on, you know, scoring but also looking at particular areas throughout the state.

Typically we hope to serve the deserts, childcare deserts, and stick to the 10 geographical areas that we have.

ASSEMBLYMAN MOLITOR: Okay. Those are all the questions I have. Thank you very much for being here to answer our questions.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

Senator John Liu, three minutes.

SENATOR LIU: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you, Commissioners, for

joining us.

So a quick question for Commissioner Guinn. You know, Senator Persaud was asking you about this already, but the theft of EBT card funds is a real big problem, and it's a growing problem. So we need those -- anything that will stop, curtail the theft of these funds. And our understanding is that those chip cards are an important part.

So you're saying you don't have resources and you need more money. How much more budget do you need to get these EBT cards in the hands of people who need them?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes, so we are continuing to collect additional information. The initial information or estimates that we came up with were as high as $40 million for the first-year cost associated with moving toward chip cards.

Like I said, we're continuing to gather additional information, kind of scan with respect to the environment of the vendors that are out there that can provide

this service.

SENATOR LIU: So $40 million just to set up. And that's for how many individuals, how many cards?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: That would be, you know, over a hundred -- over 1.5 million cards for sure.

We -- our intention and the reason why the first-year costs are so high is a combination of factors. It's both on the EBT system itself and would there need to be technical changes to the EBT system in the processing to accommodate chip cards.

Then also there is the cost associated with card distribution.

SENATOR LIU: All right. What's the total annual budget of OTDA again, roughly?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Almost 8 billion.

SENATOR LIU: Eight billion, okay. And you need another 40 million to get this done.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes.

SENATOR LIU: Do you need -- you can't

get any of that done before you get another budget allocation for this?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I guess in theory we could issue a procurement, and that's something that we have been working on. And we could issue it and see what bids come in and see if it's something that's more affordable.

SENATOR LIU: Yeah, I think it's really important for many of us, and more importantly our constituents.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Absolutely.

SENATOR LIU: These funds are being stolen at a more rapid pace.

Commissioner Harris-Madden -- yeah, I'm sorry, Commissioner Harris-Madden, thank you and welcome to your new role. I don't have much time left, but the LEAPS program is a big problem all throughout the state. I know you testified about the scoring system and the fact that many have passed without being able to access funds because I suppose it's incumbent upon us to put more funding into the plan.

But we've been trying to get more information about what the scoring process has been. And of all the ones that have passed, how did you select the ones who actually got the funding?

You're not going to have time to answer this, but I just want to impart to you that we're very concerned that we increased the amount of after-school programming only to see many of our programs completely eliminated.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Senator.

We've been joined by Assemblywoman Simon and Assemblywoman Chandler-Waterman.

I'm now calling on Assemblywoman Lunsford for three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you very much.

This is a question for OCFS.

Over the past several years we've been hearing concerns from volunteer foster-care agencies about the rising costs of their liability expenditures with regard to

Child Victims Act cases. During the lookback window, 50 percent of the cases filed were against voluntary service agencies, and we already saw the bankruptcy of a Long Island-based facility.

Last year I asked if there was any plan to help address these closures since our counties rely on these voluntary service agencies for available beds. Has any progress been made in that regard? And could you update us on the amount of closures of voluntary service agencies, if there have been any others this year?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

Voluntary agencies are critical for our operation, and we share your concern in terms of their solvency and their ability to operate.

That said, in terms of the insurance, it's the same as I responded earlier. We are aware that insurance is skyrocketing across all fields, and --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: I'm sorry,

it's not a question about insurance, it's actually about their exposure on these cases. Because of the 800 cases in the Child Victims Act lookback window that were filed against voluntary service agencies, a high proportion of them have no insurance at all.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: That's correct. I apologize for that.

So that is, again, another area of deep concern for us in terms of supporting our agencies. However, we are in communications and monitoring as things develop. We are in touch with the field. We are, you know, participating with COFCCA and other organizations, listening and learning to what they're experiencing. And at this juncture we're just still communicating with our partners and speaking internally to, you know, monitor this situation to see what we -- what if anything we can do.

But we are clear that these agencies are vital to our operation and to the community.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Just a

reminder that if these fail, there are no other beds. These are performing an essential government purpose. We can't just offshoot 50 kids who previously had beds to the National Guard and say, You're foster-care agencies now.

Switching quickly to the substitute pool, we're very glad to see the substitute pool. Can you speak a little bit in the last 30 seconds here about how we're going to administer that substitute pool? Are we going to rely on outside businesses? Are we going to do it internally?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Sure. We anticipate an RFP for the substitute pool. And again, we are hoping that our partners who are well-versed in this space, such as the CCR&Rs and other nonprofits, will apply. And they will be responsible for the vetting and ultimate decisions regarding the substitute pool candidates and the training as well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you very much. I'll cede my last nine seconds.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senate?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: (Mic off; inaudible) -- operating this morning. Thank you.

We have Senator Rolison -- oh, no, sorry, Senator Murray first. Excuse me.

SENATOR MURRAY: There we go. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you, Commissioners, for being here. My questions will be primarily to Commissioner Guinn.

I want to go back to the EBT and the chip card technology. As you know, I'm a strong supporter of this. I'm actually a cosponsor of Senator Persaud's legislation -- I want to thank her for leading the way on this -- of requiring the chip technology in the EBT cards.

You've been very open about this. We've worked on this issue. You've also instituted the lock-and-block plan right now, which has helped, but it's not solving the

problem. As Senator Liu said, this is a major, major problem. We're losing hundreds of millions of dollars.

But I have some concerns here. So last year, in May, you switched vendors. Who was your previous vendor, and who is the vendor we're using now?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: The previous EBT vendor was Conduent. The current EBT vendor is FIS.

SENATOR MURRAY: That's where I have a major concern. So we switched from Conduent to FIS. I'm looking at a press release from the Department of Labor from June 26th of 2023 where they announced the new Conduent "Way to Go" debit card utilizes chip technology.

So we have the Department of Labor that's been using these cards, using this technology for almost two years now. Have you had any conversations with Commissioner Reardon about this?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Our staff definitely have had conversations with the

Department of Labor to understand their contract structure and terms.

The systems are different in terms of EBT and what it requires is different than the UI system. But yes, we are aware that they have chip card technology.

SENATOR MURRAY: The concern here is we've been told that there are basically two vendors, and that's Conduent and FIS. And we've been told that the problem is that there are only two. But yet we had a contract in place, were using Conduent, who is currently using or administering the technology for the Department of Labor, yet we switched away from them to FIS and moved away where we're not ready yet, or it's not ready to be implemented.

Why would we do that?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the transition from Conduent to FIS happened as a result of a procurement that we were required to issue. It took years between the procurement being issued and actually getting to the point of transition. So it wasn't --

the reason we switched vendors was simply because of the procurement process that we were required to follow.

I wouldn't say that -- I mean, Conduent's work or FIS's work with our agency with respect to EBT is different in terms of what is required to implement chip card technology. I'm not saying that FIS is incapable of doing so. I'm saying that we need to have funds available to support that move.

SENATOR MURRAY: But this isn't new, Commissioner. This is -- for years we've seen the fraud going on, we've seen them stealing, literally stealing from people who need this to feed their families on their SNAP cards. And these criminals are getting away with it.

Now, there's a lot of talk about the federal government saying, We're not going to now make good when those funds are stolen. I don't blame them, because that's taxpayer money, and I don't think the taxpayers should be paying twice for these benefits, which is

what's happening. And the criminals are getting away with it because we don't have this technology in place.

So you can see the frustration when it seems like the technology's there, the technology's being used and has been in New York State. So it's not like this is something new. It's been in place for almost two years. I just -- I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around why we do not have this in place right now.

But again, I do appreciate the efforts that have been made as far as the lock and block. And is there anything more we can do to get the word out about that while we're waiting for this chip technology?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah. Just please understand, I share your frustration. There's nothing more important than being able to protect people's benefits. And I agree, the government should not have to pay twice. But more importantly, the people whose benefits are stolen, as you know, it's a significant issue for their household

budget.

We -- with respect to the lock-and-block, as I mentioned, we did look into it based on some of your inquiries about its usage, and it's not nearly where it needs to be. So like I said, we are conducting an outreach campaign via text this week to all SNAP households to make sure that they are aware of the lock-and-block technology. And then we are also moving toward another enhancement with that that would permit people to "block and block" their benefits by using a telephone as opposed to the current option being online or a mobile app.

SENATOR MURRAY: And do we have any numbers -- 10 seconds left -- do we have any numbers thus far as to the lock-and-block? Has it been effective?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: It is being used, but it is far underutilized, and so outreach is important.

SENATOR MURRAY: Thank you, Commissioner.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Senator.

Assemblyman Maher, five minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Thank you.

Thank you for being here, for your testimony.

I wanted to start with Raise the Age. So I really appreciate your support for this program. I believe it is something that is well-intended. I don't know that I can share that same support based on these results. And I just want to get to some of the causes.

So obviously nearly a billion dollars, not funding it is going to really affect how this has been implemented. And my hope is that that will solve a lot of those issues. However, before we really tackle the issue and create a sustainable way forward, I think we need to accurately quantify the problem.

So my question, my first question would be when it comes to 16- and 17-year-olds, we have a lot of statistics from a lot of reports that I've read that suggests they're not being put in jails, as was the intent of Raise the Age, and/or prisons for misdemeanors and felonies. But

there's also a lot of cases where services they are supposed to receive are not being provided.

So my question is what is happening to these 16- and 17-year-olds when they become 18, 19, 20 and 21? And do you have any specific information on what the arrest rates have been during those last seven years for those ages? And has that been part of your conversation on how to address this moving forward?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you very much for your question -- it's hard to see -- Assemblyman.

So going back to Raise the Age legislative intent, I appreciate that you understand the importance of not putting our young people in prison, 16 and 17 years old.

To your point regarding 18 to 21, we still serve those young people within our current facilities. I just wanted to make the distinction.

In terms of crime overall, we understand that crime is down, and youth

crime is consistent with adult crime. There have been some spikes in certain areas.

If I understand your question correctly, it is what more can we do to ensure that these young people don't enter this system at all. And so this is an incredibly local response. Again, we defer to our counties to create the plans so that they are using efficacious models and interventions that actually work.

We work hand in hand as it relates to the young people who do enter the system. And if their first stop is detention, let's say, we are working 24/7 to help find beds throughout the state. We make sure that our young people are, you know, if they are leaving detention and then entering our system in the state, that that process is seamless. And then we are providing rehabilitative types of services within our facilities.

So I don't have the numbers in front of me today in terms of the actual numbers and breakdowns by crime. But I'm happy to

provide that to you. I believe the Department of Criminal Justice Services maintains that data, and we are in constant communication with that team.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Thank you. I have two more questions, and I've got to hurry.

My final conclusion, it's kind of what you said, is I do think there are a lot more issues with this program. I have heard from a lot of case studies, and I'd love to work with both my colleagues and your offices to try to address how some of these horrific things are happening due to this program being implemented in the way that it has. Whether it's on you or the counties, whoever it is, just the importance of having that discussion and talking about those cases that are taking place.

The second item I want to talk about was childcare. A lot of investment has gone into families being able to afford childcare, but there has been a huge amount of misses when it comes to the childcare providers themselves. Obviously we heard about

insurance issues with foster care. Those same insurance shortfalls exist with childcare facilities.

When it comes to the desert grants that have been awarded, it seems as though not all of that 100 million, if that's the accurate number, was given to those facilities. Was there money left over, and how was that used if it didn't go to those facilities that weren't able to meet those deadlines?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you for that question.

In terms of the desert grants, again, that was administered prior to my time. But I understand it was very successful. We were -- OCFS worked feverishly to get the funding out the door, and that was supported through federal funds. And so those grants have terminated. But, you know, we're a work in progress. But I think the historic 7 billion from the Governor, with the assistance of this body, has been tremendous in terms of expanding the opportunities. We

have seen a 34 percent growth --

(Time clock sounds.)

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Thank you. I'll have to catch you later --

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I can talk to you later.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: -- for my last question. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senate?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I'm sorry, second ranker, Senator Rolison.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you both for being here this morning. My focus is with OCFS.

So Commissioner Harris-Madden, when you were confirmed last year, and looking at your career in local government -- City of Mount Vernon in Westchester County, where local governments need to be very flexible and to collaborate with multiple partners to see that the job is done and done efficiently -- what have you found in your

short tenure here at OCFS, where OCFS can lead a discussion amongst multiple agencies to deliver these services?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Senator Rolison. It's great to talk with you again.

SENATOR ROLISON: Yes.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: We work with our local governments routinely. And, you know, that spans across all of the domains. We have Aid to Localities, where we support our municipal agencies or municipal governments so that they can provide positive youth development, they can provide preventive services, of course child welfare services, juvenile justice services. So we're in constant communication.

We're also partners with a number of advocacy groups, and we do meet routinely, I meet routinely with these organizations to hear what they are seeing on the ground.

But essentially we are state-supervised and locally administered, so those decisions that are made at the local

level are really critical, and I think it underscores your point that, you know, our persistence in encouraging them -- an example being Raise the Age -- to, you know, develop plans that are responsive to their community needs, we do routinely.

So I think that answers your question.

SENATOR ROLISON: And also, too, what about at the state level? Because one of the things that I have heard since being here, and heard prior to that when I was a mayor, was the complexity of dealing with multiple Os, and families have -- using the Os for lots of different reasons to help them with their children and their family issues and the situations that they have.

That seems to -- obviously that's a tougher probably collaboration. But are you trying to bring the local to the state?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I think the locals are with the state --

SENATOR ROLISON: To collaborate amongst your -- your follow commissioners?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I

think they are. Our sister agencies also, you know, are routinely in the field listening and learning from those that are boots on the ground.

In terms of our interagency communications, you know, I'm told that we have now, you know, enhanced communication. We work very closely with our colleagues to try to find solutions and to be thought partners with our local communities.

SENATOR ROLISON: Well, thank you. That's good to hear.

On the capital program for childcare, different regions of the state, childcare deserts. How flexible is that money so local municipalities, local agencies can use that money to how it works within their region?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Sure. I mean, just like any other procurement we would expect that organizations apply for this funding. They're actually anticipating local support. So, you know, we are enthusiastic and believe that we will be working with the local

communities.

And we always encourage collaboration and partnership within our, you know, requests for proposals, but also in the responses. And so we will continue to look at the breakout. New York is just so dichotomous in terms of its vastness and the differences within the communities, but we try our best to create a methodology that looks at a breakdown that's equitable across the state.

SENATOR ROLISON: In the substitute program for childcare that has been rolled out -- I think it's $3 million has been committed to that -- I recently got a correspondence from a local county social services that when the teachers register, can they register locally to be able to expand that pool and not have to go through the state? Is there some flexibility there?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I'm not sure I understand the question. Can they, for substitute pools --

SENATOR ROLISON: Right, with the

pools that are going to be created to fill the gaps when you need a substitute at a childcare.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Yes.

SENATOR ROLISON: How flexible is it for them to work with their local DSS to be able to register and qualify there versus the state level?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: We envision it to be very flexible, which is why we are, you know, looking to the local -- hyper local organizations to apply so that it's regionalized as well so that, you know, there's opportunities throughout the state.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Clark for three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Thank you.

A first quick question to Commissioner Guinn.

So on the BABY Benefit program, we've been looking for years and had some much

bigger ask and commitment in our Assembly one-house last year to do exactly this. We do think supporting new moms is really a way to ensure that that family gets off on the right foot, that we can change the trajectory of that child by pulling families out of poverty.

I'm wondering, though, in the proposal in the Governor's budget, is that based on any other -- the numbers seem very low to me. And my biggest fear is that we do something and we do it too low and it doesn't have the impact that we need it to have.

Is that proposal based on any successful pilots in terms of the numbers used in it?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: It's not necessarily based on a particular pilot. But as you've noted, there's a ton of evidence out there about how supporting individuals during pregnancy, as well as when children are very young, that even modest investments can make a significant difference in terms of the trajectory for that family and for that

child.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: But you would agree that it probably makes sense to ensure that the amount we're using has been proven to be effective, versus just putting a number in there, not having it be effective and not work the way we want it to.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I mean, we do think that this will be effective. Obviously I think with many studies that are out there, increased amounts will make an increased difference in terms of reducing the stress factors within that household that parents often face, and other efforts that would improve the child well-being.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Wonderful. Perfect. Okay, on to childcare.

Quickly, I can't emphasize more on the workforce. I understand -- I mean, we have -- I've now toured a few centers just recently that have literally their doors shuttered on a couple of rooms, not because they need capital to build out but because they need staff to staff them. We have one

owner who owns multiple centers and he has, he says, upwards of 15 rooms he can't open right now.

So when we talk capital I appreciate it, I know there are still needs out there, but we know the workforce urgency is so much greater. And I appreciate finding -- and I do agree that we need to get to a point where we have a sustainable, permanent line of funding for that. But until then, I still feel like we've been told now for six years in various reports that this is what we need. Why not do it one more time this year and then use the year to get to a point where we have a permanent source to fund that?

That's a comment. You don't need to answer, because you talked about it. I do want to quickly get to minimum earnings. The Governor vetoed my bill last year. Do we not think that those who are the lowest-paid -- our contractors, our independent workers -- need the dollars to get childcare? Don't they deserve it as much as those who get regular paychecks?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you for your question. I think --

(Time clock sounds.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: To be continued.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Scarcella-Spanton.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you, Commissioners. Good morning.

My first question is for Commissioner Harris-Madden.

My district was really negatively impacted by the new eligibility provisions in the LEAPS programming. We actually lost all programming on Staten Island, and some programming also in Southern Brooklyn. Staten Island particularly was a huge problem because there's a lot of youth violence, so these schools depend on these after-school programs.

So I have two questions. My first would be, what is being done to give providers the tools that they need to be approved and receive funding? Because that was a big problem.

A lot of the providers got a letter stating that they were approved but not funded. So they weren't sure what more they could do to actually receive that funding, and then they were left scrambling because of the timeline that they got that letter.

And my second question is, is there a plan for more equity across the boroughs to bring this programming forward? Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you so much, Senator.

I'll back into that question. We are absolutely committed to equity. And as I mentioned earlier, New York City was just a very fierce competition. Your question concerning quality, if you will, or what could be done to improve the process for applicants -- you know, I think that again, with the fierce competition, many of the organizations, while they may have crafted a very well-written response, just due to the sheer volume of applicants unfortunately they made it to the "could be funded but were not funded because we ran out of funds.:

In terms of Staten Island, I understand that there's one community school that's there that, you know, multiple agencies wrote for and again were approved on the list but we did not have the remaining funding to support it.

But overarchingly, you know, I would just say that with the infusion of money, again thanks to Governor Hochul and this body, we were able to actually expand the number of seats for LEAPS and create a higher-quality system. The existing -- the programs that existed previously were based on a 20-year model. And so after hearing from the field, the team prior to me made the decision to, you know, consolidate and create LEAPS. And there are benefits that are yielded throughout the state.

So I know that doesn't give as much, you know, comfort for you in Staten Island. However, I would note that Staten Island has a number of DCYD-funded programs, I believe it's like 40-some-odd programs. And I don't have the map in front of me, but we're just

one part of the entire after-school system. There's also, you know, New York State Education Department with 21st Century, there are, you know, other local organizations that provide after-school programming.

So, you know, the state provides, you know, a small piece to the overall picture.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you so much. And I look forward to working with your office again to just see what we could do to help get them to the place where they get funding. Because they really do want the funding. They're a big fan of LEAPS. So thank you.

And my next question is for Commissioner Guinn. I think it's a great investment for the ESSHI program this year. One of the developments on the Brooklyn side of my district is called Surf Vets. It's supportive housing units for veterans. It's actually a really successful model. They have a business on the bottom -- Cyclone Bagels, where the veterans work. They bring in the VA to get disability benefits.

I notice here it's kind of not necessarily specific. It says "supportive housing for families and individuals who are unsheltered and have a disabling condition." Is there any subcategories broken down that we could carve out for veterans, let's say? Because I think that this is such an amazing model that the state could really be utilizing. And I've had some people express interest in other places in the state.

So if they could tap into something like this, I think it would be a great opportunity. Thank you.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah, I've been to that location, and it is phenomenal. It's a great place for people to live. It's -- they're very fortunate, both the building and the location.

So with ESSHI, veterans -- I believe it is an eligible group to be served. Certainly veterans is also a focus area with respect to our HHAP capital funding as well. So those are groups of individuals that also are impacted by homelessness that are

eligible for the various services.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Excellent, thank you. And I'll look forward to connecting some of those providers who are interested in just pointing them in the right direction on how to get the ball rolling.

Thank you so much. That's all the questions I have today.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Mitaynes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

This is for the OTDA commissioner. We're talking about SNAP fraud and skimming. Can you provide data on the number of reported cases in the past year, how many have been resolved and what actions OTDA has taken to assist victims?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So with respect to the number, I can tell you the number of households that have been paid through skimming. Certainly through SNAP and PA combined is about 125,000 households have received payments, or payments have been issued.

People continue to accept applications for public assistance skimming, and we still have the authority to reimburse stolen public assistance. But unfortunately the federal government last December did not authorize the ability for states to reimburse for stolen SNAP benefits.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Given the devastating impact of skimming on low-income households, would OTDA support a state-funded reimbursement program for victims? What legal or budgetary challenges would need to be addressed to implement such a measure?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So at least we certainly would support any funds that could be made available to help individuals whose benefits have been stolen so that they can get reimbursed and so that they can make up that loss in their budget. We understand how devastating this is for these households.

In terms of investment, I think that if we could have additional investment we would certainly also concurrently want to move forward with chip cards to provide a

permanent solution.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES:

Ms. Harris-Madden, really quick, just a yes or no.

Childcare workers are some of the lowest paid in the state, receiving wage supplements using federal stimulus dollars over the last several years. With no wage supplements this year, would you say this is a pay cut?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I could not attest to whether that's a pay cut. I can tell you that, you know, we released in October the new market rates, which have increased to the 80th percentile. And that's an average of a 12 percent increase.

So organizations can make decisions based on this new amount, which by the way is above the federal 75 percentile rate. So what that means is that there has been an increase in the system in the minimum amount that childcare providing agencies can charge to their local departments of social services.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: What steps is OCFS taking to eliminate barriers to childcare access for immigrant families and those who may not qualify for federally funded programs due to immigration status?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: That's a great question. You know, we have to adhere to the federal rules currently as the federal allocation is sizable.

(Time clock sounds.)

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I can get back to you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MITAYNES: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senator?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Cordell Cleare, chair.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

Good morning, Commissioners Guinn and Harris-Madden. Good to see you here today.

My first question, I want to drill down a little bit more on ESSHI, get a little clarity on this. I have some of the older supportive housing buildings in my district who did not get the same level of funding.

And I just want to know if these increases are going to make up for that significant disparity between the two -- between NYCHA and ESSHI.

That $34,000, I think you said earlier, is going to be an increase for units in New York City. Will that apply to both?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the increase to the 34,000 unit reimbursement under ESSHI for New York City is not reflected in NYSSHP. So NYSSHP funds, as you mentioned, some of the older supportive housing units, and those rates are lower.

But this year's budget does include an investment of an additional 17 million to support NYSSHP and to help increase the rates, and in particular for those providers that have limited access to other resources.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Well, this is I guess a question and an ask, that we do put more funding into those. Those units, as you know, are very necessary and it's critical that we preserve them.

In addition, it's my understanding

that the workers were not included in the COLA adjustment, and what we can do to bring that up, because they are in desperate need of that funding.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. So while there isn't a specific wage COLA for these programs, the ESSHI program does permit, has historically permitted a 2 percent escalator per year. And obviously providers can pass that on to their workers, and we certainly encourage them to do so and expect that they will do so, given the tight labor market.

And then we also similarly hope that with the additional infusion of funding for NYSSHP, that that will also provide opportunities for wages to be increased for those workers.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Well, thank you. I look forward to communicating with you. I'm really concerned about the supportive housing units that we do have in my district, and I'm very interested in preserving them as well as creating more,

because the need is there.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Absolutely. We'd be happy to work with you.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

For the HEAP program -- I know you talked about that a little earlier. But as climate change has continued to occur and we're having hotter and hotter summers, neighborhoods like Harlem, the South Bronx and other areas are experiencing extreme heat vulnerability and a disparate number of heat-related hospitalizations and heat-related deaths.

Is there a way that we can look at the current funding? It seems as if we always run out of money, you know, and we don't have enough. And can we take into account neighborhoods that are experiencing this extreme heat vulnerability to lower the deaths and hospitalizations?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah, definitely reflect that when it's hot in New York City, it's really hot. And the urban areas, that heat is a real issue for

households.

I mean, the HEAP funding, it's a block grant, it's a capped block grant. So like I mentioned earlier, we have dedicated $15 million to support this year's cooling program. We really would need additional funds to expand that.

I know that the Department of Health is also working on a program also for those who are medically in need that would -- that medical condition is exacerbated by extreme heat -- and we can certainly get more information -- and that would also support the purchasing of air-conditionings and fans. And we'd be happy to get more information about that program and bring that back to your office as well.

SENATOR CLEARE: Well, I'd appreciate that. I'd really love to be able to prioritize that for them.

The birthing allowance that is getting ready to be given, I want to know how will the one-time benefit for public assistance recipients be calculated upon the birth of a

new child, and what will that amount be?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the benefit is structured so that it's $100 per month during pregnancy, and that would be as soon as the individual has medical documentation of their pregnancy that that benefit would begin.

And then the $1,200 payment would occur at the -- after the child is born and added to the public assistance case, that $1,200 amount would be provided to the household.

So over the course of the pregnancy and the first year of that child, it's probably likely going to be around $1800 per family, which is a significant investment to help those families.

SENATOR CLEARE: And how will that -- or will that, how will that affect the current public assistance? Is that going to impact the benefits that people are already getting?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: It will not reduce the benefits that they are currently

receiving. And our understanding is is that the $1200 one-time payment, that we will also be able to exclude that so it is not counted towards SNAP benefits.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. All right. Thank you.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: You're welcome.

SENATOR CLEARE: Good to see you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Burdick.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you.

And I want to thank you for your testimony. And this is a question for Dr. Harris-Madden.

And I first want to thank you for meeting by Zoom with Senator Harckham and me earlier this week to discuss the LEAPS program and organizations which were disqualified from applying for LEAPS due to the criteria which provided that they may be serving the community that has high needs,

but because they're located in a school district in which there are some very-high-wealth individuals, the metrics were skewed and distorted and so they were ineligible to apply.

And so as we mentioned in our Zoom meeting, we have found that a number of organizations across the state were ineligible to even apply, so we don't even know that they were -- so they were obviously not rejected but couldn't apply in the first place.

Do you -- does your department have any sense now, since our conversations, as to how many there might be and how many needs might not be served because of this outcome?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Assemblyman. Good to see you again.

You know, we again champion after-school, and it is a holistic approach. And in particular, some of the areas that you're describing unfortunately did not meet the criteria for LEAPS. However, previously

our Empire and Advantage grants that were combined for LEAPS had one of the -- one of those had similar eligibility criteria.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Right. No, I'm aware of that.

But do you have any better idea now? You know, this is further, I think, to Chair Hevesi's questions regarding it. And more specifically, you know, if a supplemental funding stream were provided, would your department be able to issue an RFP that includes in its criteria the community served, as opposed to the metrics which disqualify them?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Again, if the policymakers made such decisions, we would be a partner because we naturally want to invest in our young people and after-school.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: And so what would you suggest now for those agencies that are out in the cold? Anything?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Of course. Fund development. I mean, that's

very important to look at all resources. As we noted, there's the CCAP program, where you can apply individually.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you very much.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Borrello.

SENATOR BORRELLO: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, thank you both for being here.

Just to let you know, I sit on the board of a not-for-profit childcare center, so I want to focus my attention on the workforce in childcare.

You know, one of the biggest challenges we face is that we are trying to fund recurring expenses like payroll with non-recurring funding from grants. And it's a Hunger Games, right, for everyone. But, you know, childcare, in my opinion, is just a building block of economic development, workforce development. It is one of the

major barriers to people entering the workforce. And we have a workforce problem.

So I think it's incumbent upon us to fund childcare like an economic development resource. And as a result, you know, it falls, in my opinion, on OCFS. There is a childcare workforce development funding stream, is my understanding. Can you please tell me what the plans look like this year for that?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Senator. And I agree with you, childcare is part of the backbone of our economic future here in New York State.

And so I'm not clear on exactly which program you're referencing, but I will say that we're continuing the $2 million for the workforce supports, which is for the Early Education Career Centers, supporting the workforce there.

We continue to support the scholarships for the workforce so that they can hire interns in higher education. And the Governor has proposed tuition-free for

CUNY and SUNY to include now childcare early childhood, so that helps in terms of developing the pipeline.

SENATOR BORRELLO: Would that be like very similar where it would be paid off over time, you know, as far as -- you know, just like the Excelsior Scholarship? Is that -- I mean, we have people -- we're paying people that have master's degrees, you know, $18 an hour. I mean, how do we expect them to pay back these loans? I just -- you know, we need to infuse more, I think, funding to this as a -- again, a critical step.

So I appreciate what you're answering so far. I'm just saying is there a way to broaden that? Because $2 million statewide is not going to scratch the surface for the need.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you. And I think that's the aim of the new coalition that is being formed that is proposed in the Governor's Executive Budget. They are looking to the tax experts, businesspersons fiscally to develop some

plans and strategies so that we have a sustainable and strengthened system.

Lots of research is going to be behind this, and, you know, hopefully they'll have some recommendations to bring forth to this body so that we can pursue a more sustainable plan for the future.

SENATOR BORRELLO: Well, thank you. And again, funding this for what it is, which is, you know, a basic foundation for our workforce I think is the best way to justify the expense. It will save us money down the road. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Ra for five minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

Good morning -- it's still morning. Good morning, commissioners.

I wanted to talk about the childcare, in particular the sub pool. So I know there's $3 million along with this. Can you provide a little more detail as to what's being done with that money, how this is going to be done? In particular, you know, who's

going to fill the role of the childcare support centers?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Sure. Thank you for that question.

You know, the substitute pool was one of the recommendations of the Child Care Availability Task Force. And this will allow for organizations who are selected through a procurement process to vet -- to recruit, vet and train individuals who then will serve as substitutes to support, you know, childcare centers, family home centers, so that they don't have to close classrooms in the event of absence from their personnel.

And so, you know, at this point we're looking to make sure that we are creating pipelines as well. It's been talked about at length today how we can create a sustainable feeder into this system. So we envision substitute pools as another benefit to that process.

And in terms of the implementation, there will be a procurement process to which nonprofits and, you know, our CCR&Rs will

apply. And then from there they will then take the work of hiring the substitute pools and then deploying them. But the CCR&Rs are really critical in our communities because they already provide resources -- I'm not saying they're all going to apply. It's up to them, their discretion. But we suspect several of them will, which will be able to kind of layer on additional supports.

But the $3 million really will go towards the workforce, supporting those people that are working so that they can afford to be sick and they're not coming in ill or just calling out and leaving the childcare providers without coverage.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay. And, I mean, do you foresee this kind of being piloted in some way? Like I mean is it, you know, regionally? Obviously you need to know you're drawing from a region where people are actually going to be able to get there. So will there be partners in different parts of the state?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN:

Absolutely, yes. This will be regional. And we do consider this a pilot to see how this will work.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay. And so you mentioned that the $3 million will support the workforce. So, I mean, kind of incentivizing people to be on the -- in the pool? Any incentives in terms of the providers to participate in the program?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: At this time no incentives. We think that the agencies will actually be -- you know, participate and they'll be working with trusted individuals at the local level so that they can, you know, fill those positions temporarily, on a substitute basis, so that they don't close.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay. And lastly, not so much about the pool but just in general, is there any thought being given in terms of whether it's law or regulation -- my understanding is that, you know, you may have a childcare agency or whatever with multiple locations and they may have staffing at one

location and have a need at another one where they need a substitute, and that they're not allowed to pull that person over because their certification or their license is for one particular location.

Am I correct about that? And is that something we're looking at as well?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: So the safety is always important for us. It's tantamount to what we do in this space. And so we want to make sure that the organizations go through a process which is called the SACC licensing process, and that's where we take into account all the individuals that will be working on-site.

So, you know, it's a little nuanced but there may be a way prospectively to look at how organizations might include, you know, the same person on each site. I don't want to say for sure that that can happen, but I'm just thinking that we could look into that. But there is a reason why we insist that, you know, those that are hired are reported to us so that we can make sure there's appropriate

clearances so they can work with our children.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

As my colleague said earlier, you know, we can give all kinds of tax incentives, we can do all these different things, but if there's no workforce within this sector, then there's not going to be spots for the children to go. So thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senate?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator April Baskin.

SENATOR BASKIN: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Commissioners, for being here this morning.

Commissioner Guinn, I have a question regarding OTDA and the fact that there are several resettlement, refugee resettlement agencies in my district who have called my office regarding the fact that they've had to lay off several employees, which is further complicating their abilities to be able to help individuals in our community, which are

my constituents.

What would need to shift in OTDA in order to be able to step up and support these agencies in light of the federal government stepping back from support?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right, yeah. And as you said, that is definitely a result of federal action. It was really the first we saw impacting the refugee resettlement agencies throughout the state, that they did receive a directive from the federal government to stop work.

I understand that there are lots of efforts underway to see if there's something that can be done to intervene in that to continue those funds flowing.

There are funds available through our -- the New York State Refugee Program that our agency does administer that can provide some support to those households. But definitely that lack of federal funding is critical at that time, especially when it's for that first 90 days when these families are just moving in and acclimating

in neighborhoods throughout our state.

So we do have some services that could augment those providers, but certainly not sufficient to replace that federal funding. And hopefully efforts will be able to bring that back online.

SENATOR BASKIN: Any ideas or plans forthcoming around helping these agencies maintain their stability? Because they're the boots on the ground service providers, and they would have the direct proximity to build the healthy relationships, restore public trust. Anything in this space not necessarily for the constituents but for the agencies to continue being able to provide the service?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. I mean, we -- the providers that we fund are selected based on the fact that they are local affiliates of refugee resettlement agencies, and typically awarded funds through a procurement process. We do not have an open procurement process, I believe, that those agencies would be able to tap into.

But we certainly understand and appreciate their particular role in this process.

SENATOR BASKIN: I would just close and add that in light of the situation with the federal government that we explore a process where a lot of these organizations who may not fall within a traditional procurement process have some type of conduit to be able to gain state support so that they can continue just helping communities thrive.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay, thank you.

SENATOR BASKIN: Thank you guys for being here.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblymember Eachus.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Commissioners, for being here.

The only thing I'm a little depressed about is in both your testimonies you referred to inflation. And yet the best inflation rate -- meaning the lowest that I

could find -- over the last year was 2.8 percent. And yet here in the Governor's budget we're looking at the possibility of a 2.1 percent increase.

So my question is, at any point in time -- I know it's your boss and so on like that, basically -- do you let the Governor know that she's not keeping up with the actual inflation rate for these workers, for these foster families and so on like that?

Because you're very positive in your testimonies, but they're falling behind -- the childcare workers, everybody.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Is that for both, or me --

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Either one. Both your testimonies.

(Laughter.)

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I would just say that the Governor's budget is making significant investments to support families and organizations that serve families throughout the state.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I

would echo that.

We absolutely know that the TII is very important, which is why we've included this in the calculus, and we hope through negotiations maybe that number will change. But if not, we do know that we are targeting our very vulnerable populations. So in OCFS, this rate is going to be applied to our foster-care agencies as well as our adoptive parents and towards NY III, which is a housing subsidy for foster care.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Well, I appreciate your optimism, but I don't think it's reality, to tell you the truth. But thank you.

That's all I have. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senator Weber.

SENATOR WEBER: Good afternoon.

So I have really a regionalized question. You know, throughout the summer and fall of this year and last year we got a lot of calls from childcare providers and daycare centers in terms of fire inspections. I guess there was a big delay and backlog in

getting fire inspections done I guess in a timely manner.

And some of the research I've done has indicated that maybe there's a shortage of staffing or maybe some of the grade pay for fire and safety inspectors is maybe too low and we're having maybe trouble getting enough fire inspectors to, you know, be in the industry as well.

So I just wanted to bring that to your attention. I don't know if you have any comment to make on it. But, you know, it was a very stressful time for a lot of centers that wanted to open and they were -- you know, they were feeling the pressures of not having their certificates in time.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Senator, for that question and comment.

To my knowledge, we've actually expanded the number of fire inspectors. We're using contractors and working locally to ensure that we have that support so that we can move the process along faster,

particularly for our school-aged children and the childcare programs.

But I would need to get back to you to see what that actually looks like. I don't have the figures on me at this moment.

SENATOR WEBER: No, that would be great. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman González-Rojas.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you so much.

This question is for Commissioner Guinn. I really want to go back to the SNAP skimming issue.

And you're hearing a resounding concern. It's impacted over a hundred thousand New Yorkers. And with the feds pulling back on their ability to replace those benefits, that's really going to harm, you know, our everyday neighbors that are depending on SNAP to feed their families.

So can you be very clear about why you suggested the cost might be 40 million? I have the bill that would actually require us

to transition to the chip-enabled cards. We were quoted 4 million for that transition. And in an ideal world, the federal government would be reimbursing us for half. So that would be a net cost of 2 million to the state.

The EMV chip can decrease fraud by 87 percent. And again, if we get to the root of the problem we could, you know, not have to pay back these families that are suffering.

So can you be clear about what the 40 million would cover?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah. And thank you for your attention to this matter. We agree it's of utmost importance.

The up to 40 million is based on information that we collected from -- primarily from the State of California, also some information from Oklahoma. California has actually started to move in implementing the chip card technology.

Like I said, we are continuing to gather other information and think about

strategies that we could employ that would bring that cost down, because we agree that it is the most effective way that we could protect people's benefits from being skimmed.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: But would it cover -- is it just the transition? Is it other systemic investments? And are you clear that that's not even a fund to reimburse the families, it's simply the technical transition to the cards?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the cost that we've identified is associated with costs that it would require to amend the existing EBT system to recognize and process chip technology. So that's part of the cost.

And then the other portion of the cost is primarily associated with a mass distribution of new cards to all households that receive SNAP and public assistance.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Yeah, because we got the estimate from the Empire State Justice Center and experts that have worked on this.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: We would be

very happy to have additional conversations with you and work with you on this topic.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Okay.

And then also we were discussing the recommendations from the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council around increasing the minimum benefit. As you know, the SNAP minimum benefit is $23 a month. At this point I don't think you can buy two dozen eggs with $23 a month. Over 100,000 --

(Time clock sounds.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Oh, man. Anyway, it's something worth fighting for. Thank you.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Senate?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Hi. I'm the last Senator at the moment, at least for the first round. So appreciate you both being here.

And of course we did have some time to talk about things before the hearing. But my colleagues have raised a number of issues

that, you know, we just need to deal with.

So you've heard about the EBT cards, and we've had that discussion. But we also had something called the integrated eligibility system that was supposed to streamline the application and processing for a variety of the programs through OTDA. And my notes go back to 2018. Where are we on that?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So as -- I acknowledge that it has been a process that has been underway for many years. I would say the current iteration does not go back to 2018.

But I would say a big difference with this iteration is it is fully funded and we are making significant progress in working toward development. The project was taken over from kind of a different leadership structure so that it is not under the leadership of ITS. But certainly we know that it is also one of their highest priorities, and it certainly remains a high priority for our agency.

We understand the importance of making it easier for people to apply as well as for workers to process cases.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And I know it was raised before, and it's being raised at every hearing, how much money we're at risk of losing from the federal government, including programs run by both of your agencies. But based on the newspaper stories that are coming out, it seems like the first round of cuts from the federal government almost on a day-by-day basis is the actual grants they give to not-for-profits, not going through our state budget to then move along, but actually just being cut as grants through all these different federal agencies.

Do we track any of that in our system so that we will know, you know, we lost $60 million for this under the federal changes, or 40 million for that? Because I'm very concerned that this will be happening and we won't even have a way to know exactly who's getting hit and what that means.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. I mean, I would say first, for our agency, obviously we don't have direct information about grants that are going from the federal government directly to nonprofits. But we do have information obviously about the overall funding amount that's available for the various programs, and certainly can collect information through -- our sources are also various associations that are paying close attention to each of these matters.

And so I think, you know, we are all paying attention, people are definitely looking at what's happening at the federal level and being prepared to push back and to make sure that funds continue to deliver really needed services throughout our state.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Same situation for you?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I would say the same, yes. We have insight into, you know, the broader numbers in terms of the large allocations that come to our departments, but not at a granular level.

We are closely monitoring and working with the Governor's office and our legal teams to just monitor around the clock when new things kind of hit, and have been actively communicating with the field to keep kind of calm and let them know that we are here to support and that we have confidence in our Governor and the existing New York State laws that protect New Yorkers.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: So I think just sticking with your agency, my colleague Assemblyman Hevesi started out his questioning this morning about Raise the Age and the funding that has never gone from the state to the city. And I think it's close to $800 million.

And I was quite shocked at that, because I know that most of the programs in the state are actually operating out of New York City. And then I was doing a little homework while we were up here listening, and there was something in the statute that -- having to do with a 2 percent cap on property taxes, and that the city was told they're not

eligible for that money.

But then I followed through and I was told that they could waiver request for that money.

So if they submit a waiver, are you going to be able to give them the money that they should have been getting all these years?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: To my knowledge we have yet to receive a waiver or request for a waiver. However, this is something that we would look at.

But to your point, you know, based on statute, that may be why New York City has not submitted a waiver.

I will say that there's non-Raise the Age -- so there's Raise the Age funds that do support New York City in some ways, and that's with our detention programs. And -- which, you know, support that similar population.

But to answer your question specifically, if and when we would receive that request for a waiver, we would certainly

take that into consideration.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. So you're encouraging the City of New York to submit a waiver for the Raise the Age funds that they believe they would be eligible for, other than this section of a different statute on 2 percent cap on property taxes, is that -- I just want to make sure I'm hearing that correctly.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: So to clarify, what I'm saying is from my knowledge -- and it is limited in terms of the history. But to my knowledge, we've not received a request for the waiver.

And if we would receive one, we would, you know, consider it and go back to both the legislation and also discuss internally how we might proceed.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: But you're not saying to me, No, they have not fulfilled their obligations under the Raise the Age statute and that's why they haven't gotten the funds.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I'm

saying that they have -- you know, they have followed the legislation, at least our office has, in terms of the cap, which prevented them initially from applying.

However, I do believe -- and again, I'm not the attorney in the room, but I do believe there's an option for New York City to submit a request through the waiver, which we have yet to see. So ...

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay, so you need the waiver but you don't currently have a reason to believe that they are not fulfilling the obligations of Raise the Age. Is that a fair statement? I just want to make sure --

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Essentially.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay, thank you.

So then, Commissioner Guinn, there was questions from colleague Senator Cordell Cleare about the two different funding streams for different kinds of supportive housing.

And you clarified that yes, the

Governor put some additional money in for the older contracts.

Can you tell me what, per unit, that would increase their allocation?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I can't tell you that at this point because we're evaluating exactly how we would apply that increase.

We're looking to make sure that we're directing resources to those programs that are most in need and do not have access to significant resources outside of the NYSSHP program.

I can only say that the 17 million represents a 40 percent increase in funding for NYSSHP.

But we would be happy to follow up with you as we continue to work that through.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And what are significant other resources? Are there other government funding streams that I might not be aware of that they are getting separate from the state?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I believe

that many of the units receive support through New York City.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. And then in the contracts on obligations to serve for both kinds of supportive housing contracts, is there a big difference between the new and the old? Because the dollar amounts are huge differences.

So I'm just curious, are you just making many less demands on the older contracts?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. There is a difference in the two contract structures. So NYSSHP, the older version of supportive housing, the intention there was always to fund services but not necessarily operating costs or rents.

ESSHI, when it was developed, was developed to cover both services and operating costs.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: But you break it out. So you know, on the newer contracts, what's going to rent, what's going to services, right? And operating costs, I

assume?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Everybody has operating costs.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I believe it's around 50-50. So about 12,500 for services and 12,500 for rent. It might be a little higher on the rent side.

But we can certainly get that information to you as well.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: But just to get it on record, there's no reason for any of us to think both of those kinds of programs don't have approximately the same service costs. They might have different rent costs, depending on the prices of the building.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right, I would agree that they both have similar service costs and both serve very needy populations.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. All right.

And you know what, the other questions are longer than 28 seconds, so I'm not going to start them. Thank you very much.

Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Senator.

Assemblyman Anderson. He's gone?

Okay. Assemblywoman Rajkumar.

(No response.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Forrest.

(No response.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Lee.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: It pays to wait.

Okay, this is for Commissioner Harris-Madden. I just wanted to clarify again on Raise the Age.

You mentioned that New York City does have access to some Raise the Age funding, is that correct?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: So Raise the Age has multiple pieces to it. It's very complicated and I'm still learning.

But I will say that part of Raise the Age includes detention, which we do support in New York City. So the original statute had a cap, to my understanding, for cities with -- that exceeded 2 percent could not

apply. However, there is still an option to submit a waiver for consideration.

So I hope that answers.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: So if New York City is able to get that waiver, would you support allocating some of the funding from Raise the Age to nonprofits in New York City who can support youth programs?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Again, the plan that would be submitted from the local governments are reviewed, and then once approved, then they would be able to -- so it's an incredibly local response. And if New York City were to include nonprofits in that plan, and that, you know, demonstrated that they were addressing the need, then we would take it under consideration.

But New York City again is an outlier in this situation. So, you know, I would have to get more details in terms of how we would proceed with --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Okay. And are you able to -- once you approve the plan, are you also tracking to make sure that the funding

is getting allocated?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Across the state we are tracking. We are encouraging for, you know, local departments of social services and/or units of government, when they submit their plans, there is the expectation that they will spend on the programs that they intend to implement.

And so, you know, it's based on claiming. We're always asking for claims to be submitted. Again, we rely on those counties to submit the claims for reimbursement.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Okay. And is that public information where we can get -- we can find out how many of the claims have been unspent and where the claims are being spent across the state?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I'm sure that we can get back to you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Okay, great. Thank you so much.

And for Commissioner Guinn, in October

the Governor announced an additional 35 million for COVID-related rent arrears. Do you know how much of that has been spent down for NYCHA?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay, thank you. The 35 million that was made available to NYCHA, we have approved that plan and NYCHA has drawn down the majority of those funds.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Okay, great. Do you know how many households that has benefited?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I do not. But we'd be happy to get that for you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LEE: Great, thank you.

We appreciate your support on that. It's impacted a number of residents in my district. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Torres.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TORRES: It's really hard. All right. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Commissioners, for being here.

Commissioner Harris-Madden, I look forward to welcoming you in the Bronx. I know you're coming up to see us soon.

Two questions. On the initiative in the executive proposal on dual enrollment for SNAP and WIC, I think this is a great initiative, at least on paper. I would love to know any more details you have; particularly, are you working with a partner, a technological partner?

Sort of, what's happening there? Because I think, to Senator Krueger's point, this would reduce a lot of burden both on New Yorkers who are applying, social service agencies and nonprofits in my district. I can tell you many constituents are applying and having a hard time with these programs.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay, yes, thank you for acknowledging this effort.

So as we await system modernization -- and system modernization definitely is being planned in a way that will support multiple avenues for cross-program enrollments. That is definitely one of the core tenets and

values that we hold as we move forward with that.

The initiative referenced in the Executive Budget is our effort to move forward before we have that high-tech support, so it essentially will be increased data sharing between our agency and the Department of Health.

So that when we identify someone, for example, who is in receipt of SNAP and is eligible for WIC but not receiving, we will make sure there is outreach to that household to try to bring them into WIC, and vice versa. So if we have WIC households that are not receiving SNAP, the same process will come into play.

Because we definitely want low-income households to access every single food nutrition benefit, in particular those for young mothers.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TORRES: Thank you. I'd love to keep track on this and see how it's going. And any public reporting or anything that we can learn, that would be great.

My second question -- it's a comment and a question. My colleagues already raised the concerns that have been ongoing on benefit cliffs. And I'm excited to see the Monroe Ladder Program. Would love to see it, you know, once we see the study perhaps replicated in other parts of the state.

Do you have any more information about the program? Particularly I see financial counseling, case management and the work incentive payments. I think that one is critical. Do you have a sense for -- if there's going to be an actual replacement in the cost? For example, if someone is no longer receiving a benefit, are they going to get that exact sort of subsidy as a part of this program?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the specific details have not been worked out. But that is exactly what is envisioned by that statement.

So it's looking at in the event that someone does take on a promotion or increased hours and it results in a reduction of

certain benefits, say SNAP, that that would be an option to make that up for a period of time and see if that makes a difference in terms of people's willingness to take on more work and also just our efforts to support low-income workers.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TORRES: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Epstein.

ASSEMBLYMAN EPSTEIN: Thank you both for being here.

Commissioner Guinn, I just want to go back to the supportive housing conversation. I'm wondering why there's still a differential between downstate and upstate, 31 to 34,000 per unit.

And two is how many units are we thinking we're going to get out of this for this additional funding?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the additional funding supporting ESSHI will support another round. I believe we've been adding at least a thousand units per year.

But the increase in the rates is

really just to provide additional supports to those providers who are delivering this service.

ASSEMBLYMAN EPSTEIN: So we've heard from providers all over the state that, you know, that it's good, that proposal to go to 34 for the city, but the rest of the state are at these same issues with building these units. And they would like to see the increase for them as well.

Is there an opportunity to increase it for everyone across the state to 34?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: The Executive Budget proposes increasing from 25,000 to 34,000 in New York City, but also does include that significant increase for areas outside of New York City to 31,000 per unit.

ASSEMBLYMAN EPSTEIN: So we see the need for supportive housing across our state, we see this mental health crisis we're experiencing every day. You know, I represent parts of Manhattan on the East Side, and so a thousand units is a great

movement. But it feels like we need to in some ways double or triple that investment to really get the people who are on the streets in the supportive housing.

Why did you pick this figure on why are we not doing more on the supportive housing front?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: You know, again, I would just -- we're pleased with the increased investments in supportive housing. And in the event that the Legislature is able to provide more funds either for the operating and services cost or for our HHAP program to develop more supportive housing, we would be very happy to administer that.

ASSEMBLYMAN EPSTEIN: Great. And that would be for some of the older supportive housing units that are already online or some of the newer supportive housing units online. If we were able to increase those investments, it sounds like you'd be very supportive of having those dollars available to you.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yes. And

the NYSSHP increase that does cover the much older supportive housing units throughout the state, particularly in New York City, and then also the 25 million additional funds that are in our HHAP budget, that is specifically expected to enable us to support preservation of older HHAP units.

ASSEMBLYMAN EPSTEIN: Yeah. So yeah, I would encourage us all to be thinking about that preservation as well as more units, because that's really going to get us in front of this crisis that we're experiencing every day. Thank you very much.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Yeah. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Anderson.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Good afternoon. Thank you, Chair. And thank you to both of our commissioners who are here this afternoon.

I have some questions really quickly that I want to briefly ask, but let me acknowledge -- it's good to see you,

Commissioner Guinn, as well as our doctor, our new commissioner -- I believe you're the first African-American woman, and as we're celebrating Black History Month, that's something important to acknowledge. So welcome to you both.

My first question, of course, to you, Commissioner Guinn. You know we've done a lot of work on this issue. We're actually doing a press conference on it right now, SNAP skimming. And I'd like to associate some of my comments along with my colleagues', but also asking the specific resources that are on hand now to combat and address it, given the fact that there's not a request from the Executive in the executive proposal. That's the first question.

The second question for you, Commissioner Guinn, is we have a lot of social service districts throughout the state, and my thinking is that OTDA oversees all of those social service districts. So I'm just wondering, are there any recourses or acts of recourse for a social services

district that violates state law or directives given from the agency?

Let's say you give a directive to HRA and they don't follow through. What do you do about it?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So first, with your question on skimming, the resources that are currently available include just the ability for individuals to lock their card. And that is the current best defense we have for folks to protect their benefit.

So we are trying really to get that word out and would certainly welcome support from the Legislature to help spread the word about that option for folks. So that's with respect to skimming.

And if a social services district, any of the districts within the state do not follow state law or regulations we definitely have recourse. And we have the power to limit reimbursement. Our first step, obviously, would be a conversation and education and make sure that they understand what the requirements are.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: But what happens if they don't make any changes after that conversation? Because it seems like we're having a lot of conversations about fair hearings, about SNAP skimming, around a lot of things with HRA, and behavior's not changing.

I'm just wondering what tools do you have in your toolbox to hold the social services districts accountable.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: We do have -- like I said, we have the authority to direct them to make changes, and we have the authority to adjust funding. Certainly we are always welcome to work with your office and that of others to address any unique concerns that you may have.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Definitely will continue to reach out.

And in my last few questions I want to thank -- I want to ask a genuine question that you all can take to the next panelist. In terms of employment, just wondering your positionality about how employment is a tool

for anti-poverty. Just as you're answering the questions, how that continues to be a tool for anti-poverty.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Assemblyman.

Assemblywoman Chandler-Waterman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the commissioners for your time today.

I represent in Brookhaven Brooklyn Assembly District 58 covering East Flatbush, parts of Canarsie, Brownsville and Crown Heights. My district is primarily Black and brown Caribbean immigrants. I cofounded a nonprofit, former childcare provider, led after-school programs, former teacher and the first to run the Empire State After School Program in my district before I was elected.

So I just want to thank you and your team, Commissioner, for joining our gun violence conversation -- to kick off June -- earlier this month. So I want to edify some

of those conversations.

We heavily depend on our grassroots nonprofits on the ground when it comes to providing safe spaces, programs to reduce gun violence, after-school programs, community-center concepts of public schools that have the wraparound services.

However, the procurement process at OCFS, it's very challenging. It seems at times the goalposts keep on changing. And there's several delays that leaves our nonprofits stretched thin, unable to cover payroll and other hardships running programs. Then, to add insult to injury, after not being paid for almost two years, with the eighth year severely underfunded, Empire State After School Program, we had the LEAP grant that was put in place. Organizations in my district got a letter that says congratulations, you got 95 percent, you did all the requirements, but guess what, we don't have the funding, we ran out.

What are the plans going forward for the LEAP grant? What is your office doing to

fix the issue of the procurement process? And as we know, your staff is very essential to assisting organizations receiving funds on the ground. So what's the plan to address the high turnover rate in OCFS?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you, Assemblywoman. I share your passion in terms of, you know, serving at the grassroots level and certainly championing after-school.

As I indicated earlier, the Empire and Advantage Program was combined to create LEAPS for, you know, increasing higher quality within our after-school settings. And we recognize that the competition was extremely stiff. And as you indicated, your agency, one of the agencies that you work with received an approved score but was not funded. And that simply was because we ran out of funding. In New York City --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: Thirty -- 30 of my organizations received that letter.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN:

Thank you. We had well over 400 applicants and we were able to fund 239 sites. Forty-two percent of the allocation went to New York City; 40 percent rest of the state; and 19 percent downstate.

So, you know, as I said earlier, there were some organizations that did not receive funding, but it was not a cut. It was a new program that was created to increase efficiencies into --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: -- the procurement process, sorry.

(Overtalk.)

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Okay, procurement process. So the procurement process, the RFP is issued, the respondents are provided information in advance --

(Time clock sounds.)

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: And I can go over that with you offline.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CHANDLER-WATERMAN: Okay.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman

Simon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Thank you. Thank you very much.

I have a couple of questions, I guess it's for Commissioner Harris-Madden, about -- I'm looking at these major initiatives, one of which is the self-service kiosk, $600,000 to install in high-need communities to provide access to public benefit programs.

So my question is just like operationally, where are they going to be? I assume they're not going to be out on the street. Like we have these kiosks in the city that -- they don't work, but they're out on the street.

And what is being done with regard to the accessibility of those kiosks? So for example, will people be able to have something that is voice-activated? Many people have reading issues. How is language access? What languages will this information be available in? And how user-friendly is this program that will be in those kiosks?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN:

Thank you for that question, Assemblywoman.

This is a partnership that we have with Commissioner Guinn's department --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: So I can blame her too?

(Laughter.)

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: No, I wouldn't say blame, just to demonstrate the synergy that we have.

This is an opportunity that we see to increase access, to your point, to services and to reduce the wait times and, you know, bureaucratic fog, if you will, that some folks have experienced.

So the kiosks really are designed to be in locations that -- where there is accessibility needs, and we haven't quite figured out exactly where it will be, but they will be throughout communities that we see that there is -- particularly rural areas, for example, where there is a challenge to get to some of the official offices to file for applications for various things.

So this is a new initiative, it is a pilot, and we're working collaboratively just for the purpose of accessibility. And I would imagine that we would work towards creating language access, as we do with all of our documents and supports within our agency.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: What about disability access, which is --

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Okay. So when will we have some idea of how that's going?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: I would have to get back to you on that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Okay, thank you.

And then we heard other comments -- I know Senator Cleare mentioned the OMH supportive housing. And I know that the CRSRO program, for example, is way underfunded. They have a higher service mandate than the ESSHI housing. But there's no -- the Executive Budget doesn't address increasing their allocations to be at least

on par, if not above.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I can't really speak to what's funded in the OMH budget.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: But it's in here under budget highlights for OTDA.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I'm sorry, are you referencing ESSHI?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Yes, it mentions ESSHI in here. So maybe we can talk later.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay. Absolutely. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Romero.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROMERO: Okay, thank you. And good afternoon at this point.

My question is for Commissioner Guinn. In my Assembly district, the 109th Assembly District, there is a punishment system for very low-income New Yorkers where if you have a substance use disorder, you get a ding or a punishment -- and this is actually, I'm sure, across all of New York State, but I'll describe the very specific program soon where

you have 30 -- if you have a substance use disorder you get a ding or a punishment of 30, 90, 180 days on your access to your services and basic necessities like housing or food benefits.

And in my jurisdiction, after a certain number of dings there's actually a lifetime ban where there are people who are actually lifetime-banned from services, unable to get back into DSS to get access to housing, SNAP -- unless they pay a large up-front lump sum to a private agency for a specific drug or substance use evaluation or treatment program.

And I just want to know if that is a 109th Assembly District problem or if we're seeing something like this across all of New York State.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: That's alarming. I would definitely like to get more information from you about that.

First of all, there should be no lifetime ban on access to benefits. You are correct that Social Services Law does

currently provide for durational sanctions associated with individuals receiving public assistance with respect to various substance-use-related requirements. But anything beyond that would certainly -- unless it's coming from some other policy that I'm not aware of, but certainly within Social Services Law is not legal. And I would certainly like to follow up with you on that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROMERO: So this is a great -- so you're saying that there is 30, 90, 180 days, but beyond that it's unacceptable to have a ban that would go beyond the aforementioned 30, 90, 180 days?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So it does require compliance. But if an individual is willing to comply, then there should be no additional -- they should be able to restore their benefits. There is no lifetime ban.

And I've never heard of someone having to pay an upfront fee. That's also concerning.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROMERO: For an

evaluation from a private agency that's not through DSS.

Great, I'd love to talk to you after.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Okay.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Reyes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: Hi, good afternoon.

So in 2021 I passed legislation, along with Senator Persaud, to enroll New York State in the federal Restaurant Meals Program, which would allow unhoused, disabled and seniors to use their SNAP benefits to purchase meals, hot meals from delis.

What is the status of New York's implementation of the program? And have recent executive orders and restrictions and funding impacted the federal program or New York State's implementation of the program? And does the Executive Budget speak to anything that may include any funding to help the implementation or rollout of the program?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the

Restaurant Meals Program has just actually recently gone statewide. We started with a pilot in Monroe County and then expanded to Brooklyn and other parts of New York City. So we have just opened it up so that restaurants throughout the state can apply for certification as a Restaurant Meals Program, meaning that people can use their SNAP benefits at that location, certain individuals, if they are elderly or disabled.

So it's actually been going quite well in terms of getting restaurants to participate in the project. We are not hearing concerns from restaurants or districts with respect to its implementation. And like I said, we just -- I believe last week -- announced that we are moving to statewide rollout for the Restaurant Meals Program.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: And no concerns in terms of federal guidance that's been coming on the impact on the program?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: There are a lot of concerns about what could be coming

from a federal standpoint. I am not aware of any that are directly targeting the Restaurant Meals Program, but we certainly will be on alert.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: And I have another question. This one is around WiFi for homeless shelters. And as you know, New York State has varying access to internet and broadband for unhoused New Yorkers in temporary housing.

What is New York's plan to address the lack of internet access in shelters? As you know, it's very important for people who are either going to school or applying for work to be able to have access to the internet.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Right. I may need to double-check. I do not think that our regulations require internet access, but I am aware that most shelters -- in particular, family shelters -- have access to the internet.

Obviously that was something that was elevated as an issue during COVID, and family shelters really moved to make sure that that

was something available to individuals. And most areas do have common spaces where individuals can access the internet.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: Yeah, we've gotten reports that it's not always accessible. Oftentimes they use it as a punitive tool to punish people who perhaps, you know, they feel are nuisances in the homeless shelter and deny access to the internet.

It's very important, particularly for adults, to be able to access the internet if you want them to be able to apply for work, look for permanent housing --

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Agreed. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: The Senate is up to our two chairs' three-minute follow-up.

First, Senator Roxanne Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you.

Commissioner Guinn, this is a follow-up. We're going to touch on

Summer Youth Employment. You know I'm always asking about what is it we need to do to increase the number of slots. You know, my thing is that we need to ensure that every youth across the state has employment.

And I've introduced legislation about creating year-round employment. Can you tell me, what else can we do to ensure that youth across the state have access to employment?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So thank you. The Summer Youth Employment Program I agree is an excellent opportunity for individuals, and expanding it beyond where it is now would be welcomed.

The Governor's budget does include, I believe, 51.5 million to support the Summer Youth Employment Program. So that does include a 1.5 million increase.

SENATOR PERSAUD: But that's just covering --

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Which is intended to cover minimum wage increases.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Yeah, minimum wage.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So the

bottom line is is the way we could expand the number of slots available would be to increase funding allotted to the program.

SENATOR PERSAUD: So how do we get to the increased funding so that we have at least a billion dollars allocated to youth employment? How can you help me get that?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I'm sorry, could you repeat the question?

SENATOR PERSAUD: How can you help me get to an allocation of a billion dollars for youth employment?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Senator, we'd be happy to work with you on that.

(Laughter.)

SENATOR PERSAUD: Yeah, we do have to do that.

In terms of, you know, there's Article VII language on the oversight, the temporary oversight of shelters. Can you tell us how many, of temporary operators, how many did you authorize in the past year?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: We have not needed to invoke that provision. The

provision is just -- it's something that we feel is a tool that remains available to the agency if needed.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. And are there any shelters across the system that we need to really focus on because they are not operating at the optimum level?

You know, you haven't authorized any temporary operators. But are there any shelter systems across the state, do you know of, that we should be focusing on?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: I certainly wouldn't cite any particular shelter. Each year we inspect every shelter in the state and certify those shelters. We look at both the services available as well as important factors such as the facility, security and staffing.

And so as part of that process each year, if there are deficiencies, we identify those and we require corrective action plans to be put in place and implemented to correct any deficiencies.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay, thank you.

Thank you and your team again for all that you're doing and for always working with us. Thank you.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Of course. Thank you so much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: The Assembly is done.

SENATOR PERSAUD: So, excuse me, our other chair, Senator Brisport, for his three-minute follow-up.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The first one is for Commissioner Guinn. We are getting a lot of extra anti-immigrant rhetoric coming from Washington, and in our communities we are hearing immigrant families scared to approach government offices for services that they're fully entitled to.

What is OTDA doing to ensure that immigrant New Yorkers are able to access the services they need and are entitled to?

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: So we share your concerns. We certainly do not want

individuals to stay away from accessing services due to fears over their immigration status.

So our -- we've had conversations with social services district commissioners about the importance of making sure that workers, in managing their offices as well as shelters or other facilities, are aware of the rights that individuals have. And our advice is: Call your attorney, but also that you do not need to require entry unless there is a judicial warrant.

But I understand what you're saying. There is a lot of fear out there. And I think what we'd like to do best is just to get the word out about what individuals' rights are and make sure that facilities continue to make people feel welcome and not discouraged from accessing services.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

And I have one additional question for Commissioner Harris-Madden. I just wanted to follow up on a question from Assemblymember Clark that the clock ran out on last time.

But given the Governor did veto the legislation we passed to provide childcare to parents who are considered to make too little to access childcare, I do consider that just one of the most egregious means-tests that we do implement on families.

What is to be done about these families who are, quote unquote, making too little or doing part-time work to ensure that they can access childcare for their children?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you for that question, Mr. Chair.

You know, OCFS is very flexible in terms of its collection of evidence to prove eligibility. And so, you know, we go as far as accepting Zelle payments to demonstrate -- you know, to help figure out how much one makes per month. We also accept attestation.

But, you know, to your point in terms of the policy and the legislation that was vetoed, we are unable to comment on that process.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Okay. And then just one more about procurement.

With the procurement process at OCFS, we've been hearing it's very challenging and sometimes it seems that the goalpost of what is needed keeps changing. And there are severe delays that leave our nonprofits stretched thin, unable to cover payroll and other hardships.

Are there any things being done to change the procurement process?

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Well, I've offered this, and I'd be crazy to say it to everyone here, but, you know, I'm more than happy to work with nonprofits. It's my background in terms of preparing and readiness for contracting with government.

Now, there are lots of --

(Time clock sounds.)

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: We can discuss offline with respect to that.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Commissioners. This ends this portion of our hearing. I want to thank you both for your testimony.

OTDA COMMISSIONER GUINN: Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Look forward to seeing you in the near future.

OCFS COMMISSIONER HARRIS-MADDEN: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: And I'll now call up our second panel: The New York State Office for the Aging and the New York State Department of Veterans' Services.

(Pause off the record.)

CHAIR PRETLOW: Good afternoon, Panel B. Mama V, you're wearing camos? We're not going to attack you.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay, we can start. Who wants to start?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Who would you like to start?

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Well, Aging, Veterans. Veterans are aging, we have a --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Seventy percent of the vets in New York are over the age of 60.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: We could flip a coin. Let's do Aging.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: All right, that sounds good. Well, thank you so much. It's always a pleasure to be here.

Good afternoon again, Chairpersons Krueger and Pretlow, Chairperson Cleare, Assemblywoman Chairperson Seawright, it's great to see you and all the distinguished members -- Senator Ashby, Assemblyman Krasny. And I have to say hello to the Rochester contingent, Assemblywomen Clark and Lunsford, and Long Island, Assemblymember Stern. We go back a long way.

My name is Greg Olsen. I'm the director of the New York State Office for the Aging. I'm honored to testify today -- I'm always honored to testify.

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget prioritizes affordability for all New Yorkers and ensuring public safety. The proposed Executive Budget does exactly that, building upon investments in last year's budget. And as always, the proposed Executive Budget

includes many proposals that support older adults and their families across agencies, and I'm going to highlight some of these in my testimony today.

I'm pleased to testify on a provision of the Governor's budget that directly affects the New York State Office for the Aging, our programs and services, along with additional budget proposals that will positively impact older New Yorkers and their families -- because older New Yorkers live in families -- and move towards the broader goal of creating a more affordable and livable New York.

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

Through much-needed investments, the Governor's fiscal year '26 Executive Budget expands and strengthens NYSOFA's and the network of aging services providers foundation that will help individuals access

needed services, age in their communities of choice, and lead healthy lives.

The first proposal makes the largest and most historic investment in NYSOFA in state history by providing $45 million to address documented unmet needs statewide. This investment brings the total invested in the unmet need category to $200 million since 2019. So I thank the Governor for that, and certainly I thank you all for that. It's needed.

Above the 45 million is an additional 4.7 million via COLA for vital services such as in-home care, nutrition, transportation, case management, and caregiver supports. That's on top of 6.4 million invested last year.

Continued support for the Master Plan for Aging.

Continuing our nation-leading investment of almost $3 million to expand efforts to combat social isolation, bridge the digital divide, improve overall health and wellness, reducing depression, addressing

elder abuse, and strengthening NYSOFA's stipend program for two of our most important volunteer programs.

And I just want to highlight one of them. For example, we are serving now more than a million additional people using our public/private tech partnerships. And just one of them is called GetSetUp. You'll see that in our appropriations bill. That has 700,000 users that have taken over a million lifelong learning and other types of classes. The top 10 classes are all health and wellness: Morning tai chi -- morning exercise helps reduce injuries and falls. Hydration, nutrition, et cetera. Designed to combat isolation, but also teach people how to use their tech.

Let's just do the math on this, because I love it: 350,000 in our budget, 700,000 users. That's 50 cents per person per year to access it, and it's available to anybody over the age of 50. And we have several things like that that I could really use your help on getting the word out, like

GetSetUp, our caregiver portals that are free for anybody in New York State. And you guys can really help us get the word out on that.

Six-point-two million in the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, maintaining base-level funding. They're the eyes and ears for quality of care in residential facilities.

The middle-class tax cut is going to have a huge benefit for older adults, putting money back in their pockets.

The inflation rebates checks. I know you've heard about all of these before, but again, I look at ways to make affordable, especially people who are on fixed incomes.

Expansion of the child tax credit and free school meals. Now, why would I mention that? Because we have hundreds of thousands of grandparents who are the primary caregivers of their grandkids. And if they're claiming them on their tax form, they're eligible for these types of things.

Again, we have grandparents taking care of their kids -- or parents who are

older taking care of kids. They're taking care of their grandkids and vice versa. Again, we often silo people in these different age groups, but no different than my family and yours: They're multigenerational.

Expanding victim support services, especially in the area around scam-victim compensation, which I think is extraordinarily important. I know that Ann Marie Cook from Lifespan will be testifying after me.

Scams cost older adults $28 billion a year nationally. Yeah, they're sophisticated, but how to prevent them is quite easy to do. And we work extensively with her. I want to call out Dan Lyons, Justin McCabe and their whole team in how we can not only prevent, but this is a way to again react and expand those services.

Increasing access to government services, including SNAP. We heard on the last panel a lot about SNAP. Another way that I'm appealing for your help with your

constituents to get the word out, if we just took three programs in New York State, the MSP, Medicare Savings Program, SNAP and HEAP, we'll put $11,000 back into low-income individuals' pockets every year. Older adults leave $66 billion of benefits they're entitled to on the table every year, and we could really use your help in getting the word out. That's just three examples.

Innovative approaches to homebuilding. We really know the issue with housing. It's really, really important, especially small and modular homes. They're very cheap, they're quick to set up, they're energy-efficient, they're safe, they're affordable.

Banning algorithmic rent price fixing, really important. Thirty-four percent of older adults are renters in this state. Enhancing subway safety and other consumer protections for older adults so they can travel, but also making it easier to cancel subscriptions. I have somebody on my staff who went through this for a year with his

mother, and it took almost a year to get rid of all of these subscriptions that she had that she continued to pay for.

Expanding support for homeowners and businesses due to severe weather events. Sixty-six percent of older adults own their own homes. But what I found really interesting is the increase in the number of self-employed people who are 65 has increased 57 percent, to 230,000. So when we have these extreme weather events, we don't think of older adults as business owners, but they are. They're the number-one entrepreneur group in the country.

So this budget is about much more than any one program or service. Of course I have to talk about NYSOFA, and I always will, because I'm so proud of what we do. The staff that I have, but the 59 Area Agencies on Aging, the 1200 community-based organizations that we work with, the Association on Aging, which will be testifying after me -- we do amazing work.

But we have to work with other

agencies, and we do, to leverage those assets. Why I love being here with Commissioner DeCohen and Benjamin is because of the number that I said: 70 percent of the state's veterans, 440,000, are over the age of 60. We have 28,000 on our caseload. Which is why we work so closely together.

We obviously work with the Department of Health, whether it be the folks in Medicaid; Dr. McDonald, Dr. Heslin with the MPA and their entire team; the AIDS Institute. I could go on and on and on why that's important.

Office of Mental Health -- we serve 19,000 people that have a diagnosed mental health illness on our caseload, so we have to work with them in order to leverage those assets. Eighty five hundred with an alcohol or substance abuse problem on our caseload. I'm not even going to get into problem gambling; that's the next big thing we've got to get to.

OCFS, they house the Adult Protective Services, Blind and Visually Impaired Bureau.

OCFS, who was just up here, OTDA, SNAP, SNAP Ed, which we spent a lot of time trying to get people on.

So we will continue and always we'll be engaging anyone anywhere who can help improve the lives of older adults in New York because, working together, we can leverage those assets so we can serve people holistically.

One of the things I'm most especially proud of is the work that we've done to significantly increase access to hard-to-serve individuals and communities. We've worked tirelessly with our county partners to reach diverse communities, and these efforts are paying off because, according to our assessment data, in every single one of our core services we've seen an increase in serving hard-to-serve older adults. And we're going to continue to do that, regardless of their circumstances, and make sure that we can ensure, to the best of our ability, access to services.

So I love being here. I really

appreciate the time. Look forward to any questions that you have. Assemblyman Jones, good to see you. And turn it over -- I think we go right to Commissioner DeCohen.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you.

Good now afternoon, Chairs Krueger and Pretlow and esteemed members of the Senate and Assembly. Senator, welcome back. Congratulations.

I'm Viviana DeCohen, commissioner of the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, proud member of the United States Marines. It's an honor and privilege to testify on Governor Hochul's 2026 Executive Budget.

The mission of our department, as you know, is to connect veterans, members of the armed forces and their families to the economic, medical and social benefits which they have so deservingly earned.

Governor Hochul has been a true friend and strong ally to our veterans and military families. The Governor has increased funding to local service agencies, expanding the

peer-to-peer support programming and so much more for mental health and wellness. Under Governor Hochul's leadership, and with the support and partnership of this Assembly and Senate, DVS has continually advanced that mission, expanding now our reach -- because of you -- statewide.

Through our Operation Find and Serve, focusing on getting out across the state and reaching those where they live, work, and play, many of them who were not aware that they were even entitled to service by way of no longer utilizing the word "veteran," but for those who have served.

And applaud yourself: It is working. DVS builds relationships and earns the trust of all who have served. We do no longer assume the veterans' voice, but we are now listening and asking them what it is they need to best serve their needs.

2024 was an especially impactful year for our department, as we launched our Veterans Emergency Housing Program, as well as three Mobile Outreach Units that are now

on the road. We have continued to be innovative, partnering with supporters like HelloFresh, which in just a few weeks will reach its two millionth meal for veterans, service members, and the families.

Additionally, we continue promoting our Veterans Welcome Center Digital Kiosks to continue the connections with benefits and services for those who served, expanded our partnerships to ensure that no veteran or family member goes without the essential needs. One hundred fifty-four special events were had during the month of November for Veterans Month, over 543 in-person and virtual outreach events throughout the year. This means that we are reaching them, we are reaching those who did not even know that they needed to be reached.

Our accredited VBAs, or veteran benefit advisors, all former members of the military, all veterans themselves, are continuing to help those who have served meet their VA benefits.

For 2024, DVS assisted over 10,000

veterans who were seeking to submit benefit claims to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. And as a result of that, over 12,069 claims have been filed for our veterans. Many of these were new or first-timers who are now submitting claims.

In 2024, appellants represented by DVS have received over $4 million in retroactive payments from the VA. I'll remind you that these payments come back to our states. As the old song goes, the more you give, the more we give back to you. And we're seeing it.

As the leading veterans claims accreditation training entity in New York State, DVS accredits and trains partners to file veterans' claims on the department's behalf via our power of attorney.

With me today is one of our deputy counsel, Benjamin Pomerance, who does this training.

Any entity officially accredited by DVS, including our county partners and nonprofits, can submit such claims, and these

filings help to measure the effectiveness of our advocacy work.

Without them, without all of you, this would be impossible.

By prioritizing fully developed claims, DVS has significantly reduced the waiting times, ensuring swift access to the benefits earned by those who've served.

In regards to the Governor's 2026 fiscal year Executive Budget, the Governor's Executive Budget has built upon and strengthens this steadfast commitment to veterans. In particular, the budget includes three key initiatives for veterans and their families which, if adopted, will be well received with great praise by the veterans and military families.

The first focuses on expanding the Gold Star Parent Annuity to encompass the families of servicemembers who give their lives for their country in both non-combat and combat theaters.

Currently the Gold Star Parent Annuity Program, which you know, provides benefits to

parents of those who died in combat, but it does exclude the spouses, children, and families of those who die during non-combat active duty.

So this is integral, and this is huge. And it's a long time coming.

Governor Hochul has proposed legislation to expand this program to now include all immediate family members of servicemembers who die while on active duty.

The second initiative focuses on building on the track record of success achieved by New York State's delegation to the federal Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide for servicemembers and their families. Governor Hochul proposed a $1 million investment to expand that, including enhanced risk assessment training, outreach tools, gun safety programs, and improved access to telehealth services for mental health services.

We've even, inside of our own offices, because we are veterans serving veterans, have established a Wellness Wednesday where

we are establishing all of these services as well, because we have the same needs for our staff.

So I cannot overstate the lifesaving importance of this initiative and investment. Through the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide, we have developed innovative approaches to reducing that. Benjamin Pomerance happens to sit on the Governor's Suicide Challenge Team, so he's able to tell you wonderful things about that.

The third initiative allocates $350,000 for our Military Family Relief Fund. I want to applaud the Governor, I want to applaud you, because this means that you heard us when we said we were asking those who served across the state what it is that their needs were, and you heard us say diapers, but you also heard us say that it should not be back to a diaper bank where they have to be tied to social services. But that there should be dignity services for those who served.

So thank you, thank you. I'm

applauding you for the Military Relief Family Fund, which is equipping our department to now augment these existing programs and promote new ones.

In closing, Governor Hochul's budget proposal for the Executive Budget reinforces her administration's unwavering dedication to veterans, to their well-being, and who serve in honor of those of us who they have fought for to ensure our freedoms in this great state.

DVS looks forward to assisting in every way that we can to help bring these initiatives to fruition during the state budget process, continuing to work with you and all of our stakeholders in meeting the needs of those who have served.

This concludes my testimony, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Commissioner. And who's the gentleman next to you?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Yes, this

is Mr. Benjamin Pomerance, our deputy counsel. He sits on many of these committees, and he has initiated many of these new legislations that we see now. He's to be commended.

CHAIR PRETLOW: Okay. Deputy Counsel, welcome.

Assemblywoman Seawright, 10 minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you, Chairs Pretlow and Krueger. Good morning -- or good afternoon, Director Olsen and Commissioner DeCohen. Thank you for your testimony today.

New York State is fourth in the nation for the 60-plus population, with older residents paying over 72 billion per year in state and local taxes. This vital, very special population is booming: 4.6 million New Yorkers are over the age of 60, and by 2030 this population is expected to reach 5.3 million. Seniors are more than one-third of the population, and increasingly diverse. Yet there are elderly people sinking lower into poverty each year.

Seniors are the driving force for the economy, cultural life and the volunteer base, yet they are struggling to afford housing, transportation, the rising cost of medication, and so much more.

Seniors are the largest voting block, yet they feel invisible, without a strong voice in our budget.

Director Olsen, we await the Master Plan on Aging. Yet according to the preliminary report, there have been 351 total members representing all stakeholders in over 400 meetings. An additional $1 million is allocated in the proposed Executive Budget, and we allocated 1 million last session to support its mission.

What are the recommendations coming from the Master Plan, and what are the additional allocations in the Executive Budget proposed for? And can you tell us which of the 10 foundational pillars outlined in the preliminary report are supported by this proposed additional funding?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well,

thanks, Assemblywoman, that was a lot of questions. So I'll try to answer them and if I forget any of them, you can let me know.

First and foremost, I appreciate the question. I like you citing the data, because that's our data we've been putting together for the last 13 years to show, again, the value of the older adult population. We often think of, because we're culturally taught this way, that older adults are frail, they're a drain on resources, they take more than they give, and they don't give back. And that's not true. So I appreciate you talking about that.

So do you want me to start with the MPA? Because I think Commissioner McDonald, you know, spoke of that yesterday, and my answer's really the same as his. The executive order has laid out that the final report -- which is, again, just the first report, right? This is a short, a medium and a long-term plan over the next 10 years on how we help older adults and their families age. Because you begin aging the day that

you're born, not when you turn a certain age.

So, you know, we are on track to have the final report with the interim reports that were done -- there were two of them -- on time, which is the spring of 2025. So that will be coming shortly.

I can't go through what the recommendations are. These came -- I think you cited 370 people that were involved. It was a lot more than that. There were 500-plus stakeholders, among many committees and subcommittees that spent a lot of time using their expertise, whether they be --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: So because we're limited on time --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Oh, I'm sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: -- I'm just going to direct my question. So there's additional funding that's requested. Can you justify what it's going to be used for?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So the -- if you're talking about the million dollars in the budget, that's not

implementation money, that's for us, with the help of the Department of State and other agencies, to do the work. So that will continue.

A couple of things. Because the MPA is not designed to be a part of the budget, but that will be presented for you guys. We're just coordinating the recommendations. But I can tell you the number-one recommendation was an increase in funding in the New York State Office for the Aging. That is in there.

Another recommendation that has already been implemented is an Older Worker Office, which we launched with the Department of Labor in September. So there's things like that in there. They're not designed to be together, but they will be at some point because you guys will be engaged to review what those recommendations are and then how to move forward. We look forward to that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you. Area Agencies on Aging reported being unable to advertise the availability of their

services due to an inability to meet the demand. How much of an investment would be needed to address waiting lists?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: The exact amount that was put into the budget this year.

So we baselined the 10 million legislative add last year, 35 million to address the current waitlists, as reported by the counties in September 2024, plus an additional 5 million in COLA money, which funds the same types of services.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: According to the latest data on your website, the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program does not meet its program goals. Ten percent of the facilities received no visit; 82 percent of all the facilities did not receive a weekly visit. What is the goal of the program if we're not meeting these needs?

In New York City the problem is even worse. Only 2.4 percent of all the facilities received a weekly visit. Why has the state not provided enough funding for

this program to even get close to the stated program goals?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So fortunately, Assemblymember, I have some of my communications staff here. Those numbers are not updated at all.

So what you'll see in the budget is 6.19 million, but there's several other funding sources that we use to bring it up to a total of 10.2. We've had a -- and what that money's used for is our network was really organized around volunteers. We're way beyond that now, especially with LTCOP and the HIICAP program, Health Insurance Council.

We've gone from 57 full-time staff in '22 to 101. That's a 74 percent increase. Eighty-one percent of facilities received at least one visit each quarter. That's up from 24 percent. Ninety-four percent received at least one in a year, up from 63 percent. And we've doubled the number of visits to 22,000.

This is a federal program. You would be stunned to see what type of support, not only in

the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, but through our general services, of the lack of support we get from the federal government, where then the state and the counties and others, private fundraising, have to step up and try to provide these funds. This is the start of the budget process. I know this will be an issue that will be debated and talked about, and we look forward to being a part of that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: So this latest data was taken straight off of your website. So maybe --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I know, I heard you say that.

Well, we'll make sure that it's updated. But I can provide you with any updated information and we'll make sure that we update the site.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Aging Chair Cordell Cleare, 10 minutes.

SENATOR CLEARE: Good afternoon, Commissioners.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Hello.

SENATOR CLEARE: I'm just going to continue on the MPA a little bit.

I just wonder if we can -- if you can tell us -- I heard you say the spring of 2025 is when -- is there a specific date we can look forward to? I mean, you know, this was -- we started this process a long time ago, and I --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah. Well, no. And it is a long process. It's not that we are late. Okay? I mean --

SENATOR CLEARE: No, I'm not trying to say that.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I know that you're not.

SENATOR CLEARE: What I'm trying to say is that I'd like to know when is -- I'm really anxious.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: We are really expecting this to be coming out soon. We're in the home stretch.

SENATOR CLEARE: You don't have a date.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I

don't -- I can't say to you February 22nd it's coming out. All I can tell you is we are on track and we're very, very close, as Commissioner McDonald said yesterday.

SENATOR CLEARE: Do you know how much in state funds will be needed to implement the Master Plan?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, I mean, I think the decisions in terms of what's in the Master Plan are going to be debated with you guys. There are, you know, statutory changes, regulatory changes. There's -- obviously people have proposed new programs.

SENATOR CLEARE: But there's no estimate amount.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, these are not things that the state agencies put forth. These are things that the stakeholders have said. So, you know, I think depending on where you guys all stand with the Governor's office, fiscals will be done on anything that's being considered.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. The Governor

proposed $35 million in new money to help close the waitlists. There are those who think it needs more than that, but I heard you say this is the estimate. Is this a one-time Band-Aid or will this be recurring? Is this something that's just being proposed for 2025?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, my experience is that, you know, when the Governor proposes something in the budget, those things are recurring.

I think it's important that over time -- it originally started with 15 million, the Legislature put in eight that was recurring. Then an additional 10, that recurred. That's really important for these programs and services because these are not one-time expenses.

SENATOR CLEARE: Nope.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Somebody getting a meal, that's going to happen for a couple of years. Personal care. So --

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Can you speak

a little bit as to what form -- how will this money be allocated?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, it's very easy. Every September we survey our county Offices for the Aging that, again, work with community partners. So -- and they report to us, individuals in certain categories of service needs that are eligible and agree to go on a waitlist.

Then we have -- literally I have data from every single county on how much it costs to serve a person in that service category for the year, and then you just simply do the multiplication.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. And do you know -- is my understanding correct, there's no county match?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, that's the beauty of this.

So we have general like EISEP, CSE, our federal titles, et cetera, all go out by law, what's called an interstate funding formula. We designed this back in 2019 for a specific purpose. Number one, there's no

match. If this 35 million was in CSE, for example, counties would have to come up with a 12 million match. If they can't come up with it, they can't draw the money down, which makes the whole thing moot.

And then it allows us to direct the service dollars to where they're actually needed.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. All right. I'll shift a little bit.

In the last six or seven budgets, SOFA has been required to report on spending on unmet needs to the Legislature, among others. We have seen reports for two years, I believe '20-'21 and '21-'22. But the other years seem to be outstanding.

Has SOFA submitted those? Do you have them?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: It's on our website. So I knew that was going to come up today, and I know there's going to be testimony behind me about transparency or something like that. All you need to do is go to the website.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. Is it broken down by county?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: It is not broken down by county, it's aggregate. You know, that's the way it's reported: What service areas, how much we spent, how many people were served.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. And does SOFA have -- this is another category -- have any bonding authority? And if so, can you use it to produce more senior housing?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I'm sorry, can you repeat?

SENATOR CLEARE: Senior housing. Does SOFA have any bonding authority? I'm asking, do you know?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: No, none at all.

SENATOR CLEARE: Okay. And NORC funding was kept flat by the Executive this year. Does SOFA have a sense of how many more NORCs could be created if we only found more funding?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, I

mean back in the day, Senator, that was -- the NORC question was the number-one question I would get here.

Look, the population's getting older but that doesn't mean that that's bad. Seventy-five percent of older adults consider themselves healthy, very healthy. We know that from our statewide needs assessment survey that backed up that data..

You know, could a lot of communities use them? Absolutely. Do they always need state funding money to prop them up? Absolutely not. Is that helpful? Sure it is. But it's a model that can be replicated locally.

SENATOR CLEARE: I think we do need more. And, you know, I really love our NORCs because that keeps our older New Yorkers living at home longer, which keeps them healthier. So I really support more investment in that.

New York City, we talked about this last year. You know, they want to know if the administration will commit to matching

the funding needs for older adult services to the proportion of older adults living in New York City. And I know there's a small difference in the way that money is allocated, but it is necessary.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, again, Senator, I appreciate that they raised that to you, probably have to other members in the city. It goes out by funding formula.

They get their fair share. They actually get more federal funding than they really should be getting, under the formula.

We did revise, because we're required by law to update our funding formula. That was just approved by ACL in the fall. So there will be some changes.

I know that there's older adult growth in the city. The growth proportion outside the city is higher. There is growth everywhere, and --

SENATOR CLEARE: But isn't the allocation given according to the number of --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Because

it's based on multiple factors, as required by state and federal law. It's not just the 60-plus percent.

You know, part of the statute is people living in rural areas, people with geographic discrepancies. You know, different types of weighting, which we did a whole public comment period over. And I'm not sure that we received any feedback from the city on that at all.

SENATOR CLEARE: I'd like to continue that conversation.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Sure. Absolutely.

SENATOR CLEARE: Medicaid home care providers received a 55-cent increase by EISEP. Home care providers are being left out of that wage increase. Will the administration or does the administration have any plans to match that 55-cent increase for EISEP home care providers?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So I believe the home care increase was $2.

And what we did -- you are correct

that our program -- and EISEP is just one of many funding streams that funds the in-home program. So I want to be very clear on that.

We told the counties that they could use their COLA dollars over the last couple of years to do that.

In terms of this year's unmet need money, if that is passed -- and I'm hoping that you're all supportive of that -- we built a $35 minimum rate increase into that so that those dollars would get to the aides.

SENATOR CLEARE: And just -- how does the administration plan to replace the stimulus funding provided to the localities?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: In any particular area? Because a lot of it was in nutrition. And again, nutrition is -- especially home-delivered meals is one of the main areas in the unmet needs request.

So, you know, if you look at statewide data, the average meals that somebody's getting in our network is five per week. That's one meal a day. So as part of that calculation, I doubled that, as well as built

in a little additional rate. So we'll be able to provide additional funding.

You know, I think that there is a natural reduction in the people that we serve year to year just because of how complex they are. And sometimes in their 90s or hundreds they're moving from our system and others. So there's some natural attrition to that.

But I've got to tell you, Senator -- and you and I have talked about this many times -- the federal government needs to step up. We get $90 million for a state with 4.84 million people over the age of 60. And who's left holding the bag is the New York State Legislature and the Governor and the counties. That's the way that it works.

Not to mention, you know, people who are providing through their own pockets -- older adults, they're providing $16 million annually just for a meal, $1 to $2 increments. We need help at the federal level.

SENATOR CLEARE: I don't disagree with that at all.

And speaking of meals, weekend and holiday meals -- you know, in New York City we have great organizations like Meals on Wheels.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Citymeals on Wheels.

SENATOR CLEARE: But we have seen an increase in need because, as you said, this is one meal a day. This is not breakfast, this is not dinner. And as people get older and age, their health is definitely related to their eating.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Absolutely.

SENATOR CLEARE: So do we see any plans to maybe provide some support for weekend and holiday meals?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, I know in the city, Citymeals does that for the clients that Aging NY -- New York City Aging provides five days a week. I've had multiple conversations with Citymeals to look at, you know, are there ways within our structure.

I mean, we are kind of tied by law

because our funding is required to go to the Area Agencies on aging, and New York Aging is one of them. But Citymeals is providing those weekend meals and emergency meals. And we would like to find a way to try to support them.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

CHAIR PRETLOW: Assemblyman Stern, three minutes.

ASSEMBLYMAN STERN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Director Olsen, always good to see you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: You as well, thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN STERN: Mr. Pomerance, great job, sir.

Commissioner, thank you of course for your service. It's good seeing you again, and thank you to you and your outstanding team for all you do for all who serve, and their families, of our great nation.

As you had mentioned, the Executive provides a million dollars to expand suicide

prevention initiatives for our veterans. Suicide rates among our veterans are troubling, heartbreaking. And I know that we all believe that that is absolutely unacceptable.

So I would look forward to getting your vision on how that program is going to be initiated, what the outreach efforts are going to be, who determines who is most in need, and how recipients of that assistance are going to be brought into the system. And share with us how you see that very critical initiative being rolled out and who it will be able to touch.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much.

Let me just begin, before Benjamin gets into this, to let you know, you know, we have expanded our department. And so in that, we were able to change our intake form. So I want you to know that one of the benefits of that is utilizing the Columbia protocol for the possible suicide.

And so we are finding -- and we can

now report to you that our veterans benefits advisors, who are sitting with those who serve, they are asking that question. And we're receiving the affirmative, that they are in fact thinking about suicide. And we are able to address it right there and then.

Also now -- well, thanks to the Governor and thanks to all of you, we have a special assistant for outreach. And we're finding those who have served who did not previously know they were entitled to benefits, but also able to capture them.

I wish I had brought a letter -- we had a very lengthy letter from a woman who was off the grid who served for eight years who happened to stumble into a library and saw that there was a hygiene kit for those who served. Long story short, her letter said that she was going to commit suicide, kill herself that day. And she sent us a copy of the note in her pocket that says "By the time you find this, please contact this person."

And then I'm going to let Benjamin

continue to speak to that.

But that's a result of the efforts of what it is that the Governor has done and that we're proposing to ensure that the find-and-serve for those who are on the verge, but also to ensure that letters that are on the base and that we are now on the base to capture those who are coming back into civilian life, to those who are off the grid, for find-and-serve, and to those who are in our organizations that need these programs.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: And just to build on that, we've had a delegation to the federal Governor's Challenge since April of 2020, and it has received national recognition from the VA, from SAMHSA, and from other federal leaders for the work that we've done here in New York State when it comes to creative approaches to suicide prevention.

The major thing that we have learned throughout that five-year process is that when we talk about suicide prevention, it's

an upstream process. A lot of preventative maintenance takes place long before the precise moments of crisis when someone is on that verge. And so we look daily into how can we find solutions to stop the problems before they start, to find ways for the transition from military service back to civilian life to be as smooth and as seamless as possible.

Because we've talked about the at-risk categories. There's two major groups of veterans that we see in those at-risk categories. One, pertaining to our conversations around aging, are veterans who are 65 and above. The other are veterans who have just come back home from military service and they are coming back from military service, entering civilian life, and often not sure what's next.

So those are key groups and crucial groups on which we have to focus.

We now have access, more than ever before in the department's history, to data around who is coming home to New York State

and how do we outreach to them. And we do that on a weekly basis, week over week, with Department of Defense data, to make certain that we're reaching them, linking them with us and with all of our partner agencies at the state and county and city levels around New York.

But there's still some key gaps that we have to focus on. We've talked in many prior hearings about transportation and around connectivity being huge barriers for so many veterans and their families. And those -- if you take those issues and bring them out downstream, those are predictors of veterans who are at risk of suicide and self-harm. So those are areas we have to look at for sure.

Lethal-means safety: Crucial, okay? Often controversial to talk about, crucial to talk about and to act upon in a practical, successful manner. We're already doing that right now, in collaboration with the Office of Mental Health, which has been fantastic with their WAV, Worried About a Veteran

initiative, first in the nation, helping military families approach veterans in their households with these crucial conversations.

We're going to take that and build on that, and plans are already in place of how we're going to do that.

So there's so many areas, we can certainly talk more beyond the time we have here of where this is going. But when it comes to lethal-means safety, when it comes to identifying veterans early on in the process, staying with them throughout their journey for the rest of their life as civilians here in New York State, and when it comes also to coordinating and facilitating care transitions at the proper time.

Also a crucial area, last year we had all of our staff trained in mental health first aid in the veterans and military families specialty area. More of that needs to happen not just within DVS, but beyond as well. And we're doing work -- last year we had a program where there were bartenders at American Legion and VFW posts in the Erie

County area, who received this mental health first aid training. Right?

The more points of contact we have like that, the more successful veterans are going to be in the rest of their journey back home as New Yorkers.

ASSEMBLYMAN STERN: Thank you.

You had also, Commissioner, mentioned the $350,000 proposed in the budget for the Military Family Relief fund or various initiatives. Could you share with us your vision there as to specifically what type of assistance you see that fund providing to military families?

And it is within your discretion and the law provides that it's within your discretion to determine eligibility and how those funds are going to be utilized. Have you given any thought to how that program is going to be administered, the type of benefit that military families will have the ability to access and, again, how we will ensure that those resources go to veterans and their families most in need?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much for that question. And thank you for the opportunity.

And again, let me say thank you to our chair and our committee of veterans' services, because we have worked together. You know, you heard me say it the first year, this looks like DVS, but this is all of us with our hand to the proverbial plow and pushing with hand or pushing with shoulder.

And I stated at that time that you would see my office upstairs with the resources in it. Today there are 5,000-plus pairs of socks and underwear and resources in that office upstairs. My pocketbook has been my office. One of the benefits of being able to go across the state and asking those who have served what it is that they need is just that, being able to ask them what resources they needed.

Well, we didn't really have a good understanding the first year when I said the people were coming to us for diapers. We said, Send them to the Diaper Bank. The

Diaper Bank is tied to social services. I'm trying to get away from the word "veteran" and those who have served and social services, that the veteran is impoverished, or those who serve because they're poor.

We are finding more needs now of our families who are in need of resources that the emergency grant does not speak to, for back rent -- and we'll talk about that. But they're needing diapers. This has been so, so spoken about, and the need now that our military organizations and bases now have family coordinators. Because the diaper requests have been coming in to us for veterans but also our reservists and our active duty.

So when we say diapers, when we say school clothes -- why? Because we have those who have served that are home-schooling their children not because they want to, but because they can't afford school clothing.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Commissioner.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: And also book bags.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senator?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Scarcella-Spanton.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: You got it.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I got it.

I apologize, our Veterans chair.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you.

Thank you so much, Commissioner, for being here.

And I think it's been no secret that one of my frustrations is learning about different programs that New York State has to offer for veterans and for military families, as opposed to searching for that information when my husband got out of his military career 10 years ago.

What is DVS doing specifically to capture veterans who are getting out of service and coming into New York? And do we know how many veterans returned back to New York over the past year?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I can get back to you on that second part.

One of the things that you helped us develop was that "Welcome Home" letter that Joel signed maybe 10,000-plus a week or so. So the people calling us and letting us know that they received the "Welcome Home" letter.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Can I just -- really just in the interest of time, with that letter, one of the -- that just jogged my memory. One of the things -- especially as we see different cuts coming from the federal government -- that I think is incredibly important is making sure that our returning veterans enroll in the VA.

Because we constantly see every few years threats for different VAs to shut down. Specifically in my district, the Brooklyn VA, that came up a few years ago.

But the biggest issue is enrollment. Does that letter include encouraging returning servicemembers to join the VA?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: It actually encourages them for a special hand-hold, that

you don't just call the 188 number, but now you call Veronica or Branch {ph}, who is ready to do the hand-hold with you to get you your eligible service connection, but also to get you enrolled into the VA.

This is what we want to drive home. You know, we have the resources, yes, on the website. There's a list of them. We don't have to say resources, a list of them. But we want the veteran to sit with our veteran benefits advisor. Why? Because they may ask for the one thing, but when we sit with them, they find out that they are entitled to 10 more things.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Yeah, and I think that's really important. And that kind of brings me to my next point about the website. You know, as you know, I feel really strongly about creating a registry -- very similar to how you have the memorial registry, a registry for resources.

The Governor, unfortunately, vetoed my bill last year that we passed, I think it passed unanimously in both houses. It is

incredibly difficult to navigate -- even as I'm going through the website now -- exactly what a family -- I can speak as a spouse, what the family member can need, and what the veteran can need.

We're trying to take steps such as working with the Department of Labor to have businesses, as an optional checkoff, say that they're looking to hire veterans. We know that they have the Veterans Tax Credit if they hire veterans, so jobs are a piece of it. Housing is another piece of it.

I just don't think that it's -- I'm looking at the memorial registry and seeing how it's just very -- you type in words and you find what you're looking for. I again am going to be pushing that bill. And the advice that we had gotten was that they will direct DVS to improve their website.

What steps have you guys taken so far to improve the website? It looks a little bit similar, so I still really am encouraging the registry.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I want to

entice you to look again and to scroll down, because again -- because of the Governor's initiatives and as well as yours, there are things on there like outreach for the Veterans Mobile Unit, with some of the suggestions that we had from the monthly meetings on being able to have those at events and locations. Housing is on there.

It's actually a comprehensive list. It doesn't say "resources," but the things listed are the resources. And again, when the phone calls come in and we ask how did you hear of us, it's not through the website. We are getting to the people across the state who have never heard of us -- who have never heard of us, who did not, again, know that they were even veterans entitled to benefits.

We would rather have them speak to us. And now, on that mobile unit, they can get on there.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: That brings me to my next question. You know, I see that there is a $1 million investment to expand veteran suicide prevention

initiatives. A couple of questions on that.

One, we know that family members are often the first line of defense when you see a veteran who is suffering with mental health issues. Is there a specific resource for family members to reach out to Veterans' Services? That's one.

Two, can we get a breakdown of where there $1 million goes across the state?

And do you think also a larger investment, you know, would be needed to address this crisis? I think that, again, utilizing military families is a really important way to combat this issue, because they see this firsthand day in and day out.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I'll let you answer.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Senator, I could not agree more when it comes to the importance of military families in this work. That's why, for example, we've had the success that we've had since 2021 with the Worried About a Veteran initiative. That focuses on the families. We're the

first state in the country to do that, through that interactive online resource.

So we want to do more with that, and we're going to do more with that. Not just in lethal-means safety, either. In the entire panoply of topics that you're bringing up here. Military families are crucial. They are the first line of defense. And working with them is essential.

So certainly as we're thinking about and sketching out how this can be done, working with military families, addressing them directly, and also utilizing data that's there right now from the Military Family Advisory Council about where the greatest needs are, the most glaring needs, the most crucial needs. We're going to be using that data to drive a lot of the work that we do both with suicide prevention and also with the Military Family Relief Fund, because they're doing the research for us with that.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: So that was going to be the additional question I was going to get to, was last year, you know, the

Comptroller had released the report regarding the tax donations that had been underutilized. To my understanding, some of that money has gone out the door.

So I guess my first question would be, how much of that money has gone out the door, and to where?

And my second question was I see the 350,000 for the Military Family Relief Fund. I know that there was also funds and it needed an appropriation for the military families, which is in there this year, which is good. I don't think the rest of that needed an appropriation.

So can you just walk me through what that means exactly, the Military Family Relief funds. Like how will this help military families, and what will it be doing?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Certainly.

So first, if I may, on the question or on the tax checkoff funding. We have the Veterans Homeless Assistance Fund, for example, right now, which has disbursed more

than $430,000 since its inception to veterans and their families who are facing crucial, critical housing needs -- individuals who literally on the street or about to get there.

And these were people who had often fallen through the cracks of both federal and state systems. Oftentimes they didn't quite qualify for one program or a different program. Or they didn't know the programs existed. And so what we're finding is many of these veterans were contacting a veterans benefits advisor or veterans service officer for the first time through their application to this fund.

And so we're getting them not just the money for housing assistance, you know, short-term needs being met, but also getting disability compensation, pension, education benefits, even blind annuity benefits for these veterans who are facing these emergent housing needs.

So that's definitely being utilized, being extremely well run, and we're very

proud of the work that's been done in that area.

Military Family Relief Fund, pivoting over to that. Again, looking at what the data shows us, one of the most crucial needs, according to the Military Family Advisory Council, is food insecurity. This is the often-off-the-radar need that is not thought of enough in this workspace, and it needs to be front and center.

There are people right now in military service in this state who are facing food insecurity. And since June of 2020, we've had the honor of partnering with the Governor's anti-hunger policy coordinator and with many both governmental and nongovernmental partners around the state to engage with the HelloFresh program, which is coming up on 2 million meals in April of this year.

We want to and we need to see more work being done in that area. What exactly that looks like is still under discussion. We want to see more in that space.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: In the interest of time, because I know we're closing up here, but for the Military Family Relief Fund, especially that this is a new appropriation, I would strongly encourage you to have something designated for military families, whether that be mental health support for children and spouses as well, or a coordinator specifically at the Department of Veterans' Services that they can contact if they are concerned about the veteran that they live with.

So thank you. I hope that you will take that into consideration.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We will.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Most definitely.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Manktelow.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you.

And good afternoon. Commissioner, good to see you again, and thank you for your service.

I've got a couple of tough questions

I'm going to ask you, and these are really coming from our veterans that we see each and every day in our districts, ones that we know. And we talked a little bit about mental health. And one of the questions we are constantly being asked as legislators is, you know, why does the Governor continue to cut veterans' benefits in her budget, her budget proposal? Why does she do that?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you -- thank you -- thank you for that.

We want to say again these legislative adds look like the cuts that's coming out. We want to remind them also that when I first began here, we were applauding this Governor because we had an empty cup for a long time and we had never had the benefits that we had before. We know those legislative adds, the ink is still good in your pen, we know they'll be written back in there.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Okay.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: And I would just add I'd be curious on that front which specific benefits are veterans saying

are being cut. Because I know that in my 11-plus years with the department, we are at a high-water mark in terms of what we're able to offer both directly and indirectly to veterans and their families.

So I'd be curious to know which specific things they're saying are being constrained or cut.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: So maybe you and I can directly have a conversation, because I'd like to talk to you about veteran suicide as well.

The second question is as you just said, if she's going to put those cuts upfront, we're going to have to get them back in the budget. Okay? We are going to have to put them in our one-house budgets, the Senate and the Assembly.

What happens to our veterans if one of those does not get put into that budget and it doesn't get enacted in the final budget? What happens to our veterans then?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: I would say in part this is probably why you had a

State Department of Veterans' Services. We're able, for example -- there have been organizations in New York State over the past five years that have stopped doing direct work as far as claims and appeals for veterans. We have picked up that slack, if you will, when that has occurred. And we've taken on those cases, we've done those claims, and we've won those claims. Sometimes it's a pretty sizable six-figure retroactive payments for those veterans.

So we are here as an organization -- not just an organization, an ally for veterans and military families across the state, and that does not change. We're here each day and every day to serve that purpose.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: And you guys do a great job, and I think we all agree about that across the board.

But what we're talking about, though -- first of all, this is the budget. Because there's no doubt that we play this game of chess with the budget process. And why would we jeopardize our veterans by

playing this game of -- why not come up with a straight line budget, this is what the numbers are, why does one house or the other house have to bring something forward to get it back to where it was last year in the previous budget? We are playing with our veterans' lives and their families.

And I applaud you for all of your hard work, but we need to do a better job with that, making sure we constantly have that number where it needs to be.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: I would just add, as was mentioned in Panel A of this session that this is not new, as you mentioned, and that this is not unique to this administration. This has been a longstanding concept of the legislative adds being zeroed out and then added back in individually. So it's not new to 2025.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: No, no, absolutely not. But we as legislators, you as commissioners and departments, you know how the game is played here.

But what I'm saying is our veterans

that are home that don't get to see this each and every single day, they don't know how that is. And we need to do everything we can to alleviate that mental stress on our veterans. And doing the budget -- moving the budget forward constantly, we need to do. And we are going to all advocate for that.

So I just wanted to share that with you. And that was one of the questions that I'm receiving from some of my veterans out there.

My second question is the expanded Gold Star annuities. Thank you for that. I'm glad to see the Governor put that in her budget. How many more recipients do you expect this expansion to take care of? With the extra hundred thousand dollars, how many more recipients will this benefit?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: The best answer we can give is we're not certain at this point.

But one thing we can say is that based on the number of individuals whom we have had to horribly and regrettably turn down over

the past several years when it comes to the death in question occurring in a non-combat theater versus a combat theater, we have run every projection imaginable in the last several years. And certainly with that additional 100,000 it will make certain that all of those parents and families are fully covered.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Assemblyman.

ASSEMBLYMAN MANKTELOW: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

So next is Senator Ashton, who's getting 10 minutes -- Ashby, I'm so sorry. Excuse me, Senator.

Don't get excited, all you other rankers. He's getting 10 minutes because he's the ranker for both the Aging Committee and the Veterans Committee. Okay, thank you.

SENATOR ASHBY: I'm glad you got that right.

(Laughter.)

SENATOR ASHBY: Director Olsen, it's great to see you. Thank you for your

testimony today and thank you for your continued work.

So it's my understanding that the funding this year is not for the implementation of the Master Plan but later on, later on down the line still. We're awaiting that. Of the discussions that you've had, what's the biggest thing that stands out to you that will need funding immediately?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I think that the number-one recommendation that seemed to be universal was an investment in the New York State Office for Aging, and you see that in our budget.

SENATOR ASHBY: As a general way of funding it, yes. But specifically for what?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: What services, you mean?

SENATOR ASHBY: Correct.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Personal care, Level 1 and 2. Case management. Home-delivered meals. Home modifications. Transportation. All of those

are wrapped up within that.

And, Senator, first of all, thank you, because you've been a staunch supporter of ours and the network. I'm happy to get you the unmet need report that will show you where these dollars have directly gone. You know, 23 million three years in a row.

SENATOR ASHBY: I appreciate that. Thank you, Director.

Commissioner DeCohen, so last year we had spoke about the veterans' tax checkoffs, and you said the money would be moving shortly with that. Have you released every penny of these veterans' tax checkoffs yet?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: So just so you know, in reference to -- yes. Well, not every penny.

The Emergency Housing Grant, we've assisted 230 people out of over $436,000. Shortly after the announcement for the cemetery, we acquired the Veterans Cemetery. And so we have a balance of $1 million, a little over a million dollars that is there. And then we're already working and utilizing

the money for the new columbarium and the maintenance yard and maintenance building.

So yes, that money has been moving and utilized.

SENATOR ASHBY: Why the delay? I know that we've -- we have this new cemetery, right, and there are still residual funds that are left over. But by law, all of these funds need to go. Homeless Veterans Assistance, the disbursal that I've seen, $175,000. There's still 1.4 million left. That's coming from your department, the last correspondence that I have from July.

And by law, you're supposed to be updating the Legislature on this. And I understand that there needs to be -- or you're asking for an appropriation. But if you need to notify the Legislature, why do you need an appropriation? Why can't you just release it? That's duplicative.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you so much for that. Because from the time the announcement came out that we were not utilizing funds, the cemetery was not yet in

our possession. We --

SENATOR ASHBY: What about the Homeless Veterans Assistance Fund?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: That program was being developed.

Please understand that as we have gone from a division to a department and expanding upon our programs, we wanted to ensure that every I was dotted and every T was crossed before we released this program. So the program was not yet in existence, still being developed. And since we have given --

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) These tax checkoffs have existed for seven years.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: -- that money -- that money has -- that money --

SENATOR ASHBY: Seven years.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: -- has been utilized.

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) Commissioner, seven years.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We have -- we have --

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) So it's

not like you didn't have a heads-up that these tax checkoffs were not being used.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Let me remind --

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) And when you came into this role as commissioner, this -- we made this abundantly clear last year.

So I just -- I do not understand how -- we're not even asking for the money. The money exists. It's here.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: The -- the -- the money from -- the money from time -- and thank you for this. Because this is why I say we have to have the partnership. We have to continue to meet and not unmeet. We have to continue when there's a question --

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) I agree. So why have we not heard from you since July?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: -- and false news goes out, that we're available by phone call for you to call us. Because these programs were not even in existence yet and

were not even began --

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) That is blatantly not true. They have existed for seven years.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: -- that is absolutely true.

SENATOR ASHBY: That is -- that's not --

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: If I may, I'd be happy to --

SENATOR ASHBY: That's not true.

Have you had any communication with the Department of Health regarding the nursing home tax checkoffs?

I know that DOH is responsible for those. Right? There's a number of veterans' nursing homes. Have you been in communication with them regarding the release of those funds?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: We've been in contact with both Health Facilities Management at DOH and also with SUNY as far as the Long Island State Veterans Home.

SENATOR ASHBY: Have those funds been

released?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Not that I know of at this time. But again, that would be a question best suited for them and not for DVS. If I --

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) If they have oversight on this. But these funds are for veterans, right? So I understand that you may not be the department that's responsible for releasing the funds, but you are the department that's responsible for helping to take care of our state's veterans.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We are -- we are -- listen, we are releasing these funds. In fact the applications have been coming in.

SENATOR ASHBY: By law, all of them need to be released annually. You're releasing pieces of them, portions of it. Why?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Senator, I can speak to the Housing Fund in particular. We are not just releasing pieces of the Housing Fund. There's applications

coming in literally every day, weekends and holidays included. Our outreach team is processing them as rapidly as they come in to make certain that the eligibility standards are met. And as soon as they are approved, we engage in the claim-for-payment process to get the money out the door.

So there's nothing being held back.

SENATOR ASHBY: Has the Comptroller confirmed that an appropriation is required for the release of the Military Families Fund?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: I'm not sure I understand the question.

SENATOR ASHBY: Why would we -- why would you need an appropriation for this?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Because that is what the department has been told.

SENATOR ASHBY: Even though, by law, you're supposed to update the Legislature annually, specifically for this fund you need an appropriation, even though for all the others you don't?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Again,

Senator, all I can tell you is what we have been told as an agency.

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) Have you asked why?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: What's that?

SENATOR ASHBY: Have you asked why, why the discrepancy?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: No, we have not asked that.

SENATOR ASHBY: Why specifically for this?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: (Shaking head.)

SENATOR ASHBY: Okay. Being that you're now a full cabinet-level department, what staff increases have you seen since becoming a full department?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I'm sorry, I didn't catch the first part of what you said, Senator.

SENATOR ASHBY: What staff increases, now that you're a full cabinet-level department?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Good. We've gone from the 89 -- we were allotted for 110 FTEs. We have gone from 89 to now over 99, and still interviewing at this time.

SENATOR ASHBY: What -- what federal money are you going after now that you can acquire federal grants as a department? Do you have any large-scale initiatives that you're looking at?

I know we talked about -- I really appreciate the Gold Star Family Annuity. I mean, we've been working on that with Carrie Farley and the Gold Star Mothers and very happy to see that go through and the Governor's $1 million investment in mental health is nice, right.

I went to a funeral for a buddy, a veteran, two weeks ago. This is still a big issue, right? Are you going after or do you see anything on the horizon as far as a large-scale initiative for the department?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: A large-scale initiative in a certain area, or --

SENATOR ASHBY: We heard the chairwoman just talk about the website, right? We've had legislation exist since I was in the Assembly where we've gone back and forth on the quality of the website. It's pretty much the same thing.

And Spectrum News reported just last year 17 percent of our state's veterans access their resources, 17 percent. We have to be doing more than what we're currently doing. And if there's not a list of priorities out there in terms of going over federal dollars, right, that you now have the ability to garner, to communicate better, right, educational resources, vocational resources, mental health. There's a host of initiatives that you could be going after. Right?

I didn't hear -- I didn't hear much of that at all.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Let me speak in 35 seconds --

SENATOR ASHBY: I heard you kind of double down --

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: -- on what we're doing.

SENATOR ASHBY: -- that we are reaching our veterans when we're reaching 17 percent.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Twenty-four percent. Which is a national average. Seventeen percent did not include -- 17 percent did not include all of those who had served, but those who have connected disabilities.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: If I may, on the website as well, the website has changed. I can verify that because I have written the content changes myself.

SENATOR ASHBY: What's been --

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: If there are -- if there are further content changes that are desired, I welcome any and all recommendations, changes, edits and so on.

SENATOR ASHBY: (Overtalk.) We've written -- we've written legislation on --

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN:

(Inaudible.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: -- there are ample changes.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Clark for three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Thank you.

And my questions are for Director Olsen. A couple of rapid-fire, and then we'll get to hopefully where I want to land.

But on LTCOP, the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, how much staff has been hired in the last two years, with the current --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: It went from 57 to 101. And we're still hiring.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: We're still hiring based on the money that's been allocated extra --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: I mean, I think it's been said already, but reiterating the

fact that we're not meeting our targets but that yet -- but we know professionalizing works. I'm assuming when you go from 57 to 101 you see a difference in terms of the ability to really advocate for our residents?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Double the number of visits over that time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Wonderful.

On the waiting lists, were the community-based organizations that sort of run this, were they talked to in terms of when you said this is the number that will clear the waiting list? Our assumption and what we're hearing from them is that it is actually much higher.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So, I mean, you know, Ann Marie's going to be behind me, I know that they weighed in. Catholic Family Center comes through Monroe County Office for Aging, for your particular district. It's really incumbent upon them and every other triple A, whether they're providing direct services or subcontracting out, to reach out to their

folks to get a handle on what exactly the waitlist is.

As you know, Assemblywoman, there's a difference between waitlist and need.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Okay. Our numbers that we're hearing, though, are closer -- are well over 80 million.

So I appreciate the Governor, but I think if we're going to do it, we need to just do it regardless of the cost.

The second thing, on the scams. We know that what we've seen on fraud and elder abuse, through what Lifespan's been able to do, and other organizations, that it is really amazing but we haven't invested yet on the same kind of level in terms of education around scams, yet we know that that's increasing.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I mean that's a huge priority for me. I know it is for Ann Marie.

That's why we've done a lot of work -- you know, we fund them to do a lot of work. They're spectacular. But we're also doing a

lot of work together. Doing videos, doing training. We provided funding so that Ann Marie's staff could actually not just work in and around the Rochester area, but go statewide.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Yes.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: But you're absolutely right, we need a campaign, because this needs to be stopped: 28 billion annually.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: The scams is a big piece. We really need to double down on that, not just the fraud and abuse.

I just want to ask you, if there was a program out there that had already been tested, tried and trued that kept 30 percent of our older New Yorkers who are living at home out of emergency rooms, would that be something that we should be jumping for joy in our state and funding, knowing that it costs so much less to keep people at home, safe and healthy, versus -- and keeping 30 percent out of emergency rooms?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So let

me answer that in 18 seconds. The integrated care model in the Rochester area, absolutely.

You know, strong advocate for those types of models that bring together social services, clinical services, and you can measure them.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: We didn't see it in the budget, so we hope we can get it there in the final product.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Liu, is he still here? No.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: So, okay, we're not doing three-minute follow-up yet. I think it's me, then, if I don't see another Senator. Oh, wait, I have other Republican Senators. Excuse me.

All right. I'm just looking at the numbers, excuse me. The clock is -- no, don't run, I apologize. Senator Stec is listed next. Oh, he's not? Because he left, because he's not here.

Okay, Senator Weber. No, he's not.

Senator Rolison?

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you, Madam Chair.

For Director Olsen, about the expanded victim support services and increasing compensation for scams, as you said and as we know, we're living longer. I would also say there's probably a correlation to the amount of people who are going to fall victim to these scams. I know in our district office we field a lot of calls, we put a lot of mail out, and of course we know we're not reaching everybody.

Does -- do you coordinate with -- and just for our veterans' services, we have an aging veteran population also. Are they receiving like the same information? Is there a coordinated effort to reach as many people as possible, you know, in these age categories to let them know they can fall victim very easily?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah. There's -- I mean, there's no question. I mean, one of the things that -- and Benjamin

entered a while ago, and now of course under the leadership of Commissioner DeCohen, we do a lot of cross-training for exactly this reason.

So we added -- you know, I used to be a case manager. One of the things we added to our COMPASS years ago was "Are you a veteran," so that we could do that soft hand-off. Right? We're screening for anxiety, depression, and so on and so forth.

I'm talking fast because I know you only have a couple of minutes.

The answer's absolutely yes. And this is not an issue just for older people. So I don't know how many of you have gotten the Thruway scam. I've gotten it from Massachusetts, I get it from New York, I get it daily. The USPS scam. There's a ton of them. You got IRS scams now because of tax season. FTC scam. I mean, you know, the advice is simple. Again, it's very sophisticated: It's like don't click the link, don't answer the phone. Those are the things we keep telling people.

So, you know, in your district, Senator, we could certainly work with Ann Marie and her team because, as I said, we put together a budget for her so her folks can travel. They're amazing. You know, past law enforcement officials, investigators. And it also can be done electronically.

But to your question of do we connect, that's our job. We are the connect-the-dots agency because our folks hit so many different systems.

SENATOR ROLISON: And I thank you for that, and we look forward to partnering. And to your point, anybody can fall victim to a scam. I almost did with Nordstrom Rack.

(Laughter.)

SENATOR ROLISON: So it's possible.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, it totally is. You're right. I'm glad you raised it.

SENATOR ROLISON: Yeah. If you see things that look really cheap, they're not real.

(Laughter.)

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Burdick.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you.

And Commissioner DeCohen, I want to thank you for your service to the country and also for your testimony.

We know that one of the difficulties in serving our veterans' community is that thousands of veterans don't know that they may be eligible for benefits and help. And of course to respect their privacy rights, you can't just send out notices to them because we don't have their addresses and they're not available in public record.

So have you considered collective collaborating with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide notification to veterans in New York State that they may be eligible for benefits and to contact your department for help?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Sir,

the short answer is absolutely. Both with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and with the U.S. Department of Defense.

We structured an agreement, an authority to operate with the U.S. Department of Defense, whereby we get a weekly update, a weekly spreadsheet, provided securely by DOD, which tells us who has listed New York State as the state to which they intend to return. And that provides not just the address, but it also provides, for those who opt in, an email address. And we reach out to them in those welcome-home letters the commissioner mentioned.

In addition to that, we partner with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs all the time on outreach programs, on awareness programs, on -- as was mentioned earlier -- enrollment campaigns, the VA --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: If I may, are you satisfied with those results, or do you think that further efforts are needed in order to reach the veterans that still haven't been reached?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: I'll give a two-part answer. Yes, we're doing well with the results. But also yes, we want to do more. Always we want to do more.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: A different area. Could you share with us, Commissioner, the number of veterans your agency has served in each year since your appointment as commissioner?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I can show you what -- give you the approximate number of where we started and where we are now.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: You know what, rather than giving that to me now, if you could just share it with the group here.

And one thing also is can you describe any new initiatives to provide help to local veterans' organizations such as the American Legion chapters, as well as to county veterans' agencies? Anything new that you've been doing, anything on the horizon?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: We're continuing to offer the training to them. We're also working with our veterans service

officers across the state as it relates to the needs for those veterans, especially expecting the babies, those who are in need of the additional resources like the book bags.

And Benjamin has a comprehensive training and monthly meetings each month with the veterans service presidents.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And now we have Senator Murray, also a ranker.

SENATOR MURRAY: Thank you, Chairwoman.

Thank you both for being here -- all three of you for being here.

And Director Olsen, first let me say I so appreciate your energy and your passion.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you.

SENATOR MURRAY: You can see it in what you're doing. And I very much

appreciated your testimony because it was eye-opening for me on a couple of aspects.

So I'm going to hit you with a couple of questions. You might not have exact numbers, but if you can give me guesstimates, that would be fine.

So I've been very, very outspoken -- I want to start with the universal three meals in schools. I've been very outspoken. My colleague to the left here, Assemblywoman González-Rojas, has been extremely passionate and out there about this. I didn't realize, though, and I didn't think about the other benefit being that of our seniors, of how many grandparents are actually the primary caregivers.

Do you have numbers as to how many will be affected by that?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I don't know how many actually claim their grandchild on their tax, because that's the key.

But you're right, I mean, that's -- it's just the way that my mind works, is like look, they don't just live at the State

Office for Aging, because I don't either and neither do you guys. The last count I saw was about 350,000 grandparents and over 400,000 kin care -- so it's still family members, but they're not necessarily grandparents that are taking care of somebody else due to a variety of reasons.

SENATOR MURRAY: That's a very big impact, and I appreciate that.

Moving on to some others, I want to talk also about the SNAP benefits. And again I'll ask, do you have numbers as to how many seniors are currently qualifying for SNAP benefits?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I can probably get through the other agency.

But I can tell you, the average benefit's a little over $200. That's $2400 minimum a year for an older adult household. Right? That goes right back into their pockets, and that's why it's so important.

A lot of older adults don't tap these benefits. Just like we're talking about with

veterans, there's a lot of reasons why that is. But we can do so much better. They're leaving $66 billion of benefits on the table every year at a time where -- you know, a report came out yesterday that half of older adults in New York State who are retired don't have Social Security. That is stunning to me.

So that's new. I just read that yesterday, and I think AARP is going to testify about that study. But like what are we doing? How can that be? Fifty-nine billion dollars of Social Security gets pumped back into New York State. And if half of folks aren't receiving it, like, oh, my God.

SENATOR MURRAY: That is -- that is big.

Do you collaborate with other agencies, such as OTDA and others?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Constantly. Because older adults touch all these agencies. So OTDA does HEAP; we do HEAP outreach. They're responsible for SNAP.

We do SNAP outreach. We have a contract with them for SNAP ed.

So I could go on and on, but that really is leveraging what we do and what they do to serve people holistically and expand services under, you know, the budgets that we have. That's the number-one job.

SENATOR MURRAY: Good. Now, I work -- locally I work with our district attorney, Ray Tierney's office, and we do a lot of senior scam events. We go and do that. Do you also work with law enforcement, or do you have something that we could work with you, your offices as well?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah. So make sure you ask Ann Marie when she comes up afterwards.

We're the only state in the country that has organized and has a statewide EMDT, Enhanced Monthly Disciplinary Team, to combat elder abuse in all its forms. And that includes law enforcement, district attorneys, DSSs, Aging, Office of Court Administration, et cetera, et cetera. Again, for a holistic

approach, right?

And these cases get very complicated, so what you want to do is you want to leverage every asset because if somebody needs housing, you need the housing people there. If they need, you know, a particular benefit, you need those folks there.

So very, very proud of that. That's something that we worked really hard with Ann Marie and a group of folks to establish. So there's those types of things, but they're very localized in a hub-and-spoke model.

SENATOR MURRAY: Well, we'll talk more about that and collaborating.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Absolutely. Would love to.

SENATOR MURRAY: And finally, I want to touch on the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. And it kind of ties into what you were just saying about people not knowing about the benefits.

I can't tell you how many times I've had conversations with families and they didn't know this existed, this was there for

them, to help. How can we better get the word out? What can we do to let more families know you've got this service here for them?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, and facilities are required to post that they have access to a long-term care ombudsman, here's who it is, here's what the number is.

Outreach and education -- I don't mean to be flippant about this, I hear this -- I've been doing this work 33 years. And I hear, You don't do a good job doing outreach. And it's not true. You don't need what you don't need until you need it. And then it's like, how do you find it, who's organizing it, what are the rules, and how do you pull it all together?

Which is -- you know, one of the proposals the Governor has that I'm so proud of in this year's budget is how do we pull all this stuff together? I think you guys (to DVS) have over a hundred federal, state and local benefits. We do, and so do others.

It's like the thing -- if you don't

hear the thing, does it really exist?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thanks. I would love to follow up with you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Hooks.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HOOKS: Thank you, Speaker. And thank you, Commissioner and Acting Director, for being here today.

I have worked in aging services from 2011 to 2024, and throughout my tenure I have witnessed a persistent case management waitlist -- a persistent case management waitlist due to a need crisis in New York City. In my district alone, there are six older adult centers, yet only two provide case management services, both of which have extensive waitlists.

Even more concerning is that community-based organizations are all not allocated funding for case management. As a result, older adults are forced to seek services outside their neighborhoods,

creating further barriers to access.

Additionally, while case assistance regulations have been modified to closely resemble case management regulations, the necessary funding had not been provided to support this change.

To address this crisis, every center should receive dedicated funding for case management services with quality personnel. This would not only help alleviate the current backlog, but also ensure equitable access to essential support for older adults across all communities.

How can NYSOFA assist in securing appropriate funding for all CBOs to provide case management services?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thanks for the question. I love it. I started as a case manager in 1992, so that's how I started my career. I know exactly what you're talking about. It is way different than care coordination in a clinical model, so you know exactly what I'm talking about.

One of the number-one areas of

waitlists that gets reported to us is case management. So that will be a part of, if the budget passes with all of your support, that will go out the door. What you're talking about is a little bit differently, because what -- the way that we are structured and required by federal and state law is the dollars have to go to the 59 Area Agencies, who then in New York City subcontract out to case management agencies.

So if we want to talk about how to get directly to the community-based providers, that would be -- we would need some statutory change to do that. Because that's the way -- again, back in '65 and up till today, that's the way the network is structured, is my hands are tied. The funding has to go to the triple As.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HOOKS: Thank you so much.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thanks for the question.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. I think it's now my turn. Hi, everyone.

So we've had this discussion before, Greg, that the statute requires that you share with us each year the unmet need broken down by county and service. Last year after I asked you, you were able to get that information to us. So can we expect that information from you again after today's hearing?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I don't have any problem sharing the county. Are you looking for the allocations?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes, both the -- well, any kind of data on their waiting -- if there's waiting lists on any services, what the services provided were per county and where we are on unmet need. Because --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Well, we know why, because you and I are both passionate about the issues for older New Yorkers.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: We are, Senator, and I appreciate it. And it's not ever anything that I do not want to share, it's what's the impact of sharing that

publicly. Because what winds up happening is then you have counties that don't report what their needs are because of local political issues. That has always been the issue.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. So even the discussion today highlights being an older New York is probably a 30-to-35-year age range. I think we actually struggle with even understanding all the needs, because they really vary. I'm now proudly 67. I'm one of your constituents, and I'm still working, but I have plenty of constituents looking for jobs. I also have plenty of constituents who end up in a situation where they've lived longer than their savings and they are in rough financial trouble.

And I want to have an understanding of how we're sort of holistically looking at this when you talk about the Master Plan and recognizing that there's all kinds of different needs. I really worry that the $1 million isn't enough for you to actually start to come up with ways to create models that work.

I worry that even though we did give you additional money this year to try to help fill some of the gaps of unmet need at the local levels for all kinds of fundamental services, that that can't possibly be enough.

So if the Governor hadn't put a limit on how much more you could ask for, what would your ask have been?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, I just want to go back and clarify that the million that's in our budget is not implementation money.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Right.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I think you understand that.

The recommendations from the MPA did not come from us, they came from the stakeholders, which you guys will then, you know, sift through, I am sure.

There are a ton of needs. There is economic insecurity. There are benefits that I think we all could be helping people with. You know, I don't really -- it's a really difficult question to answer, Senator. I

don't think that there's anybody in any agency, any not-for-profit anywhere that would say they wouldn't be open to having additional resources put in.

But I can't quantify exactly what a fair number would be. I just can't do that.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. So already during these budget hearings we've heard many people concerned about the CDPAP changed policies that are supposed to be all rolled up by April 1. A large number of the people in that program are seniors. Does DFTA play a -- not DFTA, SOFA play any role in this and evaluating and tracking what happens if it doesn't work?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: The CDPAP program, as you know -- and, you know, there was nine hours of conversation about this yesterday -- is a Medicaid program. It's administered by the Health Department, so I defer to them on that.

What our goal is, Senator -- and, you know, we've known each other a long time -- is we can walk and chew gum at the same time.

The best way to save future Medicaid dollars is not to go on Medicaid. And that's what our system is. It's the pre-Medicaid, it's the community support, it's helping older adults remain independent, supporting their families who are taking care of them, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

We do have a small consumer-directed program. We are keeping our eyes on what that's going to mean, because we obviously use some fiscal intermediaries. But in terms of CDPAP I have to defer to the commissioner.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Okay. So you had a pilot with robots going to people's homes. How is that going?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So we have over 20 public/private partnerships now serving over a million people using a variety of tech. What you're talking about I think is ElliQ, from Intuition Robotics.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yes.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: It's a proactive AI companion to combat social isolation and loneliness.

All of these projects have been incredibly successful. We published a report in '24 on 18 of them, with the outcome measures. Happy to share this with all of you guys. We are literally doing -- nobody in the world is doing what we're doing here in New York. Ninety-seven percent reduction, loneliness and isolation, 96 percent reduction in depression, 95 percent increase in overall health and wellness from the things that they're doing.

We can send messaging out. For example, when SRV {sic} -- what's the difference between SRV, the flu and COVID. We were able to send messaging out to folks.

But that's just one of many platforms that are so low-budget, high-yield, where you measure then and -- you know, this is the future. And, you know, oftentimes states are not proactive, they're reactive -- agencies. That's not us. We have to find ways to do more with what we have, and that's what we're doing, serving a million more people.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: You're planning

to expand those programs, I'm assuming?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: We're doing the best we can to pilot them, show that they work. And then there's, you know, individuals that can purchase them on their own. There is mainstream insurance, there's Medicare Advantage, share them with the Health Department, there's MLTC.

So there's a lot of ways to say, Look, somebody's got to take the risk. I don't think it's risky to try something, to measure it, see if it works. They've all been positive. I'm going to make sure that you personally get a copy, but I'm happy to provide it because it's incredible.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Great. Great.

So one of my favorite programs that's I think hopefully county by county is the HIICAP program, helping Medicare participants get advice on what the best options are. I know how well it's working in New York City. It's one of the really I think successful programs.

Do we have it in every county?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: We do.

And then there's what's also called the Managed Care Consumer Assistance Program. So that came about in 2005 when the Medicare Modernization Act came forward, right, because now you have all this open enrollment. It's very, very confusing.

The HIICAP program is unbelievable. And it's the mainstay of getting the outreach and education out on the MSP program, right, which is administered by the Health Department, puts $7,000 back into people's pockets every year.

So, you know, that's something that we are continuing to not only advocate at the federal level, because it's a federal program -- it drives me nuts, the feds keep changing things, adding things, they don't fund anything, and then, you know, you guys are left and the counties are left and people are left picking up the bag for, you know, the failures at the federal level.

But yes, there is a program in every county. And then we have backups because of

the volume.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: And new colleagues, if you don't know about the HIICAP program for your own constituents, learn about it. It's incredibly valuable to people.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Great. Thank you for pointing that out, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Guardianships. There's been some exposés about really disturbing things happening through guardianships. Now, I know you don't officially have a role here. The courts do, OCFS. The AG's office is now looking into it, I met with them, I met with the courts. And yet the vast majority of people who end up in a guardianship situation are older New Yorkers.

Is there a role that you should be playing? Is there a role -- I mean, one of the things we've learned, no one knows how many people are in guardianship in the state, no one. Nobody knows who actually might be the guardians, because there are registered

not-for-profits with government contracts, there are unregistered not-for-profits. For-profits have gotten into the business, which frankly terrifies me. What is a for-profit doing wanting to go become a guardian?

So what do you all know, and what's your role here?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Our role over the last couple of years is administering funding for Project Guardianship and others who are collecting information through an 800 number that they established. If you haven't seen that data yet --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: No, I've met with Project Guardianship, yes.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Okay. So, I mean, you know, we're talking about the same people.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Yup.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: The issue is is that you can't find pro bono lawyers, and lawyers are not doing this

anymore for a court-appointed guardian.

And there's other ways to do this with nonlawyers, and that what's happened. That was funded in Nassau and Suffolk County for -- going back probably a decade.

So there's certainly a need. I think there's target areas in the state where it's more than others. If there's no lawyer available, it's supposed to be through the DSSs at the county level, but they're not available either.

So I can't imagine that between -- where are we now -- February 12th and April 1 there's not going to be more conversations about this.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: There needs to be.

And I've run out of time to talk to about the veterans, I'm sorry. I guess the only question that I didn't hear yet today, how cooperative is the Veterans Administration in making sure all the healthcare services, mental health care services that our veterans deserve, that

they're getting them? Are they cooperative with you? Are we coordinating successfully?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: They've been very cooperative with us, as well as including us in their whole life and their wellness programs, especially for the women who have served. We've actually been instrumental in designing some of them and then being able to support them across the state.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Commissioner.

Assemblywoman Lunsford.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Thank you very much. Director Olsen, I hope that the Governor is planning on investing in cloning technology with the amount of things that you have said Ann Marie will do today. We're going to need seven more of her.

(Laughter.)

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, Ann Marie's been a great partner and friend

for many, many decades. So we just aged ourselves.

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: I appreciate your testimony. It was very thorough. Yesterday I was speaking with the DOH commissioner and specifically asked if our 1115 waiver funding could be used to better address prevention with older New Yorkers.

When I've seen information about what we're going to do with that money, I have not really seen a focus on our aging population, despite the fact that we are poised to have more New Yorkers over the age of 65 than any other demographic in the next 10 years.

Can you speak to what we should be doing and planning as a Legislature to better leverage those funds for this aging population?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So I really can't say what you should be doing, right? CMS has to approve an 1115 waiver. There's not much in it for older adults.

I will tell you that the Health

Department has been very proactive in the last couple of weeks reaching out to me to talk about how to potentially include --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Oh, he told me it could be used today. That's what he said.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I'm sorry?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: The DOH commissioner said absolutely, yessiree, we can use that money for older New Yorkers.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, great, then I'll follow up with him and figure that out.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Fabulous. Wanted to let you know he said that. Thought that would be convenient for both of us. All right, excellent.

Commissioner DeCohen, I love your coat. I love the theme. Thank you so much.

Two years ago I passed a bill that created a permanent public education campaign to help destigmatize access to mental health and substance abuse for our veterans and

military personnel. Can you speak more about what your department is doing in regard to that program?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Absolutely. In fact, Benjamin is one of our program -- was our former program administrator.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: How convenient.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: The topic is essential, the topic is of daily need. And in the work that we talked about earlier when it comes to enhanced suicide prevention efforts, it's a crucial part of the work that we're doing.

In our interactions with veterans and also with their families, we're bringing up this topic literally every single day. It's a keystone of our work.

I work with a World War II veteran who just turned 100 years old. He filed a claim successfully, with our assistance, for PTSD caused by his time in World War II service. He had never filed a claim in his life because he had been told for decades what

you're having is just something called battle fatigue and it's not really anything you have to worry about. And then of course there was the stigma of I'm not going to go talk to, you know, a doctor and deal with this challenge of nightmares and hypervigilance because of the culture that was around him.

We have to break down those barriers. It's a crucial part of our work every single day. And happy to talk more about this, as I see time is ticking down quickly. But yes, it's essential to be doing that in our outreach with veterans and their family units around them.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN LUNSFORD: Sorry, I'd love to discuss this more. Thank you so much for your time.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Tom O'Mara, Finance ranker.

SENATOR O'MARA: Good afternoon. Thank you all for being here. I just want to echo Senator Murray's comments on your enthusiasm for this. It's apparent.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank

you, Senator.

SENATOR O'MARA: I've got a couple of questions for the commissioner of Veterans' Services.

Commissioner, thanks for being here and thanks for the commitment to the State Veterans Cemetery in Seneca County, where I represent.

As you're probably aware, we're still working on getting some grounds equipment for there. Presently relying on one sole contractor for the digging of gravesites. So it's imperative that we get moving on that to get that so we can have the appropriate equipment on-site that staff can use and not rely on one sole contractor out there.

So you're aware of the need, and where does that stand in getting that processed?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Good. Thank you for that question, Senator.

Just so you know, we just had a private meeting with the staff at the cemetery, and we have actually put out for additional assistance as well as getting the

list of equipment and possible folk to get it from. So we've got our pulse on that. We're in agreement with you.

SENATOR O'MARA: Great, thank you. I was unaware of that recent meeting, so thank you for that.

Just to follow up a little bit on the PTSD, the treatments. It seems to me that we're just continuing to do the same old thing that doesn't seem to be all that effective. I've been a champion for years of the research and recognition project of Dr. Frank Burke, and a different approach to this. Been trying to get -- I was successful years ago in getting them some funding. We're still trying to do it. American Legions of states across the country and the National American Legion is on board with this and pushing for this. Other states are moving forward to train counselors in this treatment protocol.

So why are we having such a difficult time in New York getting any funding to sustain this, to train counselors for

something that it seems to me actually works?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: We definitely are familiar with the program. We've met many times with the doctor and his team. As far as the question on the funding, I don't have an answer for you right now on that. We can certainly talk more about where that stands, because the process and the protocol we certainly know of and have had many conversations about with respect to its effectiveness.

SENATOR O'MARA: Well, it's an important issue for me. And from what I know of it, and I've worked on this for years now, it seems to be effective and works. Other states are going to be beating us to this, to the use of this. Other states are in the process of doing it now. It seems to me to be a wise investment to get counselors trained in this protocol and actually treating our veterans for PTSD rather than just having group meetings to talk about it, because it doesn't seem to be getting anywhere as far as treatment goes.

So please, you know, make that more of a priority, see where we can go to actually provide some real relief to our veterans suffering from PTSD. Thank you.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you, Senator.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Reyes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: Thank you.

Good afternoon. This question is for you, Director Olsen.

So as you know, New York's aging population is fueled by the growing population of foreign-born seniors that call our state home. In 2024 the New York Times wrote about how undocumented seniors face an uncertain future due to the fact that during these essential workers' earning years, they were relegated to low-wage jobs that did not allow them to develop savings or qualify for pensions or retirement. And contrary to a lot of right-wing propaganda, they don't

collect Social Security or any other benefit.

As the New York State Office of the Aging develops the Master Plan for Aging, how has the agency worked to engage foreign-born seniors and representatives of the community in the development of the Master Plan to better support this community? And what work has the office done to address the needs of this vital community?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, that's a great question. I can't get into specifics, but we work obviously with some of the other state agencies, faith communities, Office of New Americans, et cetera. Just another factoid that you want to put out there, they also contribute $97 billion to Social Security and Medicare. Right?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: Correct.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: So certainly I think that the state and the Governor have been extraordinarily clear on -- you know, whether it be my agency, the Executive, or any others -- how we are going to deal with hard-to-serve populations, and

that's to protect them.

So in terms of the MPA, again, I can't get into specifics on specifically this was addressed in terms of this specific population. But I think we look at all people as people that we want to support and help build up, regardless of who they are.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: Okay. But in terms of -- at least for us, right, when we have seniors in our communities that are really struggling to make ends meet, and it's difficult for us to direct them to any agency or any services, just wondering how you guys can also just provide us some guidance on how we can better support members of this community. We usually had to send them to our local senior centers to try and get some services met that way. But the reality is is that folks are struggling and --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Struggling because they're afraid?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYES: Struggling because they're afraid, struggling because there is really no clear place for them to go

and receive services.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, because -- you know, at least in the network that I oversee, we don't ask any of those questions. We don't ask immigration status, we don't do any of those things. So, you know, there shouldn't be a -- that's why I asked you about the fear. There should be no concern about going to any of the similar services that they've always gone to.

So if it's a fear issue -- which I completely get -- I think there was a fear issue prior to this administration, right? That what would be really helpful for me, Assemblywoman, is to sit down with you. And, you know, I've asked for some guidance and I think it's being developed in terms of our providers. But it would also be helpful to hear from you in terms of what we should be thinking about so that we can bring them into the MPA deliberations.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you for your response.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Sorry

about that, Assemblyman.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: That's all right. I like people who finish the sentence, but --

(Overtalk.)

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: It's just a really important question, so my bad. My bad.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: -- when a sentence becomes a chapter, it gets a little long.

Assemblywoman Buttenschon. Is she still here?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: Thank you. Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairs, very much for your service to our country.

And this question is for Commissioner DeCohen. So recently we passed legislation that enacted liaisons in all of our state agencies. And they're liaisons for our veterans. My first question is, how is that going? Do we see -- not only with the state agency, but this legislation reflected the Executive branch.

And the second question is we also passed legislation this year for veterans'

TAP for non-combat-serving veterans. And just seeing how you see that rolling out.

Thank you.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: So let me say again -- let me applaud you on this. We were making it clear that there are so many who have served within state agencies. When we got into the halls of the Concourse and we put up that signage for those who have served, our state partners got into their work environments and we were able to find those who served working right here in the state.

The need for the veterans coordinators, we are so pleased to be able to have them. Because we think that there should be a veteran coordinator everywhere where a veteran or someone who served -- in corporate and beyond.

We have put out the clarion call, and we have gotten the response. We have two trainings that are up -- that's upcoming. One is going to be, the first one, virtually, and then the second with the coordinators.

And again, a wonderful response across the state. Within the agencies is going to be in-person.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: So all state agencies have responded that they have put this in place? As I believe it was yesterday.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: They have. So just the first training is --

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: February 26th. That will be virtual. With the second one taking place in April in-person.

In addition to that, we've established a partnership that's been in place for a number of years now with the National Veterans Legal Services Program. They have an online training opportunity which each veterans liaison will have the opportunity to take and complete, entirely free of charge, to better inform them about the benefits and services available to the veterans and military families in their midst.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: So where

would these names be posted? Will these be on your website so we can direct individuals of each one of those -- you call them coordinators, we call them liaisons.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Veterans liaisons, yesterday. It will be on our sites --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: So it will be on your website that they can reflect on what state agency and within the Executive also.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: That's correct.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: And then the VTAP, obviously you'll have a SUNY liaison. But how do you see that rolling out for non-combat veterans?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: So this is a huge administrative advancement that was announced on Veterans Day of last year, that everyone is very excited about. My understanding at this point is we are still waiting to see the text go forward in the chapter amendments. Once that's passed, it

will be rolled out.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN BUTTENSCHON: I will get that to you.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Eachus.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Thank you, Chair.

I want to start off by thanking Chairwoman Seawright for inviting you, Mr. Olsen, to our last committee meeting. And I hope it happens more often.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Oh, and thank you. I'm Greg, my dad is Mr. Olsen.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Yeah. No, it was great.

I do want to caution you on the Social Security numbers that you were throwing around. I was qualified to get Social Security over seven and a half years ago, and I'm still not getting it. But there's a reason behind that, as you well know. You can receive it at different ages and different amounts, so --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Right.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: But I do feel that because of the uncertainty of Social Security, that we need to do everything we can to advertise your services and programs out there so that the folks who are very nervous about this feel a little more secure at least, anyway.

I wanted to mention I am so glad that we're going to a paid ombudsman program, because I don't know if people realize but if you wanted to be an ombudsman person, volunteer, you cannot have a family member in that particular facility that you are visiting. Which makes it very difficult to maintain that, as you mentioned. So.

And then the last thing that I wanted to mention, Commissioner Olsen, was I love your innovative housing suggestions. However, as we know, those are all kind of subject to home rule, you know.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Did you say housing?

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Housing, yeah.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Okay,

thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Yeah, the microhouses, minihouses, all of those. But subject to home rule, which is a problem.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, that's the whole problem with housing, right, is because it's home rule. I mean, I've seen -- I've been in these microhouses. They're absolutely amazing. I mean, the one I was in, it was on Seneca Lake, so it's a little bit different. But, you know, it goes up in a day, costs $30,000 to build, completely energy-efficient.

So there's a whole difference between how we grew up in usual housing.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: But we have to tackle the home rule issue of that.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Commissioner DeCohen, on this Gold Star Annuity Program that's coming in, I have a number of families, too many families that have lost their father, their husband or their wife and

so on like that. Will there be a lookback to that program when it comes in?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: I'm not sure. I'm not certain of that.

Do you know that, Benjamin?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: There will be the opportunity for families that have applied in the past who were previously denied to file a new application under the new statutes, and then be able to receive the benefit if they qualify.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: But if they knew they weren't qualified and it was only going to the parents, how many folks is that, possibly? I mean, you know.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: We intend to engage in a significant outreach campaign, in collaboration with partners across the state, to get that word out.

We also have information about those who applied in the past and have been denied, and we'll reach out to them directly, as well as say, Hey, you filed before, the law has changed, please file again.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Okay. And now you mentioned something about tracking, with the DOD, the veterans coming into New York State. You can do that now? About 20 years ago when I was with the county veterans department, they were not releasing that information because of privacy problems. But you can do it now?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Yes, sir, you're exactly right. There was a lengthy process of negotiations between New York State and DOD, but now it's possible.

ASSEMBLYMAN EACHUS: Great. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Walsh.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WALSH: Thank you very much, Chair.

Welcome to the panel.

I have a comment and then really a question. It's directed towards Veterans' Services.

So we all know or we ought to know, we're going to know soon, by April 15th, that

New York State has the highest tax burden in the entire nation. But somehow, miraculously, maybe, we're also very generous people. And we have people in our state who, in addition to paying the highest taxes in the entire country, will also check off an extra box or two and say that they're willing to, on their own, pay more -- pay more because they care so deeply about an issue that they're willing to pay more.

I am very troubled by the issue of having these different checkoffs and the money that's collected not completely distributed to the benefit of the categories that they're intended for within a fiscal year.

So in response to earlier questioning, you discussed expenditures for homeless veterans. But that is not tax checkoff money. Comptroller DiNapoli says that there is $1.3 million in that account for homeless veterans, but zero dollars in disbursements. Why is that?

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Go ahead.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: With respect to the Veterans Homelessness Assistance funds?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WALSH: Yes.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: That money -- when we talk about that program, that literally is taking place on a daily basis. Our outreach team is receiving applications, processing applications, those who are eligible are being disbursed funds through that program. It's happening literally every day.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WALSH: But why, then, is there still $1.3 million left in that fund? Why isn't that zeroed out every year?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: I think in part it's because it's not a type of lump-sum monetary movement. Right? These are individual veterans who are facing housing crises in their lives who are filing the applications, again, with New York State DVS. The applications are processed on an individual basis, and the allocations are given to those veterans to address those

imminent needs.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WALSH: So are you saying that there is a lack of applicants? It sounded like you had more applicants --

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: No, there's no lack of applicants.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WALSH: So what -- I don't understand why -- do you need more people to process the applications?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: We do not. No, we have a full outreach team that's working on those literally day in and day out, since that program started up on Veterans Day of 2024.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WALSH: So you've got plenty of applications, you've got plenty of people to process the applications, you're doing it on a basis, and yet you still have over a million dollars, according to the Comptroller's office, that's unexpended.

I don't understand why that number is still -- listen, I don't care if it's $50. I don't care if it's $100. My point is if people care enough, that money should all be

spent.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman González-Rojas.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Thank you.

This question is for Director Greg Olsen. Thank you for being here.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: I might have actually shared this last year, but I personally navigated a challenge where my mother fell, broke her hip, ended up in the hospital, rehab, and then we were stuck as a family as to what -- assisted living for a short period of time. Ultimately we just wanted her to have 24-hour home care. She struggles with dementia.

I want to personally thank Becky Preve, who's in the audience, from the Association on Aging, who helped me and my family navigate the Nursing Home Transition and Diversion Program, which is an amazing

program to have family members stay in their home and get the care that they need, especially older adults.

I'm concerned that I see the Executive tout an $18.2 million savings by instituting an enrollment cap on the Nursing Home Transition and Diversion Waiver Program. So I'm just baffled as to why this is included. How many older adults will be impacted by the cap? And I would imagine if there are savings from this program, it will ultimately be transferred in greater costs to their nursing home system. And for many of us, it would be more costly and remove our loved ones from the comfort and dignity of their homes.

So please make this make sense.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: First, thanks for sharing your story, because what you demonstrated is really the value of what our network does every single day.

In terms of the program that you're talking about, that's administered by the Health Department, and I really can't speak

to it. I'm so sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Right. I would love to hear about -- I know the Master Plan for Aging has yet to be -- or is coming soon, as I understand. But I'm wondering about how we are thinking about family caregivers that are not in programs like CDPAP, are not getting covered. What are the ways that we're supporting our family caregivers who are uncompensated that put billions of hours of labor into this field but are not compensated and don't have a lot of support?

Is there an element of family caregiving -- I know you can't give away the details of the plan. But how are we thinking about this?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, I can't give away details of the plan. I can just tell you what we do. That's one of our four huge pillars. We've got 4.1 million caregivers at any time during the year, providing $39 billion worth of care.

So through our network, through a lot

of community partners, there are a lot of services and supports, both directly -- meaning how do you support the caregiver -- respite, support groups, et cetera -- and indirectly. And those are the services that take those tasks like you were dealing with off of the family. Right? So that's really, really important.

The biggest problem, Assemblywoman, is over 50 percent of caregivers don't self-identify. And so we've got to come up with a different word. They think of themselves as sons, daughters, et cetera, et cetera. So we have a whole campaign statewide we've been running to change that. When we do, we see a 430 percent increase in outreach --

(Overtalk.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you for your response.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you, Assemblyman, thank you. I'm looking at you. Sorry about that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: I'd

love to talk more about that.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblymember Maher.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Sorry, I didn't hear that.

Thank you all for being here today. I wanted to bring up the Veterans Nonprofit Capital Program. So I just wanted to ask -- I believe this is the third round. Is the funding for the third round from the fiscal year '23 in the enacted budget appropriation? Or is that an additional funding?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: The applications for the third round, sir, are in progress right now. And so there is funding that is in place on the books at the moment that will be used to fund that third round.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Do you expect this to be expanded into future years?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: At this point it will depend in part what the full response to the third round is.

We've already provided, you know, millions of dollars, as you know, in funding through this program. It's a question at this point of what we see as far as lingering need after this third round is completed.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Have you heard of some difficulties from local VSOs being able to apply, some roadblocks they received? Has anyone reached out to your office and then not submitted an application or maybe received that assistance?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Yes, sir, we have. The biggest roadblock and really the only roadblock that we've heard about is challenges with the technology, of utilizing the system formerly known as Grants Gateway, and I can't think of what it's currently called.

But the access and the use of that system was a challenge for a number of veterans' service organization leaders. We provide opportunities, as we've heard about this, to better educate them about how to go through that process.

For example, in this last round there was an entire education session with the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York that provided full-scale guidance and answered every question that was posed during those sessions about how do you utilize that system.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: Will you be, based on the response, advocating for this to be continued?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: That's going to have to be looked at and evaluated internally at our agency. Our general counsel, Jonathan Fishbein, is our project lead on that.

But we certainly are looking at all of the results of that. We've heard many positive things from veterans' service organizations about their use of those funds, and we'll certainly be taking those into consideration as we evaluate the program and the after-action work that we'll be doing.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: And as boots on the ground we can tell you, going

across the different legions and the posts that I get to see, we get to see the difference before and after -- leaky roof coming down, and now the wonderful work that's been able to be done as a result of this project. And we hope to be able to continue.

ASSEMBLYMAN MAHER: No, for sure. The capital improvements are huge for recruitment for all of the operations that exist, that camaraderie that's created. Some of it is just being prevented from happening because there are so many capital issues all over the State of New York.

So I would hope to see this program continue, but I also would love to talk offline about how we can overcome that tech gap and, whether it's in our district or districts throughout the state, working with members to kind of identify how we can help with some of those veterans' organizations in getting the funds to them.

Thank you.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: Thank you.

Thank you so much, Assemblymember.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Giglio.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Thank you.

I'm just going to follow up on what we were just discussing about the grant opportunities and applications. Because we did put a program in place that says that every department should have a veteran liaison.

I'm just wondering if every agency throughout the state has a veteran liaison, especially when it comes to these grant opportunities. Because I just got off the phone with my VFW post commander, and he did apply for grant funding and thought for sure that he would have it, and then said: No, we just got an email back saying these are the posts that did get the grant funding.

So, one, are all of those funds being utilized by the VFWs and by the veteran service organizations? Is there any money ever left? Do you ever look into that? And then also, is there a liaison? Because it

could take hours to go onto the grant portal. And a lot of these people do not have the technical skills, whether you're going around to different parts of the state and training them for hours on how to apply for these grant funding opportunities. A lot of them don't have the technical ability or they're snowbirds, they go south in the summer and then they're back in the winter -- I mean, south in the winter and back in the summer. So they may miss, if they get an email a week later saying, Hey, you've got to give us the deed to the property, or, You have to give us the budget.

So they really need technical help. So do we have veterans liaisons in every state agency?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Not only do we have them, but we have programming already on the schedule coming up this month and the months beyond to work with them to educate them about the programs at the federal and state levels that they can be speaking to their constituents about.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Okay, because he -- like I said, he had went onto the portal and didn't get the funding, got an email saying this is who was awarded the grant funding and no explanation as to why. And he didn't know who to call in DASNY to determine why he wasn't able to get that funding.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Be happy to have a conversation both with you and with the post commander regarding that, because again, there is a third round that is in progress. And certainly those who may have not gotten it in the previous couple of rounds can apply again and file an application through that process.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Okay. So is there a list of all the liaisons for every agency in the state and veterans service organizations have so they know who to call to help them with these technical issues?

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: If I may, are we talking about state agency liaisons or veterans service organizations

liaisons?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: We're talking about the executive or the Chapter 477 of the Laws of 2024 that requires a liaison, a veterans liaison for every agency.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: There is a list being built. Once that list is finalized as to who's in that position for each agency, it will be finalized and posted on our websites.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Okay, so we don't have all the -- all of the agencies in the state as per Chapter 447 haven't been established yet.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: They have. We're going to be having a meeting with them on February 26th to make certain that we have all the information correct. After that, the list will be posted.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Senate for follow-ups?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

First we have Senator Cordell Cleare,

three-minute follow-up.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you again, Director Olsen, for being here. And I want to thank your office for the work that we do together on social isolation, and I look forward to doing much more of that.

I'm glad that you all are recognizing grandparents. We've known that for a long time, a lot of grandparents and great-grandparents are raising their children, their great-grand and their grandchildren.

I want to know two things that I am noticing. You know, many of the homeless individuals I encounter are older New Yorkers, and their needs are very different from families and younger people. Is there any portion of NYSOFA's budget or anything dedicated to address this sadly growing --

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Senator, I would love to have a follow-up with you on this. In previous administrations when I was in here, there

was, you know, a Homeless Advisory Council that we tried to bring the issue of older adults to.

I don't hear it really from the field very much. But if it's something that you're seeing, you're absolutely right, the needs are completely different. Shelters need to be, you know, organized or at least have staff that understand what those differences are.

But this is not something that trickles up to me. I know it's there, but I don't hear about it. So I'd love to follow up with you.

SENATOR CLEARE: Sure.

And then something that's been touched on today a little bit in different ways by yourself and others, you know, almost every agency touches the lives of older New Yorkers. But there is no one place -- even for me, it's a struggle. I go from committee to committee, agency to agency, looking for what has been appropriated for seniors in every category.

Can NYSOFA develop a report and let us know so we can actually see in one place everything that we are doing for older New Yorkers?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I think where -- you looked at the testimony that I put together. Been doing that every single year, from State of the States to final budget. I don't have to do a formal report, but I go through them all for exactly that reason, to show that the Governor really cares about this population. And whether you're DVS or OTDA, we're all doing work to support them.

So we can absolutely package that together.

SENATOR CLEARE: Yeah, I'd like to see it in front of me. And anything my office can do to continue to help and amplify SNAP, HEAP, MSP and all the other programs to get it out, we're happy to do that.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I love to hear you say that. I appreciate that, Senator. You've been a great supporter of

ours. But I think everybody could do a better job, because these are benefits they've earned.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly?

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Seawright, for a three-minute follow-up.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For Commissioner DeCohen, I just wanted to mention that in 1925, a memorial grove of 24 trees and a flagstaff was conceptualized in Central Park, and the grove was a tribute to American women veterans.

It was forgotten about, and a senior constituent was in the library reading through old New York Times and saw a 1930 article. So every Veterans Day a group of us, including Senator Krueger, have an event in Central Park on Fifth Avenue between 69th and 71st Street.

So we'd like to invite you to come look at this wonderful grove of trees and this living memorial in the fall.

And I have two quick questions for Greg. Thank you again for your testimony.

What are your thoughts or what is your position on including in the Master Plan home sharing and respite care? What are your thoughts?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: I think that the Master Plan is going to continue to evolve.

I am a huge proponent of home share. I think the New York Foundation is testifying today. We piloted the Vermont model that's been going on for 38 years. It's very, very effective not only for the individual who is opening up their home, but for the individual who is moving in -- not only in providing services that they didn't expect to, but obviously the cost sharing. Huge fan.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: And I know you said the 1115 waiver, you've told me previously, doesn't include anything for the

elderly. I know Assemblywoman Lunsford said the commissioner I believe yesterday had said that it does.

So what's your position on including that in the Master Plan as well?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Well, again, any waiver has to be approved by CMS. It's pretty prescriptive. So I will follow up with Commissioner McDonald. If there is room in there for 1115 waiver dollars to support older adults, I'd be a hundred percent behind that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: And with regard to the Ombudsman Program, how many more volunteers would be needed statewide to meet the need?

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Yeah, I don't know the answer to that question, Assemblywoman.

We are continuing still to try to push to get as many volunteers as we can. Volunteering today is way different than it was 10, 20, 30 years ago, just in terms of what people are doing. This is a very, very

skilled job. And the volunteers that are doing it -- I mean, God bless 'em for what they do.

But we will continue to push that as a wraparound, a supplement as we're increasing the FTEs.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: I received a letter from a constituent on the Upper East Side that participated in the home-sharing program and what a success it was. And I'm hearing from people in my storefront district office that come in, seniors that really appreciate the respite care and the home-sharing program.

Thank you.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: No doubt the hardest thing is to match, especially around politics these days.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Senator?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

And I think to close for the Senate, Chair Scarcella-Spanton.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you again.

I know this has come up a few times. The Executive Budget proposes 157,000 for the coordination of those employees for each agency, the veterans' liaisons. Are we going to be adding to people's portfolio, like assigning somebody, if they're doing something else, they're going to also be doing veterans work? Because it feels like 157,000 wouldn't be a sufficient amount to cover every single agency in having a veterans' liaison. My first part.

And second part, similar to what Senator Cleare said, this -- Veterans' touches every single agency. I've been waiting to see if we can get a breakdown of what we're spending in each agency for our veterans so we have a better idea of what New York's investment is.

Thank you.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: Thank you, Senator.

As far as the question around the

$157,000 for the veterans liaison work, what we're seeing with the agencies across the executive branch is they're individuals, many of them veterans themselves, who are raising their hands saying I want to be in this spot. They're already working for those agencies. They're not new hires, they're already there boots on ground.

But they want to be taking on this role, and they want to get the education and training that we're looking to provide them as well to become better informed about their fellow veterans in the agency as well as those whom they serve constituency-wise.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Really quick on that, if you could provide our office with a list of who each veteran liaison is, that would I think be incredibly helpful for us. Because especially in my district office we get a tremendous amount of cases. So if it's a veteran and it's specific to a veteran, it would be great to have that contact.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: You

will have it on the afternoon of the 26th of this month.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you.

And also for the update on what we're spending within each agency, that would be helpful as well, so we have a better, more comprehensive idea of what we're spending and investing in New York veterans.

And I also just wanted to leave you with this. As we see changes coming down from the federal government, I think it's really important that New York State takes a leadership role in making sure our LGBTQ+ veterans are taken care of, whether that's mental health resources, additional protections for benefits if they lose any benefits.

I think that's really important that New York State starts thinking about that.

Thank you.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: We are fully prepared to pursue justice on all the fronts you are mentioning. Our appellate units in particular, both with VA cases and

discharge upgrade cases -- and with Restoration of Honor Act matters.

We have had many conversations internally about that topic, and we are ready for what comes.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you very much.

DVS COMMISSIONER DeCOHEN: And I was just on our first meeting with the doctor who's been reappointed to the office of experience, Dr. Davis.

SENATOR SCARCELLA-SPANTON: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

And to close for the Assembly, Assemblyman Stern, three-minute follow-up.

ASSEMBLYMAN STERN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Two issues. Following up on the Gold Star Annuity Program, the last annual report of 2023 -- looking forward to getting the 2024 as soon as we can, by the way. But the 2023 report, there were 206 Gold Star parents. Has there been an analysis on, with the expansion of the program, how many more

beneficiaries we expect to have in the coming years so that we can plan accordingly going forward?

The 2024 annuity was $588. I'm wondering if you know what the 2025 annuity number is going to be.

The second issue, in the 2023 budget there was a requirement for the agency to submit a report on the Justice for Heroes initiative. These are legal services provided through the law schools throughout the state to provide vital representation for veterans in legal proceedings.

The report was supposed to be filed -- submitted the end of the year. So when can we expect to receive that report? And prior to receiving the report, I'm wondering if you can share maybe just a little bit of insight on the impact of that very important program.

DVS DEPUTY COUNSEL POMERANCE: I'd be honored to, sir.

Yeah, taking your questions in order, if I recall them correctly. First on the Gold Star parents, the answer is yes, we do

have several mathematical calculations about what this looks like in the outyears. Happy to share those. Probably more complex than we have in the minute and 20 seconds I see left in the time, but I'm happy to provide those to you about what that calculation looks like.

When it comes to Justice for Heroes, that's going to be in our annual report that you'll be getting for the 2024 calendar year, talking about the successes of that program. I've had the honor of being a part of that since the very beginning of that grant program, and we're actually in the new cycle right now. The RFP's going to be coming out quite soon for law schools to apply for what's going to be a third round of funding in that area.

What we are seeing is life-changing services being provided free of charge in areas ranging from character of discharge upgrades to housing matters, family law cases, a lot of work being done even as far out as things like driver's license

suspensions, which can be devastating to a veteran, and making certain that they can get access to justice when they are facing those situations. That's Part A.

Part B, and in some ways the best part of the entire thing, it's helping the veterans of today; it's also training the veterans' advocates of tomorrow. Because when you have law students going through a clinical legal education program and they see firsthand the direct impacts of what veterans law in its various forms can do, that will inspire them to go into this field for a career or, if it's not their main focus, to at least make it a part of their practice in some way, shape or form.

ASSEMBLYMAN STERN: Very good. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: And with that fine answer, that ends this portion of the hearing. Commissioner, Director, Attorney, I'd like to thank the three of you for your testimony.

And I'll call up the next panel,

Panel C.

NYSOFA ACTING DIRECTOR OLSEN: Thank you all. Appreciate your support.

("Thank you" from legislators, panelists.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Calling AARP New York, New York Statewide Senior Action Council, the New York Foundation for Senior Citizens, Lifespan of Greater Rochester, LiveOn NY, and Association on Aging in New York.

(Pause; off the record.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: (Mic off) -- in the booth, just introduce yourselves so they'll know what names to put up on the screen when it's being broadcast.

So start from my right, your left, and just go right across, just your name and organization. Don't start your testimony until -- yes.

MS. MYERS: Gail Myers, New York StateWide Senior Action Council.

MS. McMANUS: Kristen McManus, AARP New York.

MS. BAER: Barbara Baer, New York Foundation for Senior Citizens.

MS. COOK: Ann Marie Cook, from Lifespan of Greater Rochester.

MS. FISHER: Dora Fisher, LiveOn NY.

MS. PREVE: And I'm Becky Preve, executive director of the Association on Aging for the State of New York.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you. Welcome, one and all.

We can start wherever you'd like, left or right.

MS. McMANUS: Yeah, sure, I'll start.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: You'll pick you to start? Okay.

MS. McMANUS: Thank you. As you heard, I'm Kristen McManus from AARP New York, and I really appreciate the opportunity to be here to testify in front of you today.

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit social mission organization. We have 2.2 million members in the State of New York. We advocate for the needs of the 50-plus population. And that is a population that is

booming.

There was a report that came out yesterday from the Center for an Urban Future that says the 65-and-over population in New York State is 3.5 million people. This is a 50 percent increase from the previous decade. And unfortunately, this is also a population that is increasingly living in poverty. More than 50 percent of this population is under the poverty line, and around half does not have access to retirement income.

So the need really is for a state budget that looks at the needs and wants of this population and meets them. And what we know from our research is that overwhelmingly this is a population that wants to age in their own homes and in their own communities.

The programs that we've been speaking about today, the non-Medicaid home and community-based services that are administered through the State Office for the Aging allow older adults to do that. We are, speaking for AARP, unbelievably appreciative

of the Legislature's historic commitment to funding these programs, providing the additional investment every single year. We are beyond grateful that the Governor has recognized how important these programs are and put in a historic investment to be able to finally address these waiting lists.

Some of my colleagues here are going to go into a little bit more of the details of what more funding is needed, but I just want to emphasize how important this is for unpaid family caregivers that are taking care of their aging loved ones. This provides respite, it allows them a break. These family caregivers are spending money from their own pockets, they are leaving work, moving to part-time, and overwhelmingly these are women. These are older women around 58 years old that are leaving the workforce in their prime years to be saving for their own retirement to take care of their aging loved ones.

I also want to quickly mention our support for increasing funding for the

Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. This is critical eyes and ears for our most vulnerable residents.

And lastly I just want to close and say that AARP strongly supports efforts from the Governor to combat senior, elder financial exploitation. Allowing employees of financial institutions to place a hold on a suspicious transaction will really help the demographic that is most frequently targeted for scams and fraud.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. MYERS: Hi, I'm Gail Myers from New York StateWide Senior Action Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

A lot of what we say, we are joined in arms to support a strong aging program for New York.

In addition to ensuring adequate funding for the two helplines that our organization has through state contracts, our members have prioritized the need to stop

Medicaid home care cuts from being implemented, and also to invest to build the capacity of the aging service provider network to meet the needs of today's seniors and future seniors.

We need investment to address both inflationary costs and unmet need. I'll talk about those in our two contracted programs.

The Patients' Rights Helpline Project. We have had an increased number of callers, an increased complexity of patients' rights concerns. In our written testimony we've given you some data on looking at 2020 till today. The number of clients we have helped has increased by 184 percent. The amount of time spent has increased by 250 percent. And our outreach and community education has increased by 2,000 percent.

We are asking you, very sincerely, to stop the cut in the Governor's budget. The Legislature in the past has added $200,000 to this program that is not in the budget. We also need help because one of our $100,000 bequests from the Legislature has

not been included in the reappropriation. I'm asking for a 30-day amendment from the Governor's office for that.

We also request an additional investment of $500,000 so that total funding for this program would be 731,500.

You've heard this morning from NYSOFA about the MCCAP program. It complements the HIICAP programs in the county Offices for Aging. We are very, very involved in trying to reach people who are eligible for the Medicare Savings Program but have not yet enrolled, and we expect that there's over 300,000 New Yorkers who would fall into that category, putting about $8,000 a year back in their wallets. We need additional money to complete that outreach and education. And to meet those needs, there are six not-for-profit providers who are asking you for an additional million dollars proportionally allocated to those providers.

I also wanted to let you know that in our testimony we have recommendations for improvements to the EPIC program. We have

concerns about cuts to the Medicaid program that do affect older New Yorkers as well as their families -- we care about everybody.

And we also are very concerned about economic security issues, so we want to establish a SNAP cash assistance fund for victims' compensation, and we want to increase the SNAP benefit for families and also improve the use of chip cards so that there's not this scamming that's going on in the SNAP program.

HEAP needs to be funded for both heating and cooling. We can't have people freezing.

(Time clock sounds.)

MS. MYERS: And thanks. See my testimony.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, Ms. Myers.

MS. BAER: Thank you. So hello to Senator Krueger, who I've known for a long time. And hello, Chair Pretlow. I want you to know that I grew up in your district and I still love Mount Vernon. It's a secret gem.

So pleasure to meet you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: My pleasure.

MS. BAER: And Assemblywoman Seawright and Senator Cleare, we're so happy that you're the chair of the Aging Committee. I think you really understand the issues and really that's a blessing for seniors, all seniors.

So I'm Barbara Baer. I am the program director of the New York Foundation for Senior Citizens. And I may be a little hoarse from sitting quiet for five or six hours. The foundation is the only nonprofit, non-sectarian organization serving older adults throughout New York City's five boroughs.

We are truly grateful for your past, present and hopefully ongoing support of our citywide Home Sharing and Respite Care programs. The programs provide the only services of their types in New York City. These services allow the city's older residents to age in place in their own home, and thereby respond to the city's housing

crisis, prevent institutionalization in nursing homes and shelters, and provide significant savings to the state and Medicaid.

Our free home-sharing services are implemented by social workers who use their professional skills to successfully match older adult hosts who have extra space with guests who need a place to live. And I am the recipient of thousands of phone calls myself, having been a policy wonk -- I'm moving off the speech for a second.

Having been a policy wonk my whole life, to actually be back in the field and hear the daunting stories of seniors, many of whose only income is Social Security -- thank you, Frances Perkins from another age. These people really need help. And, you know, in our own way, we are reaching out to them. And I'm constantly daunted by this poorest group. We're talking about the 450,000 seniors who have so little income, and really they're living on Social Security.

So during the past 44 years we have

successfully matched 2,613 -- 2,600 in 1300 shared living arrangements. I see I'm running out of time. And I apologize, but I did want to speak to you.

So what we're looking for is an added-on -- and listening to these budget numbers, this is peanuts. We'd like an allocation from the Senate and from the Assembly for $250,000. And we'd take less, but it would increase our ability to do home sharing and respite care, which are really both terrific programs for our seniors.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. COOK: Good afternoon. I want to thank Senator Krueger and of course Assemblymember Pretlow, and I also want to thank, of course, Senator Cleare and Assemblymember Seawright for your incredible support of aging services. And I have to give a shout out to my Assemblyman, Assemblyman Meeks. Thank you very much.

I'm Ann Marie Cook, and I'm president and CEO of Lifespan of Greater Rochester.

We're a direct aging service provider. We provide services to about 30,000 older adults and family caregivers every year, and among other things also operate the New York State Older Abuse Coalition.

We really are seeing right now a convergence of issues that are making our work more challenging. Very specifically, a dramatic increase in the older adult population -- we've talked about that all morning -- a dramatic increase in older adults in poverty.

I will also say a decline in the family caregiver, because families are smaller and of course those family caregivers are the backbone of the system.

We've seen a dramatic increase in scams -- thank you for talking about it earlier -- workforce shortages, and of course a historic underfunding of aging services.

And while I applaud the Governor for the $35 million increase -- it was $35 million -- that in no way makes up our ability to serve those individuals on

waiting lists.

And of course the aging service network primarily serves those individuals just above the Medicaid line. And sometimes the only way we can serve them is to have them spend down, which is exactly what no one wants.

I'm going to focus today my budget requests on those older adults who are most vulnerable and ask for your consideration. One, for the restoration of $375,000 to serve older adults who have been abused. This is a restoration in funding, and we serve all individuals across the state in all forms of abuse -- physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and of course financial exploitation.

And while financial exploitation and elder abuse is typically perpetrated by family members and close friends, what we've really seen an explosion on, which is number two for me, is an explosion in scams. There isn't a meeting I go to or a presentation where I talk about scams where

someone doesn't come up and talk about them either being scammed or almost scammed.

So, Senator, thank you for saying that earlier. You're keeping my perfect record for me.

While the Governor has increased victims' compensation for people who are being scammed, quite frankly we have to look at the prevention side and add money for that.

A couple more things because I'm running out of time. We need to establish a guardianship program across the state for vulnerable individuals. We have to be able to address the social determinants of health and coordinate care better for older adults. And we need increased funding for the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program.

There are 5 million older adults in this state, 4.1 million caregivers, and they need support. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. FISHER: Hello, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm Dora with

LiveOn NY.

At LiveOn NY we believe that everyone should have the opportunity to age in the communities that they built.

I want to thank again -- I want to echo my colleagues' much appreciation for the Legislature and for all of you who are champions here today.

LiveOn represents a network of more than 120 community-based organizations that are out there serving older New Yorkers every single day, providing essential services that help older New Yorkers age in place -- services like senior centers, home-delivered and congregate meals, case management, affordable housing with services, elder abuse prevention, transportation, and more.

We are really proud to represent these organizations because what they are doing is they are out there giving people the services that they need so they can age in place.

Countless older adults across New York are providing invaluable services to their communities, such as volunteerism,

caregiving, civic participation. But New York is failing to meet the needs of older New Yorkers. Current aging policy is fragmented, siloed, underfunded. Older New Yorkers lose their independence, communities lose economic benefit of the older adults in their communities, and hundreds of thousands of older New Yorkers are at risk for financial ruin, social isolation, and poor health outcomes.

And so we have an over-65 population projected to grow to astronomical proportions, and now is the time that we have to address these core issues.

The core issues are our entire system is set up to prioritize the most expensive services and the least effective services. We spent like eight hours yesterday talking about the ballooning Medicaid crisis. Well, guess what? We have the answer. Right? We have the social and the community-based care that we know saves money and that people want. It costs 10 times more per individual to provide institutional care than it does to

provide community care.

The funding has not kept pace with the need. Service providers have been doing more with less and have still not recovered from major budget cuts in 2010 -- plus that doesn't even include the pandemic, all while demand continues to skyrocket. There's waiting lists, as we've discussed at length.

So the current and future demand cannot be met unless we build capacity. We simply do not have the number of service providers that we need, nor do we have a simplified process to access services.

So I don't want to be all doom and gloom here, because the good news is we do have amazing programs and services that help people. Our members are doing it. All of us on the panel, we know about these amazing programs and services that are happening that save the state money, give people the services that they need to stay in their community, and they're so much cheaper. And they're very popular.

So we have to act. Now is our chance

to lead the country. The cost of inaction is clear. Without investment, more older adults will be left without the support they need.

I see I'm running out of time. Please see our testimony for our specific asks. And LiveOn NY shares the stances of every one of my colleagues on the panel.

Thank you so much for your time.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. PREVE: Good afternoon, and thank you all for the opportunity to testify.

I'm Becky Preve. I'm the executive director of the Association on Aging, so I get the distinct pleasure of having the membership that Greg Olsen oversees, so you can imagine I am tired all the time, based on the enthusiasm that he spoke with.

And I think this is probably the only time as a legislative body you are going to see a whole group of advocates completely agree on one topic. This was done intentionally. We started at the micro level; I'm going to talk about the macro level.

You all know the demographics very well, but it's imperative to know a few key items. Older individuals pay over $72 billion per year in state and local taxes and make up almost 43 percent of the tax base in the State of New York.

It is astonishing that although older individuals are paying the bulk of all of the costs, the State Office for the Aging, whose task is supporting the non-Medicaid-eligible individuals, only receives less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the overall state budget. The current investment actually decreased us from eight-tenths of 1 percent to one-tenth of 1 percent because the overall budget grew so significantly.

This funding pales in comparison to the need of the network, and it continues to show the inequity of NYSOFA's budget in comparison to the demand and the growth of the 60-plus population.

Additionally, there was almost zero mention of older adults in the State of the State, the State Budget Book, and in the

hearings this body has been hosting for the past few weeks. And yes, I have watched all of them, so I feel your pain.

Our network supports individuals who are over the Medicaid benchmark but cannot afford to privately pay for the services and, on paper, qualify to go to a skilled nursing facility. We serve them, on average, for seven to eight years at less than $10,000 per year, on aggregate, versus $150,000 in a skilled nursing facility.

And it's confusing to all of us that instead of focusing on Medicaid prevention and supporting individuals at the lowest cost with the highest impact, the state continues to choose to underfund aging services, specifically home and community-based services.

These individuals are not numbers, they are human beings that are dependent on a hot home-delivered meal. They cannot bathe without someone coming into their home. These individuals are retired teachers and healthcare workers that were the heroes

during the COVID-19 pandemic, but somehow have completely lost all value as they age.

Through the two-year MPA process, one thing is abundantly clear: Over 600 members have come to consensus that NYSOFA needs to be fully funded to allow older individuals to age with dignity, autonomy and respect.

From an advocacy perspective, this is very frustrating. Professionals have come before you, individuals have come before you, older individuals have told stories of laying in their own soiled linens because they can't get assistance -- and none of it has worked.

Caregivers are in crisis. They cannot get support for loved ones. They're using alcohol and substances to cope, have significantly increased suicidal ideation, and are leaving the workforce in droves, which is obviously an economic impact.

We've made the economic case that the state is overwhelmingly benefiting from the wealth and contributions of older adults, and we have shown the cost savings to the ballooning Medicaid problem. Even with all

of the data and metrics referenced in mine and their testimony, the state refuses to prioritize the older population by investing any real funding into the aging services network.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Assemblywoman Seawright.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you.

It's great to see a table of all women with Women's History Month coming up soon. Thank you each for your testimony.

I'd like to address my questions to Barbara Baer from the New York Foundation for Senior Citizens.

You said you're requesting $250,000 from the Assembly. Are you also requesting 250 from the Senate?

MS. BAER: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: And what is the history of the Foundation with regard to your home sharing and respite care programs? And why are you seeking more funding this year than last year?

MS. BAER: The history of the

foundation is that in 1981 Linda Hoffman started the program with I think half a social worker and somebody answering the phone and actually Roy Goodman and Helene Weinstein, who helped start it in South Brooklyn. And it grew from 10 to 20 and went back and forth for a while.

And then last year we did 31 matches, which means we helped 62 people. This year we're on track to help 100 people, which means 50 matches. So that's pea -- I don't know where I got the word "peanuts" from, but that's very little in terms of what you're all dealing with, and I totally realize that.

But basically this program is cost-effective and compassionate. By cost-effective, for all the money that the Governor and all of you put in, it costs about $3900 per person to match. So in my view, when I get excited that the persons -- we're matching two people, we are putting two people under a roof for less than $10,000. And many of the people stay many more years than two or three.

So essentially while you're sending down 300,000 for an affordable housing unit, we are at least acting as a bridge for several years to house people. And we save guests because people can't afford New York City; we all know that. And we save hosts because their mortgages and, you know, the water bill and everything else is going up. So people can stay in their own home in both ways.

And we also help some students who are -- one person has to be 60, the other can be any age over 18. So it's a gem, and I kind of fell in love with the program. And with vision, it could really grow and be helpful. There was just a study, there's 10,000 vacant rooms in New York City --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Do you have any programs with CUNYs or SUNYs, matching up young people for the home sharing with the elderly?

MS. BAER: You know what, I didn't hear you, Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Do you have

any programs with SUNY or CUNY matching students?

MS. BAER: No, we have NYU and -- but we'd love to extend it, and that's a great idea. No, we don't.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator --

MS. BAER: I want to ask you, can I just answer one question about respite care?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I'm sorry, we have to cut you off. We're equal opportunity mean here.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Cordell Cleare.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you, all of you, for what you do every day to uplift our older New Yorkers.

I just want to lift up the name of Alma Rangel, who passed away this year and who was a big part of the respite care for the Foundation's program that I really believe in. And I hope that it grows and will fight to make sure that that happens.

And we should work to see if we can reach even more people, because I think it's a great program.

I just want to ask -- and this is random, whoever wants to jump in. Master Plan for the Aging --

PANELIST: Senator, I'm old --

SENATOR CLEARE: (Loudly.) Master Plan for the Aging --

(Laughter.)

PANELIST: Aging.

SENATOR CLEARE: Yeah, the aging master plan, MPA. Anything that sticks out that we really should be including in that?

And also if you could speak to the $35 million add, which we're all happy for, but are we getting everything we need? Do we need more? Quick, if you can.

MS. PREVE: We absolutely need more, and I conferred with my colleagues on answering this question.

I will tell you I personally had attended hundreds of hours of meetings at the MPA for the last two years, along with

Ann Marie Cook and many of our colleagues. I'm cautiously optimistic on what we will see with the report. The process definitely was difficult at the inception. My hope is that it will absolutely include the over 100 recommendations, which included fiscal components which were very significant. And that's not surprising when you're talking about capital improvements to nursing homes, to funding the home and community-based services network to an additional 252.5 million, which is what our recommendation was being put forward.

So I think a lot more to come on that. That is supposed to be a 10-year-long plan moving forward.

Regarding the 35 million, I will tell you it's not 45, it was a 10 million restoration of legislative add-ons that we have to beg for each and every year for services that are already turned on.

The 35 million will go a very long way to address the waiting list. That is a waiting list that was from last September.

So if you told me today "Do a statewide advertisement for services," we would be inundated and we would have a very robust waitlist again.

I will tell you I do webinars on a monthly basis. Our advocacy line then blows up with people looking for services and we have to tell them we can't turn those on yet.

So does it address the waitlist from September of last year? Absolutely. Does that rightsize or adjust for inflationary costs to our network? Absolutely not. Yesterday the food pantries testified to a 25 percent inflationary increase to food. Our home-delivered meal program uses food to feed people, and we got a 2.1 percent COLA increase. We also did not get the $2 rate increase for the home care workers, which is a $7 million hole times three years.

So absolutely we have not received what is just, fair and necessary for the aging services network.

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

Anybody else? Or did she do it?

She's good.

(Panelists nod in agreement.)

SENATOR CLEARE: Thank you.

MS. MYERS: I would just say we can't wait for funding until the Master Plan for Aging gets printed.

MS. BAER: We'd like to be included in the Master Plan. They were contemplating including home sharing, but I'm not sure it is, and I would push for it to be put in the Master Plan.

SENATOR CLEARE: Let's make sure that happens. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Eachus?

(No response.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Hooks?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HOOKS: Hello, everyone. Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for being here today.

A special shout out to LiveOn NY, as I was a member of LiveOn NY. And also -- I was also a member of the Master Plan for Aging. So I know the beginning.

Could you provide the current number of older adults on the waitlist for case management services? Additionally, how much funding would be required to eliminate the backlog?

And there should be a higher reimbursement percentage for case assistance and friendly visiting services, as they constitute a significant portion of case management. Ensuring equity in this area is essential. It's essential also for pay rates for staff.

MS. PREVE: I couldn't agree more. We have around 6,600 individuals that are waitlisted for case management.

But I do want to clarify something that's really important. If someone reaches out to their local Office for the Aging or case management service agency and says, "I need assistance with Mom, she's coming out of the hospital," and you're told you're going to be placed on a waiting list, most likely you're going to pursue a different avenue.

So that does not reflect the actual

need for case management services. I will tell you I used to run a local Office for the Aging, I was a case manager, I know how vitally important those services are. And case management isn't just a one-and-done. We follow a client the entire time that they're in need of service. And we also are not episodic in nature, and I think that those are two things that I wanted to point out.

We're not like it is under the Medicare system where we can come in for three weeks and help you and then we're gone.

And there's also no payment criteria, so you can receive case management services just if you need them.

I think the other component that's not captured within the waiting list is our NY Connects program, which is really advocacy birth to death. So you could call to say "I need Early Intervention services for a child," all the way up to "My mom needs to go to a nursing home."

And I will tell you, those case

management services aren't done in a half-hour block of time. You might spend 10 to 15 to 20 hours with one family to get a placement or get home care services.

So I couldn't agree with you more, but I want everybody to know that the waiting list is not reflective of the actual needs of the aging community in the State of New York.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN HOOKS: Thank you for that response. Yes, I know, I was the VP for Older Adult Centers.

But my real question is about case assistance and friendly visiting, because they do the same work. But what's happening is the staff is not getting no pay equity. They are also actually -- friendly visiting services provide more services than case management to go in and visit the home. So where they have to do it every two weeks and case management has to do it every six months.

What I'm saying is, where's the equity in those services?

MS. PREVE: Again, I speak to that

just in the sense that it's an equity issue and we don't have enough funding and case management is legally required for our federal and state funds.

But I couldn't agree with you more. Friendly visiting is an unbelievably important service that really carries the backbone of the work that we do.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Tom O'Mara.

Senator Ashby.

SENATOR ASHBY: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Becky, earlier when you were talking about different parts of the Master Plan that are going to be coming out, what can we do in the Legislature to prep for that?

So if you're aware of the priorities within it, right, and the stakeholders -- which are many -- rollout, I would imagine, is going to be fairly comprehensive. What can we do within the Legislature to help clear a path?

MS. PREVE: Well, first and foremost I think it is a disservice that the Legislature was not included in the MPA and the MPA process. Because I will tell you I personally put forward recommendations on bills that you guys were voting on that are going to be in the Master Plan that we didn't want invoked that were invoked, and vice versa.

So I think it's contra-intuitive for us to have spent two years on a Master Plan that the Legislature was not included in. That's not something that we can fix.

What I would say to, you know, any elected official, we are all available to meet with you. All of us have been very involved in the Master Plan for Aging, and we can share the knowledge that we have. I do believe there's not much content to the interim report, so you can't really get anything from that other than we had a lot of meetings and there were a lot of discussions and these are the pillars.

I do think that that final report will

be forthcoming. But I think, you know, in us and advocacy, at the end of the day this was a Governor's signed executive order to really look at the aging process in the State of New York, which is not about them. It's about us. And policies that we implement now are going to impact, you know, our aging future.

So I think continued conversations with those of us that are in the field doing this work that were part of the MPA are really important. And I also think that there should be pressure put on the Executive to share what has happened through the MPA and the MPA process, because it directly influences what you're going to see before you as far as bills and laws are concerned.

SENATOR ASHBY: Do you think that any of those conversations could have an impact at the local level to help the counties prep for it as well, potential early actions of success?

MS. PREVE: At least in my network, I mean, I speak to every single director in the

State of New York on a weekly basis.

I will also say that Commissioner Olsen holds, at least two times per month, meetings with all of the directors. So I feel like our network is prepared for the MPA. But we have over 1200 subcontractors that, you know, organizations like LiveOn and others support.

None of what can come out of the MPA can be an unfunded mandate. We are at a breaking point in the service industry. There are a lot of recommendations that are going to make sense as far as service delivery and increasing what we're providing to older people. But if it does not come with funding, you are going to see the aging services network crumble.

SENATOR ASHBY: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Clark.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Thank you.

And to Barbara first, I will just say I hope as we look at your program that we continue to look in how in the Legislature

can fund it to be statewide --

MS. BAER: That would be great.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: -- and to open up opportunities to see it in other areas where we know both the housing crisis but also isolation and other factors are really on the increase. And really enjoy the success it's seen in New York, and hope we can bring it upstate at some point.

MS. BAER: That would be terrific.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: To Ann Marie and the gem that is Lifespan in Rochester, New York, a question. Why do we need this extra funding for scams? Like why can't it just be included in what we do now with elder abuse and fraud? Why at this moment do we think we need more money here to really focus on this very specific piece?

MS. COOK: Well, I will have to say that the elder abuse funding hasn't increased in years. And because of the Legislature, each year you at least restore us up to where we were before.

Since COVID we've seen such an

explosion in scams I've had to use elder abuse funding for scams. We -- in the field we see these as two different issues, quite frankly. That puts tremendous pressure on serving individuals who have been abused.

I do not have any additional information on scams. So it is really using our elder abuse funding to meet the needs of older adults right now, whether being abused or scams. But I'm telling, I've never seen such an issue explode -- and I've been doing this for decades, almost 30 years now -- like I've seen this issue in scams. Older adults being scammed by the computer, by romance scams, by AI scams, by bank scams and government impersonation. And they're losing, on average for us, $10,000 per scam.

But we do not have additional funding to expand this program, and we need to.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Perfect.

Second question, and I asked it to our acting director of the Office of the Aging. If there is -- we already know connected care -- connected care community. We've seen

it. We've seen it in action, we've seen what it's done. But can you just give a little synopsis of how this very inexpensive program has reduced hospitalizations by 30 percent, not to mention all the other numbers? But it is a small investment on the front end and ends up being a huge savings on the back end.

MS. COOK: Yeah, I'm just going to describe our client. Typically those without a family caregiver who are medically complex, who need to navigate both community-based services and healthcare. And when we provide this team approach of a social worker and an LPN healthcare navigator, we can reduce hospitalizations, ED use and observations by 30 percent.

It's been evaluated for years by the New York academy of medicine, and it's been in two peer-reviewed articles about really this very small expanse of what the aging service network can do -- it can save hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This is the exact direction I think the waiver wants to go. We should do this in

the aging service network.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLARK: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Senator?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Other Senators? Yes? No?

Thank you very much. Back to the Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Oh, okay.

Assemblywoman Giglio.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Thank you.

My question is for Rebecca.

So you had indicated earlier that the home care wage increase was affecting your ability to actually pay people, to get that increase, because it's not funded. Can you talk a little bit more about that, please?

MS. PREVE: I would love to. Quite frankly, it shows the complete inequity in the Medicaid versus the non-Medicaid system.

So we provide non-Medicaid-eligible individuals home care services. So we use the same licensed home care provider network as the Medicaid system. We authorize home

care services for, you know, toileting, bathing, dressing. And what happened was when the $2 mandated rate increase went into effect -- which we wholeheartedly support. Home health aides need to make way more money than they currently do --

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Of course.

MS. PREVE: -- we were mandated to provide that $2 rate increase to the licensed home care provider network because they were getting it from Medicaid. MLTC plans got the funding to pay for the $2 rate increase. We got zero dollars. Which created a $7 million hole. We were told to use our COLA funds to absorb that cost so we didn't have to cut services for people.

I have personally raised that with the Executive since 2022. We have never gotten the $2 mandated rate increase in our service network, which just shows you, again, everything is laser-focused on Medicaid and the aging services network is stuck trying to fill those holes and those barriers.

Our home care program, our average

client is an 83-year-old low-income female who lives alone, has four to 10 chronic conditions and needs assistance with activities of daily living. They are sicker than the traditional Medicaid patient, and we're serving them in homes and communities but couldn't get the rate increase.

We were also completely disregarded in the consumer-directed conversation regarding going to one fiscal intermediary, even though we run a consumer-directed program through our home care program.

So again, it's a complete disregard of the aging services network versus the Medicaid system, and the Medicaid budget is well north of, you know, $120 billion and we're around 230 million.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Okay. And then also you had talked to the consumer-directed home care. So how many have you spoken to that have transitioned over with PPL?

MS. PREVE: So again, because we were completely left out of the conversation about the one fiscal intermediary, we have not been

told to transition anyone. We are literally waiting to see what FIs that we contract with are going to close their doors.

There are a lot of questions around that. I will also note that yesterday -- well, last evening during the hearing we were informed that PPL is using text messages and links to click to get individuals to enroll. You just heard Commissioner Olsen testify that we tell people constantly, Do not click a link and do not open a text message.

So our clients, which are a little north of a thousand that are using the consumer-directed program, we have not transitioned yet because we've gotten no direction that we need to. But it does appear that many of the FIs we contract with will be closing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Yeah, and the memorandum of understanding that PPL is sending out to those consumers is really basically do-it-yourself. So --

MS. PREVE: I will say if we're forced to transition people, we will hand-hold,

because that's what we do.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Assemblyman Meeks.

ASSEMBLYMAN MEEKS: Thank you.

This question is for Ann Marie Cook.

We all experience the cost of groceries at the store, the cost of a dozen eggs, the rate of inflation. How has that affected the population of seniors that you all work with? Just on a weekly basis, a daily basis. I know you also -- Lifespan offers like a whole cafe and a food pantry. How has that affected you all in costs as well?

MS. COOK: Well, the costs in particular you mentioned, our food pantry, five years ago we didn't have that food pantry. And as you know, it's just around the block from your office.

A few years ago, because we had so many older adults coming to us saying "We don't have any food for the weekend," we had established that food pantry so they could

have food over the weekend. And as you know, because you visit our centers so often, they get their meals during the week in our center.

I have never seen such -- so many older adults in need. And as you know, Rochester has the second-highest poverty rate of older adults in the state. Older adults are hurting, and we really need to connect them to benefits, ensure that they're receiving all the benefits they need, but we also have to be there when they have no food over the weekend.

And it's right in your district, Assemblymember. And we had to establish that. It's the only food pantry for older adults in our area.

ASSEMBLYMAN MEEKS: Thank you. And thank you for your service.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Hevesi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

Ms. Baer, very quickly, I hope you hear somebody else's words when they come out of my mouth. But how are home sharing and

respite matches implemented among the participants?

MS. BAER: You know what, Assemblyman, I have to admit I'm a little deaf, and I didn't hear the last part of your question.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Not a problem. I'll speak up. It's my fault.

How are home sharing and respite care matches implemented among the participants?

MS. BAER: Well, they're two different programs but somewhat the template is the same, which is with very great care.

So with regard to respite, you have funded the Foundation to actually offer respite care for three months to anybody who asks for it. And what it is is a program where if somebody suddenly, for example, goes to the hospital and is alone and they have to come home, we have home health attendants who we've certified who are fine.

And if you call, we recommend -- we interview you and then recommend a home health attendant, and that person goes and works for you and is paid only by you. And

they are paid $19.10, which is in the city the minimum wage, and the idea is that it's between the client and the certified home health attendant.

And that person must work eight hours a week, but it can be lots more. And that person can work for three months. And then if you think the person is terrific and you want to have a continued relationship with them, we say hooray and we find another home health attendant another case.

So it's an incredibly popular program, much easier to explain and sell than home sharing. But it's really wonderful because, as you know, so many seniors are alone. And when people might have a stroke and there's no family, as is often the case, this person can be terrific.

So because of your funding, it's $19.10, whereas if you go for a for-profit agency it can be 30 or 40 dollars an hour.

So that's what that is.

And the template for home share is somebody calls, yes, we'd love to have you as

a guest or a host, but as a host you have to show us proof that you own the home or that you lease it. You have to show us proof of ID. Then we interview you, and we also do a background check or, in the alternative, get three letters of reference and we check them.

And with regard to the guest, we ask for three letters of reference, photo ID, and proof of income, which is frequently Social Security only.

And then we have a Zoom call with each person, we have 40 minutes with 40 questions, from do you have a dog, how far will you walk to the laundry to, you know, who do you want to live with.

And then we match. It's very hard. Very hard and very daunting. And also one has to be very responsible, because you're having two people move in --

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Assemblywoman Griffin.

MS. BAER: And it's been safe.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

To the panel, I appreciate your comprehensive advocacy and support of the aging in our state. I'm new to this committee, and I'm interested to learn the many ways we can help.

My first question is for Barbara. I really appreciate the success of this citywide home sharing and respite care program. And I wonder, is this throughout the state or is it just in specific cities?

MS. BAER: No, it's in New York City, but we'd love to make it statewide. There's 70 programs across the country. It should be huge because there's such a need for housing and -- it should be huge. And we wish it were bigger.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Yeah, I represent Assembly District 21, which is the South Shore of Nassau County, and I know so many people that are living by themselves that would love the company, that would love to be in a system where they could save

money, have a companion live with them. It just seems like such a great idea.

So I would love to see that --

MS. BAER: We'd be happy to expand.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Love to see it expand.

And then on the -- Gail Myers, on the StateWide Senior Action Council, I really appreciated the -- your mention of the dental coverage for all. And obviously I believe that's so essential for everyone. And I just wondered if you could speak to it.

There's people that are on Medicare that they're not able to get that. I just wonder if you could speak to that and describe what level of people does that mean. Like what number of people are shut out of that program as it is?

MS. MYERS: So original Medicare does not have a dental provision in it. There's no dental benefit. Some people who purchase a Medicare Advantage plan for their coverage choose them because they say they have dental benefits, but the benefits aren't --

generally are not comprehensive. So there might be a screening, there might be a hygienist appointment, there might not be dentures.

So what we're looking for is the ability for people on Medicare, like anybody else, to be able to purchase on the Exchange. The state's Exchange excludes anybody who's covered by Medicare from using that network and services.

And there is now, starting January of '26, going to be a freestanding dental option on the Exchange. The Department of Health is moving forward with that, but it is not going to be open to people unless you purchase the rest of your insurance on the Exchange.

So that's what we're looking for. And we also implore you to help increase the capacity of the dental provider networks so that people who have insurance can actually access the service and use it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Okay, thank you. And that seems like such a necessary idea, like all people should be allowed to

purchase that without purchasing some fuller plan. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: And thank you, and that closes out Panel C.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you all for your testimony.

I'm calling down now Panel D: ECE On the Move, Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Early Care & Learning Council, Wonderschool, and Project Guardianship.

(Pause.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Good afternoon, everyone. Let's start to my right, and you're going to each just give your name and affiliation so the media guys know whose name to put up when you're speaking. And then we'll go to the testimony.

So starting here.

MR. MOSS: Good afternoon, my name is Jason Moss. I'm the head of new government initiatives from Wonderschool.

MS. BOWEN: Good afternoon, Shanita Bowen, chief operating officer for ECE On the

Move.

MS. BUFKIN: Good afternoon. I'm Alice Bufkin with Citizens' Committee for Children.

MS. GEORGE: Kimberly George, Project Guardianship.

MS. CHIMENTO: Meredith Chimento, Early Care & Learning Council.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Why don't we start again with you on my right, your three minutes, and we'll just go down the line again. Thank you.

MR. MOSS: Esteemed chairs and members of the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing for Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of Wonderschool.

I'm here to address the Executive Budget's proposal on the creation of childcare support centers to implement early childhood education substitute teacher pools.

Wonderschool is the leading provider of innovative solutions for the childcare industry, and we commend the Governor's

commitment to addressing the critical shortage of substitute teachers in early childhood education settings.

The shortage of substitute teachers is a significant challenge faced by childcare providers across New York State. This shortage leads to disruptions in care, limits program quality, and creates additional stress for already overburdened childcare professionals.

When a teacher is absent and no substitute is available, childcare centers may be forced to close classrooms or even the entire facility for the day. This results in parents and families missing work, causing lost wages and productivity, and ultimately impacting the state's economy. The Executive Budget's proposal to establish childcare support centers is a crucial step toward addressing this critical need.

Wonderschool has a proven track record of success in implementing substitute teacher pools. In Mississippi, our partnership with the Mississippi Department of Health and

Human Services resulted in the creation of a statewide substitute teaching pool. Since beginning operation on November 1, 2023, we've recruited and trained over 450 early childhood educator substitute teachers. These individuals have worked over 50,000 hours and over 7,000 individual substitute job postings.

This initiative has significantly improved the availability of substitute teachers, particularly in underserved communities.

We believe the Executive Budget's proposal provides a strong foundation for establishing a successful substitute teacher pool system in New York. However, we propose the following amendments to optimize the program's effectiveness and increase the chances of success.

One, a statewide digital platform. The legislation should require childcare support centers to utilize a statewide digital platform to facilitate the efficient matching of substitute teachers with

childcare providers. This platform should also streamline administrative processes such as recruitment, background checks, substitute teacher payments, and training verification.

Two, collaboration with CCR&Rs. Child Care Resource and Referral agencies possess extensive knowledge of local childcare needs and training requirements. We recommend integrating CCR&Rs into the substitute teacher pool model to provide high-quality training and support for substitute teachers.

Three, incentives and support. The program should include mechanisms to incentivize participation by childcare providers and substitute teachers, such as financial incentives and professional development opportunities.

And four, data collection and evaluation. The Office of Children and Family Services should be mandated to collect data on program outcomes and report on key indicators such as substitute recruitment, deployment, training, service quality, and financial management.

We're confident that with these amendments we can establish a robust substitute teacher pool.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

MS. BOWEN: Thank you to the chairs and the Legislature for the opportunity to testify today, and especially to our childcare champions, Senator Brisport and Assemblymember Hevesi.

Over the past three years, we have expanded access to childcare assistance, helping thousands of families afford care. The Governor promised to make childcare a priority, yet today the sector is suffering more than ever. Families may qualify for assistance, but if providers can't afford to stay open due to low wages, there won't be enough childcare programs to meet the demand.

As well, New York City and other counties underestimated how many families would need and rely on childcare assistance. Funding is running low, and without action, families will lose subsidies; childcare programs, especially those in economically

disadvantaged communities, will close; and parents will be left without care.

But this isn't just about filling a short-term gap. We must prepare for increasing demand and ensure that there is enough funding to meet it always. The demand for childcare isn't just about families. It's also about the workforce. Right now educators, especially those operating from residential settings, are watching to see if the state values their profession.

If workforce-specific funding to supplement the current market rates is not included in this budget, it will send a clear message that those who educate and care for young children do not deserve fair pay, benefits, or a sustainable future. The overhead in operating our businesses is insurmountable, and it isn't fair to ask childcare programs to donate their services for little to no profit.

This isn't just about today, it's also about ensuring that we have enough providers for years to come. Without real investment,

we will lose current educators and fail to attract new ones. When providers struggle to stay open, families and businesses suffer. Every day we see childcare educators leaving this profession -- not because they want to, but because they can't afford to stay.

ECE On the Move and Empire State Campaign for Child Care continue to report on increasing workforce shortages. Educators cannot afford to stay open, and they're driving taxis, working retail, or anything that will pay them at least minimum wage.

The Governor made a commitment to childcare. We urge this Legislature to hold her to that promise. Hold the Governor firmly to the recommendations set by her own deeply committed Child Care Availability Task Force, and ensure that the childcare workforce does not have to rely on the current low-market-rate wages.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Next?

MS. BUFKIN: Good afternoon, Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, and committee members

and chairs. My name is Alice Bufkin. I am the associate executive director of policy at Citizens' Committee for Children. We're a children's advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. Thank you for this opportunity today.

In the time I have, I want to uplift some of the most pressing issues facing parents, families and children in the state, although there are more in our written testimony.

I first want to reinforce what my colleague from ECE On the Move has referenced about the urgency of investing in the childcare workforce, as well as ensuring that low-wage workers and parents working irregular hours can access childcare assistance. I also want to flag an issue that New York City and other counties are at risk of exhausting their Child Care Block Grant funds without additional state funding, which is jeopardizing the access of thousands of families to childcare assistance.

And I just want to pivot to uplift a package of critical investments arising from the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council that was established by Governor Hochul's Child Poverty Reduction Act.

As you know, CPRAC's mission is to reduce child poverty by 50 percent over the next 10 years, and we support the package of recommendations they produced.

First, we support their recommendation to permanently increase New York's Empire State Child Credit to $1500, eliminate the minimum income requirement and phase-in that prevents lowest-income filers from receiving full credit, permanently index the Child Tax Credit to inflation, and ensure the enhancement includes all children under 18.

These changes go further than Governor Hochul's Executive Budget proposal, although we're deeply grateful for her proposed investments as well, and are estimated to reduce child poverty by 23 percent.

Second, we support the establishment

and funding of a statewide housing voucher program to assist populations on the brink of homelessness or in shelter. CPRAC's voucher proposal would reduce child poverty by nearly 16 percent.

Third, we urge state leaders to adopt CPRAC's recommendation to increase the Public Assistance benefits level by 100 percent and index it to inflation. This would reduce child poverty by 18 percent over the next decade.

And finally, we applaud Governor Hochul for proposing full funding for universal school meals, but more must be done, including increasing the SNAP minimum benefit to $100 a month and supporting the creation of a state-funded nutrition program for those ineligible for the federal SNAP program.

In the area of Raise the Age. Earlier, OCFS indicated that counties can apply for Raise the Age funds. This does not adequately convey the deeply onerous process counties must currently undergo to receive

funds. Advocates also are not confident New York State would approve a waiver of hardship for New York City.

That is why we support investing $50 million for a youth justice innovation fund, which would directly fund CBOs that provide a continuum of critical youth services, including prevention, Early Intervention, and alternatives to detention, placement and incarceration for youth age 12 through 25.

Raise the Age was intended to provide counties with resources needed to prevent involvement of youth in the criminal justice system. However, these resources have never materialized for communities. In fact, only a third of the money appropriated -- and sometimes as little as 10 percent -- have been used for the community-based services and programs they are intended for.

The innovation fund would address this failure by directly supporting the community resources that bolster positive youth development and keep young people out of the

youth justice system.

Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Next?

MS. GEORGE: Good afternoon. I'm Kimberly George, president and CEO of Project Guardianship.

Thank you, Senator Krueger, for asking Acting Director Olsen about guardianship.

I'm here today to talk about New York's broken guardianship system. Article 81 of the Mental Hygiene Law states that any person or entity can petition for someone else to be appointed a guardian and, after an investigation and hearing, if the judge decides the person is unable to meet their personal or financial needs, is unable to make reasonable decisions, and is at risk of coming to harm because they do not understand their need for help, the judge must appoint a guardian.

But there is nothing in place to ensure that a good guardian will be available to serve. The system relies on family and

friends to do the work unpaid or for the person needing the guardian to have money to pay a private practicing guardian. This leaves many adults who don't have family members able to take on the role who are aging alone and living on limited financial resources in precarious situations.

In some parts of the state nonprofits have stepped in to fill the gap, working to care not only for their guardianship clients, but also to raise the funds, year after year, to keep their programs going. Several have closed their doors in recent years. And those of us who are surviving don't have enough funds to meet the demand.

This leaves guardianship judges struggling to find appropriate guardians. The judges report having difficulty finding a qualified guardian to serve in one-third of the cases they hear each and every day. In New York City, that number goes up to one-half.

Project Guardianship and a coalition called Guardianship Access New York have been

raising awareness of this serious and growing crisis for a number of years now. New York needs a publicly funded guardianship program. We are very disappointed that the Executive Budget for fiscal year '26 did not include any funding for guardianship.

We have a proposal for an annual investment of 15 million for a statewide initiative of nonprofit guardians, also called SING. SING would ensure New Yorkers who need a guardian have access to a high-quality person-centered guardian regardless of their financial or social circumstances.

SING would build the capacity of local nonprofits across the state to serve as guardian. It would create a workforce trained to do the healthcare coordination, social work, money management, legal services, housing services, benefits applications, et cetera, required of good guardians.

It would establish a database with demographics and outcomes of nonprofit

guardianship clients. And it would result in an estimated net savings of $80 million per year in Medicaid costs by shortening hospital and nursing home stays and keeping people out of institutions and in their homes and in their communities.

Our proposal is rooted in decades of practical experience and a deep understanding of what it takes to be a caring guardian for another person. Please fund SING. And if you're not convinced, please Google "Pro Publica, guardianship," because as Senator Krueger mentioned, there's been 10 articles in the last year focusing on the crisis.

Thank you, everybody.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Next?

MS. CHIMENTO: Good afternoon. I'm Meredith Chimento, the executive director of the Early Care & Learning Council, and it's my pleasure to speak with you today.

Assemblymember Hevesi, Senator Brisport, and Chairs Krueger and Pretlow, you

guys are rock stars. It's been a long day.

I can't begin to explain how excited I was today to hear Child Care Resource & Referral agencies stated over and over again by each of you and by Commissioner Harris-Madden.

We are the state network of the 35 Child Care Resource & Referral agencies that serve all 62 counties of New York State and the 10 Regional Economic Development Councils. We work closely with community members at the community level, working with childcare providers, families, and local businesses.

While 64 percent of New York State is classified as a childcare desert, and there have been large investments to increase the capacity of providers -- investments in childcare assistance, it's record-breaking. More families can access care. But we must continue to follow the roadmap defined by the Child Care Availability Task Force report and move toward a permanent workforce wage fund. As Shanita said, we need it desperately.

I am hopeful that the childcare coalition and the Governor and the state will make quick movements to fund universal childcare an intentional matter.

CCR&Rs are the workforce behind the childcare workforce. As we move toward universal childcare, our involvement in working to improve the business operations of our programs is critical.

CCR&Rs are positioned in communities to coordinate the $3 million investment in substitute pools. We can vet and train subs quickly so they can be sent to programs quickly. We have relationships with providers to build and manage the sub pools. We are in touch with other CCR&Rs nationally that run sub pools, and we have access to lessons learned from four of the seven states that are currently running substitute pools through their CCR&R networks. We are ready to go.

This past year, ECLC worked to develop the Business Navigator toolkit, an employer's guide to childcare solutions. We are

grateful to the Governor for the inclusion of an additional million dollars to expand this project in the next year.

As we toured the 10 Economic Development Regions, businesses cited that availability and affordability of childcare were among the top three challenges to recruit and retain employees in your communities.

We have identified simple opportunities for businesses to survey their employees and implement small, favorable movement towards supporting childcare in their communities. If you don't have a copy of this toolkit, ask me or ask your local CCR&R. We'll be sure to get you one.

We are an integral mechanism for the state to distribute the critical economic supports that have kept childcare afloat. We are positioned to do this once again by supporting them to access the $110 million investment in capital grants, much-needed investments for home-based providers and centers alike.

But I ask you at this time when we are horrifically uncertain about federal funding, to recognize that the state and the Legislature must commit to supporting nonprofits like Child Care Resource & Referral agencies.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Our first questioner is Assemblymember Hevesi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Senator. Appreciate it.

Thank you, everybody, for your testimony.

I'm going to go pretty quick through what I gleaned from each of you, so -- and then I have a question for Ms. Bowen, if I can.

So let me start with Mr. Moss. Thank you for those recommendations. I'm going to review them and see if we can reconcile what you're recommending to see if it goes into our Assembly one-house. But I do appreciate about the substitute pools.

Ms. George, really sorry to hear about

the lack of funding for guardianship, and I appreciate your testimony.

Ms. Bufkin, I heard all of it, but I'm particularly grateful for your comments about the Child Tax Credit, but more importantly that $50 million innovation fund is absolutely, absolutely crucial as a starting point for us getting back on the track to Raise the Age.

Ms. Chimento, all I can say is the CCR&Rs got the recognition I believe from the commissioner that they deserve today. And with the existential threat from the administration that -- I'm going to leave that alone. I was about to opine on the administration.

The fact that, you know, it even could be potentially on the chopping block is a frightening thought. And yeah, we do need to, as a state legislature, make sure that you are whole, because we're not only grateful for all the work that you've done, but also prospectively to help us with substitute pools and other parts of the

childcare service that we need to provide. So thank you.

MS. CHIMENTO: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: And then finally -- sorry, I've rambled enough -- Ms. Bowen, thank you so much for your testimony. I agree wholeheartedly.

My question for you is, as a former home-based childcare provider, can you explain to me what a compensation benefit, a bonus for compensation, how important is that for you as a former provider? If you could speak to your experience about how crucial the compensation is. Because that is the primary thing in front of us in the Legislature as it relates to childcare: It is paying the workforce.

MS. BOWEN: Thank you, Assemblymember Hevesi, for that question.

It's extremely important. I ran the program in my home for 14 years, and it was devastating because we go into it with all our hearts, we love working with the children. Sometimes my program looked like a

school, but that's how I wanted it. Every corner was safe and of quality. There was so much to do.

It cost. What it cost me was my own livelihood. I was able to pay -- in my program I wanted two assistants because there's so many jobs involved in taking care of children. And it just wasn't enough to pay myself as well. And I could only give the young ladies who later became nurses in the field -- they loved working with children, and I could only afford to pay them minimum wage. No one got benefits. And I could only keep the lights on and keep the doors open. It just wasn't enough.

And the second prong to that is when you don't fund the family childcare enough or any program enough, it creates a disparity between the haves and the have-nots, children who have enough in childcare and those who -- when a program is sufficiently funded and when a program is not, when -- depending on the neighborhoods that we're serving --

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I'm sorry, I have

to cut you off.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, that was very helpful. Thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have -- I'm using my time for the representative from Wonderschool today.

Hello. Thank you for being here.

I was listening to a podcast that your CEO did for Marc Andreessen's venture capital firm with some other folks from Silicon Valley, and he said a few things that worried me. He said to this venture capital audience that you haven't seen much price sensitivity from governments and that in your past experience you've asked yourself are we undercharging for your services. He also mentioned that you're looking to land and expand in some jurisdictions, and I suspect New York is one of them.

You also said that the best way to actually achieve this childcare expansion in

a capitalist society is to empower businesses. Here in New York we have definitely had some issues with contractors overcharging the state for its services. I'm also very worried about large investors trying to divert state subsidies towards investors at firms like Goldman Sachs and Andreessen Horowitz, who are two of your company's investors.

On top of that, I think that the childcare sector is one that is a classic example of a big market failure.

None of this is about you personally. We see lots of people that come into this industry looking to do good things and just get paid a decent wage while doing it. I just think that some of your CEO's comments really underscore the bigger problems we have with this entire sector. And that when we introduce venture capital firms we can get even bigger problems of sophisticated parties diverting state resources towards investors rather than the childcare providers who need them most. I think this is a big danger.

So I know this isn't a question. I just wanted to say for the record that when it comes to things like substitute pools, I'd really like to see our own agencies, nonprofits and CCR&Rs, who have off the record knowhow, take the lead, and not as a sort of junior partner or a captive audience paying fees to some platform.

I do have a question with my remaining time. I saw in an interview, another one your CEO did, where he was asked how Wonderschool makes money, he responded: "We have two models. We either have a monthly subscription fee that providers pay us, or we take a percentage of tuition."

He then said the Wonderschool will take a 10 percent from parents.

So my question is, with the cost of childcare so high right now, how can we all afford a 10 percent increase in costs?

MR. MOSS: I believe what my CEO was referring to is a model for sort of as providers are able to generate more enrollments, the economics work such that

when you start to reach capacity, you're able to charge higher prices or you're able to have the ability to maximize your P&L for that reason.

So it is -- it is understood that sort of childcare providers sort of operate on tight margins. But part of what Wonderschool has always aspired to do -- and I think part of his comments that you alluded to earlier are really about sort of how do we help childcare providers to have sort of a market mindset.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Seawright.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you.

I have a guardianship question.

The state judges came up with their plan and proposal. How is yours different?

MS. GEORGE: Thank you for that question. It's great.

The biggest difference is the price

tag. The judges' proposal is to create a new office of the guardian where the state would become the guardian, and they estimated it would cost $72 million per year.

Our proposal is for $15 million.

We also have a coalition of nonprofits ready, willing and able to do the work, that have programs that exist, that have staff that are trained. So we're ready to go. It doesn't need to be built.

We have expertise that we've gained over two decades serving thousands of people as guardian. And we do the tough job of like running services 24/7, 365 days a year. A lot happens nights and weekends and holidays.

So I think the nonprofit model -- I mean, we outsource social services to nonprofits all the time. Why should this be any different?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SEAWRIGHT: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Rolison.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you, Madam Chair. This question is for Meredith.

I was lucky to be able to come to the

event at Orange Community College in Newburgh just a week or two ago, as far as the toolkit was concerned. And then you said that you've been throughout the state, you've conducted all of those forums like the one in Newburgh.

And ESD -- these are -- they were all done in the different Regional Economic Development areas, that's correct?

MS. CHIMENTO: Yes.

SENATOR ROLISON: Yeah. Does ESD have a role to play in any of this navigating and developing? Because I don't know the answer to that. That's why I'm asking you.

MS. CHIMENTO: It's a great question. I thoroughly enjoyed having you at the launch, and so thank you so much. And I always enjoy our conversations.

ESD was there at every one of the Business Navigator launches in the 10 Economic Development Regions, the representatives were. They are ready to work with local businesses. We will need to rely on them so that they can bridge that gap with Child Care Resource & Referral

agencies connecting with the local businesses.

So we need to continue to develop that relationship. That's the hope of this additional million dollars, is that they will play a larger role in it.

There are childcare workgroups with some of the Regional Economic Development Councils that function, you know, well to okay. And we continue to move that so that we continuously educate local businesses about the importance of this work.

So they were there, we're ready to work with them, and I believe in many of the regions they're absolutely committed to strengthening this work.

SENATOR ROLISON: So there could be a role to play with ESD --

MS. CHIMENTO: Absolutely.

SENATOR ROLISON: Because it is economic development --

MS. CHIMENTO: Yup.

SENATOR ROLISON: -- and the childcare system that, especially if they're going to

be granting monies for business development, expansions, people relocating into New York State -- and I guess maybe not right at this complete second that we're having this conversation.

But to me, that's the perfect partnership, that ESD, which has access to those types of economic development funds, it's the same thing.

MS. CHIMENTO: Absolutely. I think as we move toward universal childcare and figure out the revenue model that's going to support this, we're going to need those partnerships.

And so it's a step. Right? It's not the complete answer, because we need this permanent workforce fund, we need those supports to lift up our childcare providers. But absolutely, that's what the Business Navigator project does: How are we able to look at incentivizing to come into these communities so that they find supportive childcare for their employees? It's a barrier for them.

Corning, Inc.'s model of investing in

childcare to the tune of $7 million a year is a perfect example of economic development. They support centers, three centers in their region, and home-based providers.

SENATOR ROLISON: Makes good sense. Thank you.

MS. CHIMENTO: Thanks.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you. Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Ra.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you, Chair. For Wonderschool, at the risk of asking a very general question, what's the biggest lesson you've learned from running a statewide sub pool in other states?

MR. MOSS: Thank you for the question, Assemblyman. The biggest lesson is that this takes a lot of learning, it takes a lot of trial and error, and it takes a tremendous use of sort of technology to figure out how to scale. So I think there's an important distinction between -- if the goal is to run

sort of a local sub pool, what that can look like. And if the goal is to run a statewide sub pool, what is necessary.

And what we have seen is that sort of the investment in technology in order to drive the necessary application pool to support that, in order to ensure that sort of as people are engaging with the process, they're sort of quickly moving through so that we can get them on-boarded, in order to ensure that people get the appropriate background checks and all the qualifications done -- all of that takes sort of an integration of technology and then really a platform to ensure that when a provider posts a job it can be quickly responded to, to get that provider help.

And that's an overnight learning curve. So the ability to sort of do that with the numbers that I shared in Mississippi is really what we've learned over time.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: And you mentioned briefly in your testimony, you know, mechanisms to incentivize participation by

both providers and substitutes. What type of things do you feel have been successful in incentivizing that that you've seen in other states?

MR. MOSS: Yeah, I'll give several examples.

The first is that if we think about getting substitutes into this market -- but we're competing with McDonald's, right? Like that is a more attractive financial option. So there's got to be a way to complement what a sub might typically earn and add to that to make this sort of attractive thing.

That's the first thing, is we've got to get substitutes. When you speak to local sub pools, this is the hardest challenge that they have across the country, is recruitment.

Beyond that, there are ways to use incentives to help people to travel to farther-away jobs. In Mississippi there's a lot of rural communities, so thinking of travel reimbursements to get somebody to go a little farther distance is a great way to support your more rural, less populous

providers.

If you think about once you've invested the time to get a substitute, how do you keep that person on the platform, that suggests are there ways that we can think of like retention bonuses, things like that.

All of these are sort of different incentives to complement the work and build in a statewide sub pool.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Murray.

SENATOR MURRAY: Thank you, Chairwoman.

And thank you all for being here.

I'm going to make kind of a statement, and I'm kind of piggybacking off what Assemblyman Hevesi was talking about as far as wages and pay for childcare workers.

So a couple of years ago, drastic increase in minimum wage. And while I get the reason behind it, there were warnings that it could have some unintended consequences, and that's what we're seeing. So the increase was not just an increase, it

was a drastic increase. And it continues to increase, which put businesses with small margins in peril.

And one of those also was the direct care providers, the same thing happened with them. They came up and they were -- you know, we need a living wage, we need more, we can't survive. But the margins were just so tight. So our answer was we'll give you bonuses, or retention bonuses, something like this. And we threw bonuses at them.

In my opinion, that's not a solution, that's a Band-Aid. If that were to be something that were offered up to you, is that a solution or just more of the same?

MS. BOWEN: As long as you are recognizing that it is a Band-Aid, it has to be a step that leads to another step that leads to -- you know, to a permanent solution.

So we are asking for a more permanent solution to supplement the market rate. We need it to be acknowledged that the current market rates, the whole system does not work.

You know, we cannot continue to be paid what the community can offer if the community cannot offer. And our expenses as caregivers are high.

And I'm just going to say real quick the -- paying the workforce, paying your assistant and paying yourself -- and we haven't been able to pay ourself -- is the number-one expense, then followed by all of that comes with having a small business and payroll, taxes and liability and insurance.

So we're all -- and I'm speaking on behalf of residential at this time. We have the expenses of a small business, but we do not get the income that we should have to operate. So we are constantly at a deficit year after year until we just systemically close.

So you are right, yes, we need to move from thinking temporary and more permanent, yes.

SENATOR MURRAY: Anybody else?

Okay, that was good. Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

Assemblywoman Griffin, are you here?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Yes. Okay, thank you, Chair. I'm losing my voice a little bit.

I thank you all for being here to testify.

My first question is for Kimberly George. I really appreciate the work that Pro Guardianship does, and you did a great job explaining how vital this is. And one question I had was about how many people would you say are in need of a guardian but cannot find one or they don't have the ability to be matched up with one?

MS. GEORGE: Thank you. It's a great question, and it's unfortunately hard to get at because our court system, which is where the guardianship proceedings go through, has not been collecting great data.

So I think it was mentioned earlier, when Acting Director Olsen was up here, that there isn't good data on how many family or friends are serving, how many nonprofits are

serving, how many private guardians are serving. And as Senator Krueger pointed out, now we're seeing for-profits get into this business, which I think is not even legal, according to the statute.

Our proposal would serve 1500, and we think that that would meet the current need for the judges who are struggling to find guardians for a very specific population, which is people that are living in poverty and people that don't have other supports and often have overlapping, very complicated situations to untangle.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Thank you. I appreciate -- I appreciate your goals and would support your funding, because it doesn't seem like that much funding to make this happen.

And one more thing I wanted to ask and mention, if I have time, to all of you is with the minimum wage going up, that might have exacerbated issues. But it was already that workers were being paid too low a wage. So to me it's not like, oh, well, the minimum

wage went up so now we have a problem. We already had a problem because it was a low wage to begin with.

So I really support that workforce development. I've spoken to a lot of childcare providers in my district; mostly they're all women-owned businesses and it's women working, like some of you have described, working other jobs to enable your business to stay in place.

One thing we discussed was the problem of finding suitable workers to help with special ed children that come in, and I just wondered, you know, if anyone wants to speak to that issue. And we don't have that much time, so ...

MS. BOWEN: Definitely children who come to the program and need special attention and have special needs, we have to be able to pay for that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Yes.

MS. BOWEN: Okay? And also, minimum wage is not enough. We want for people who are working with us as educators -- we have

to pay educators as educators should be paid. Which is not minimum wage. We have to think beyond minimum wage when we're talking about educating children zero to five.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Thank you very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

Senator Persaud.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Thank you all for being here.

I just wanted to follow up with the Wonderschool, because I'm looking at -- you have a tremendous amount of resources. The others can't compete with you. What are your salary rates like for -- you talk about people leaving, wanting to -- you know, that you can't compete with fast food. But you have a tremendous amount of resources, so you should be able to offer the staffing that you have higher wages.

How are you paying them? What are your wages like?

MR. MOSS: Just to clarify, Senator, are you talking about the substitutes?

SENATOR PERSAUD: Yes.

MR. MOSS: So the substitutes are not our staff. The substitutes are hired by the childcare providers. Right?

And so the -- and so the recommendation is that when childcare providers, as has been said on this panel, obviously are running on very tight margins in terms of what they can offer a substitute. Our recommendation in terms of the incentives is to take that amount and add a little extra on, which would come out of these dollars that have been allocated for the substitute pool, because that's what's going to allow us to incite demand. That's what's going to make this job now a little more attractive, which is what we need to do. And that's what we've seen in Mississippi.

In fact, if we look at Mississippi, Colorado, Washington, anywhere where there are statewide sub pools, this is a common practice.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay. So you're fund -- so what do you offer -- because

you're doing a lot of fundraising to get the funds that you have. Right? And you're coming to us asking for the same pool -- from the same pool as others who can't fundraise.

Why should we be offering money to you and not, you know, in the same pool?

MR. MOSS: I think the question should be what does it take to operate successfully a statewide sub pool. What does it -- what is needed to do that?

And our belief is that doing that well requires a mix of putting in place the necessary technology platform so that something can scale to support your needs so that you have realtime data to understand sort of what you're seeing.

It requires having sort of the automations in places from the recruitment through the on-boarding to get them involved.

It requires having the incentives in place.

Sort of all of those pieces are necessary to operate a sub pool. And so we're here to say that as we think about sort

of this legislation, you should be thinking of it with that kind of structure in mind.

SENATOR PERSAUD: Okay, thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Assembly.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Burdick.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you.

And I wish to thank all of you for your testimony and the critical work that you perform.

And this is a question for Shanita Bowen. You mentioned in your testimony that the top recommendation at the Governor's Child Care Availability Task Force is workforce development. And, you know, I think you've got a lot of support for moving ahead on that in the Legislature.

But there are many ways in which the state can do this, and I'd be curious as to what you think is the best mechanism. Childcare reimbursement rates? You know, a statewide wage supplement program? Expanding workforce stabilization grants? And so forth.

And please don't tell me all of the above. What would you say would be the best way of addressing it? What would you think would be the most equitable?

MS. BOWEN: Well, thank you for that question.

Definitely I want to say that childcare is a public good. And just like public school is no means --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: I think we all agree with that. You know, I think you've got a lot of support up here.

And so what would you say that we should be focusing on? Should it be the reimbursement rates? Do others have ideas on this on the panel?

MS. BOWEN: If I could -- if I could just --

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Sure.

MS. BOWEN: Definitely, you know, we'll hear any ideas.

But also parental choice. So different providers, different programs, different family childcare programs. We

offer different levels. So, you know, create a system where if we want to offer more, we would get more. Give us incentives to do more. Pay us according to experience and offerings.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Any others have some --

MS. CHIMENTO: I think you'll hear more about that in the next -- in another panel, with the career ladders and tying compensation to education and experience.

We've addressed very well the Child Care Assistance Program. Right? CCAP is at its highest that it's been ever. The investments are incredible. We have to take care of the workforce. And we have to look at the regional or local differences in compensation, reference the ALICE report, what's occurring in different communities.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Any others?

MS. BUFKIN: I do just want to reference I know that there's a lot of momentum around establishing a childcare workforce compensation fund, which would

really allow us for having a central place to make sure that we're able to address, long-term and permanently, the need to compensate the workforce adequately.

ASSEMBLYMAN BURDICK: Thank you all very much.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I think I'm the last Senator. So just quickly, not a question, for Kimberly George. Yes, we have to do much more about guardianship. We were very impressed with your model. I don't believe 1500 people is the universe that we need to serve, so we need to figure out how we expand good models that protect people.

From Wonderschool, so we take early childhood education quite seriously in this state. We have pre-K, we have 3-K, we have daycare, we have home care, family-based care. But we have certification and licensing for everyone. Do your people go through our standards? And are you allowed to even operate in New York under current rules?

MR. MOSS: I'll speak to Mississippi first.

In the case of Mississippi, which is the example that I gave, all the substitutes are going through 100 percent the state-required guidelines for being in the centers. We follow that to the T, we work very closely with the licensing department. So anywhere where we operate, we are ensuring that we follow 100 percent the requirements of the state.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: So when I was reading your website as you were answering questions, it talks about Missouri, Mississippi, West Virginia. Those states have some of the worst education rankings in the country. We pride ourselves in New York on having and trying to have some of the highest education rankings and recognizing the importance of quality early childhood education, because it gets us better outcomes throughout the kids' lives.

So you're actually looking for some kind of approval to operate in New York? Am

I misunderstanding that?

MR. MOSS: I'm here to present our recommendations on how to amend the current legislation. That's where I sort of suggested the different points that I think would make the current legislation meet the -- I think what are really sort of the true goals of the substitute pool.

The second thing that I would say, just regarding the states, is we do work in a number of states. And, you know, Michigan is a state that we've been in for many years, and I think you'll find that, you know, our goal is always to help states and help providers achieve sort of the best outcomes.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: But right now you're not allowed to operate in New York State under our current rules.

MR. MOSS: Right now there is no -- there is no substitute teacher pool, and we are not approved to be a substitute teacher pool in New York, correct.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: I just wanted to clarify that. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Giglio.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Yes, I was wondering if any of you could please answer the question when it comes to the 4410 preschools and the 853 schools, which are the not-for-profit schools that deal with special education and mental health. They are -- no? Because they are at risk of closure because of the low wages and attracting --

(Time clock sounds.)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: -- and those kids will go into the public schools.

Anybody?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Did she really use three minutes? No, something was wrong. You didn't really use three minutes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: It's okay.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: She used the rest of my time. Sorry. Let's give her -- you already had your question. Let's roll with the answers. Okay?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: Thank you.

MS. BUFKIN: I know we'd be happy to

follow up with you on that. There are some recommendations around the 4410s around some of the state recommendations that have occurred recently and wanting to support that. But I don't have those in front of me.

But I'd be happy to follow up with you with those afterwards.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GIGLIO: That would be great.

And also the continuation of education when children turn -- or when people turn 22 in the middle of the school year and the funding cuts off right when they turn 22. So if you could get back to me on that, that would be great. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Is that it?

Okay, then that ends this Panel D.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you very much for your testimony.

And we'll move to Panel E: Northern Rivers Family of Services, the New York Foundling, Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, and United Way of New York State.

Is one missing?

UNIDENTIFIED ASSEMBLYMAN: Yay.

(Laughter.)

UNIDENTIFIED ASSEMBLYMAN: Sorry.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay, we're missing one entity. So if you would just introduce yourselves, just your name and your organization, so the people in the booth know what names to put up on the board.

MR. GETTMAN: So we get their time too?

(Laughter.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: We can't, but good try.

MS. NEWMAN: I'm Michelle Newman. I'm the associate executive director upstate at COFCCA.

MR. GETTMAN: I'm Bill Gettman, CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services here in the Capital District.

MS. DALY: Hi, I'm Therese Daly, president and CEO of the United Way of New York State.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: United Way, all righty. So we're missing the Foundling.

All right, you're on.

MS. NEWMAN: Okay.

Good afternoon. Michelle Newman, associate executive director at COFCCA, representing over 100 nonprofit organizations providing foster care, prevention, adoption and juvenile justice services in New York.

First I want to strongly emphasize the collective human services sector ask for an investment at 7.8 percent instead of the 2.1 percent included in the Executive Budget, which was previously known as the human services COLA.

Our members report experiencing significant costs to operate their programs, including health insurance increases of 15 to 20 percent. Food expenses have grown more than 10 percent. Liability insurance costs have increased by 20 to 40 percent for some.

Additionally, agencies are struggling with staff recruitment and to raise salaries in order to stem significant turnover in the

sector.

We request that the Legislature include language in their one-house budgets to strengthen these investments by ensuring foster-care rates grow year over year, and including prevention and health home care management programs.

Next the Family First Prevention Services Act provides the state with the opportunity to draw down federal Title IV-E funding for prevention services. While New York has had an approved prevention plan for some time now, the state has yet to draw down these funds. We encourage the state to maximize federal Title IV-E funding and reinvest these savings back into community services, including in primary prevention services as proposed in the child and family well-being fund, and increasing prevention funding to support programs and the workforce that help families safely remain together.

Last but decidedly not least, providers must be able to obtain liability insurance in order to provide foster-care

services. Due to social inflation and increasing pressures in the insurance market specifically related to foster care, agencies in New York State and nationwide are experiencing significant challenges in access and coverage. This is becoming an increasingly urgent issue.

There are very few insurance providers in the sector already, and we are seeing the field get even smaller in recent months. In late August of last year, the nonprofit Insurance Alliance of California, which insured 90 percent of family foster-care agencies in the state, announced it would no longer renew insurance coverage for family foster-care providers across the state. That was as of October 1st.

This change, on such short notice, created a crisis in the sector in California, and to date there is still no current statewide solution.

Then in January the same company announced that effective April 1st of this year, they will not renew umbrella coverage

for any of their insured foster family agencies nationwide.

We urgently request that the state intervene to stabilize the insurance market for nonprofit child welfare agencies providing foster care in New York State. If our providers who care for more than 80 percent of the children and youth in foster care across the state aren't able to provide these services, this responsibility will fall on the counties, and the infrastructure is not there to take on that load.

Thank you.

MR. GETTMAN: Hi, I'm Bill Gettman, CEO of Northern Rivers. We are a human service provider that serves 18,000 individuals from the age of six weeks old to Medicare-eligible seniors. We provide foster care, prevention, mental health counseling, 853 schools, Early Head Start and childcare. We serve 42 counties.

While the Governor's budget addresses affordability -- all good for New Yorkers --

the not-for-profit sector is ignored in her budget. The 2.1 percent is an underfunded insult, quite frankly, to our sector. We are the safety net for all New Yorkers. Be it childcare, be it social work, be it healthcare, the not-for-profit sector is so fragile today that unless we infuse new dollars for our workforce to pay for our insurance, we're going to have closures, we're going to have higher waitlists, we're going to have kids in school who can't get special education services. We're in a crisis.

And while affordability's an important issue for everyone in New York State, we need to invest in our workforce and in the sector. As Michelle pointed out, insurance costs are double digits. Food is up 14 percent. And as a residential provider, I think we should provide high-quality food for our kids. Every single day we are faced with an increase that's not supported by the State of New York. At the same time the foster home insurance crisis could put agencies out of

business, send kids back to congregate care, or leave them in unsafe situations. We need a risk pool.

Our third recommendation deals with creation of a fund to support justice under the Child Victims Act. We need to find a solution to this problem that is both just for individuals and also keeps the viability of the sector alive.

My last recommendation -- that relates a little bit to schools because we run a school -- is we support the school cellphone ban because it's a good thing for kids to educate, especially those with mental health needs and those who have social and emotional needs.

So again, we support the efforts in the past to keep our sector alive and vital, but it's at a very serious tipping point right now and we need investment in resources, we need additional flexibility as it relates to the workforce, and we need innovation. So we encourage you to press for those things in your final budget.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. DALY: Good afternoon, Chairpersons Krueger, Pretlow, Persaud, Davila, Hevesi, and Brisport, as well as the distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today to elevate the essential priorities for the United Way of New York State.

My name is Therese Daly, and I am the new president and CEO of the United Way of New York State.

The core mission of United Way is to be a leader and an advocate for community solutions. Every day the 32 local United Ways work with local communities to help find solutions to complex problems. They work collaboratively with community partners to define issues that impact health, education and financial stability of individuals and families across New York.

As the new president and CEO, I look to invest more than 160 million in our

communities statewide.

To continue our impact on local communities, United Way of New York State once again is seeking your support for essential priorities to be included in the '25-'26 enacted state budget. Your support will help the United Way maintain, sustain and build on these effective initiatives.

We're requesting a $2.8 million investment in the 2-1-1, which is a $400,000 increase over last year's enacted budget. But it will help maintain and expand access to 2-1-1. An investment in the 2-1-1 system is needed now more than ever.

We were once again disappointed to see the lack of funding and support included in the Governor's budget proposal. We have requested, as part of the 30-day amendments, a reconsideration, and also shared important information on the importance of 2-1-1 yesterday, which was National 2-1-1 Day, a day celebrated in communities across New York.

We greatly appreciate the support of

the Legislature to ensure funding for 2-1-1 has been included in the passed budget.

The next item is United Way of New York is requesting the Legislature to maintain the Governor's $7 million investment in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library Program in the enacted state budget. United Way supports early literacy, and many local United Ways across New York have been participating in this program.

On to universal school meals. We were thrilled to see Governor Hochul's historic initiative to ensure every single one of New York's over 2.7 million students can receive both breakfast and lunch. We request that the Legislature maintain the Governor's investment to fund universal school meals and provide free breakfast and lunch to all students across the state.

Lastly, the United Way of New York State is incredibly supportive of the expansion of the Empire State Child Credit. As reported in our ALICE report in 2022, 40 percent of families with children in

New York were below the ALICE threshold. This expansion will allow more than 1 million families to receive financial assistance and allow individuals to have a direct payment of up to $330 per child.

Thank you!

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Hevesi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for your testimony. It's good to see all of you.

Let me start here. Ms. Daly, thank you for talking about 2-1-1. I feel like Donna Lupardo is not going to be mad at me because we've talked about this.

2-1-1, you're absolutely right. I thought we were -- I thought we were closer to potentially getting it into the Executive Budget. Because it is -- it's a service that the state provides now.

So in the absence of that, I want to say thank you for the work on 2-1-1, and also

that I hope my colleagues will join me in the Legislature in pushing to continue and add funding to the 2-1-1 system that you recommended. So thank you. I appreciate that.

MS. DALY: Thank you. And thank you for your support continually.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: You got it.

Mr. Gettman, it's good to see you, sir. Let me -- let me start with I totally agree about the 2.1 COLA.

MR. GETTMAN: (Inaudible.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: 7.8, is that enough?

(Laughter.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Am I sold? That's perfect.

You know what, I'm done. I have no more questions for this gentleman. Thank you.

(Laughter.)

MR. GETTMAN: (Inaudible) -- 240, your bill, and Senator Persaud's bill and Senator --

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: You know what, I would like to cede the rest of my time to Mr. Gettman --

(Laughter.)

MR. GETTMAN: -- and Senator Ramos's bill on the employee wage board I think would be an important conversation to have in the future also.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I appreciate it.

And actually I have a joint question for you and Ms. Newman, if I can.

So first, Ms. Newman, thank you. One thing you mentioned that -- I'm interested in all of it, but one thing I'm really interested in is the potential to draw down on the Title IV-E money. Do we have a sense of why that's not happening?

My original understanding of this -- forgive me, from years ago -- is that programs have to be evidence-based, and that was a distinct problem in using that money. But the state has drawn down none of the Title IV-E money, or very little of it?

MS. NEWMAN: (Mic off.) My

understanding is -- ooh, I'm sorry, everyone. My understanding is that there was a delay in getting (mic out) -- spending plan, for which I believe (mic out) -- it is quite difficult in upstate to get those models running because there's joint risk among the county and the provider, but we're very interested in seeing those funds get taken advantage of and any savings generated reinvested back into the system.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Perfect.

MR. GETTMAN: I would add, Assemblyman, that there's a 19 percent local share, which is always a caution flag for local counties. And then in addition, the evidence-based models require the most highly qualified and credentialed staff.

So this leads us right back, are there enough social workers, clinical social workers, mental health counselors, addiction specialists.

So again, we've got to address all parts of the system, which is the workforce piece, the administrative burden, cost

allocation, et cetera.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: I have 10 seconds. Could you each, Mr. Gettman and Ms. Newman, tell me in one word what would happen if New York State loses its liability insurance for its voluntary foster-care agencies?

MS. NEWMAN: Hotels.

MR. GETTMAN: Return to orphanages.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you very much. I appreciate both of you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Could a Senator jump in? No?

Assemblyman Ra.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

Going back to 2-1-1, can you just detail a little bit what that extra money would enable you to do in terms of expanding the system?

MS. DALY: Thank you so much, first of all, Assemblymember Ra, for your support over the years.

Secondly, thank you for the question.

So yes, what is happening is 2-1-1,

for those of you who don't know, is an emergency line. We help with resources. We help everyone 365 days a year, 24/7.

So what is happening, the calls are becoming more complex and they're taking longer, because there's not only more of those in crisis, but there's more severity to the crisis. It's taking longer.

Also, a number of individuals call for the first time, and when you call for the first time, the calls also take longer as well.

And the cost just to generate operations are increasing, as everyone is experiencing.

And then also I would just say there have been a lot of weather and natural-disaster-related events that have happened, and those are not refunded through -- with 2-1-1. So the costs are technically eaten.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Okay. And with my remaining time, if either of you want to expand upon Mr. Hevesi's question regarding

what happens if our foster agencies lose access to insurance, I would be happy to hear from you.

MS. NEWMAN: Yes. So they're required, our agencies are required by their county contracts to have liability insurance and if they don't have that, they can't legally provide the services. The responsibility at that point falls to the county. And if the county is not able to have the capacity to do that work, which many of them currently don't do, our agencies provide 100 percent of the foster care, family foster care in New York City, and 80 percent statewide, then there's going to be a real problem finding placements for children.

MR. GETTMAN: Right now we already know that some kids are placed in hotels or motels because of lack of placement resources.

If we had several foster children, where would they go? They would end up either in hotels, as Michelle said, or

they're going to end up in congregate facilities, which makes absolutely no sense.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Griffin.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you to all of you for being here.

I just wanted to say, you know, I agree with the 7.8 makes absolute sense. So I don't think we're getting anyone to argue that point.

I just want to speak about the loan forgiveness incentive programs to recruit and retain mental health clinicians and child welfare workers. So this is already {inaudible}, and you're looking to continue. But sometimes we never hear directly how you've seen this impact, like how you've seen this work, that you are getting more workers and you're retaining them. So I'd love someone to speak on that.

MS. NEWMAN: Yeah, so the loan forgiveness program that's coming out of OMH

for mental health clinicians serving children hasn't yet been implemented, so we don't have an impact. We're waiting for the RFP. We anticipate that will be out soon. That's funded at 4 million and continued in the Executive Budget.

The child welfare loan forgiveness and scholarship programs are currently only funded at 50,000 each. Last year the Legislature increased the scholarship program by 100,000, so the total was 150,000. With a maximum award of 10,000, you know, the maximum number of folks that can be assisted at that level is five.

So it's really hard to quantify a systemwide impact of such a small number. It's why we're asking for those programs to be increased to a million each.

MR. GETTMAN: I can say on the ground level we privately raise for loan forgiveness, and it allows teachers and social workers specifically to stay longer. So we get an additional year to two years of tenure out of them because we're helping them

with their loans.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GRIFFIN: Okay, thank you. Thank you both very much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: That closes this panel, then.

MS. DALY: Thank you so much.

MR. GETTMAN: Seven-point-eight, thank you.

MS. DALY: Two-point-eight, two-point-eight.

(Discussion off the record.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: (Mic off.)

MS. DALY: Thank you, Assemblymember Pretlow, for your support in the past.

Yes, so across the state we had 2,045,078 calls alone in 2024.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: And how many total employees are answering these calls?

MS. DALY: That's a really good question. I'm on my 31st day, so I feel like that's a 32nd day answer.

In all seriousness, I would say probably about 150, if not more.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: A hundred and fifty

people handle 2 million calls?

MS. DALY: Yes, I'm sure --

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Are they paid or volunteers?

MS. DALY: I can follow up with you with the exact number, because I am -- I'm not confident in that number.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: You're the new president. You'll get to know these --

MS. DALY: Like I said, 31 days.

But I will get you that. I will follow up with you on that exact information. There might be some discrepancy between part-time and full-time workers as well.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay, thank you.

And you operate 24 hours a day?

MS. DALY: Yes, sir. So 365 days, 24/7. So we are always there to help.

And just one other plug. For it as well, it has been consistent even despite crises and weather-related events, et cetera. It's always been standing strong.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay. I only hear good things about you. Thank you.

MS. DALY: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Raising New York; Association of New York State Youth Bureaus; New York State Network for Youth Success; New York Early Childhood Professional Development; and the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance.

Before we start, just for the benefit of the people in the booth, could you all just announce your name and your organization before you start your testimony.

We can start on my right. I guess that's you.

MS. RYAN: Hi. Kate Ryan, Adirondack Birth To Three Alliance.

MS. TETTEH: Trudy Morgan Tetteh, New York State Network for Youth Success.

MS. O'CONNOR: Jenn O'Connor, Raising New York.

MS. ANDERSON: Dona Anderson, New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay, thank you.

Where do you want to start?

MS. RYAN: I'll go first.

Good afternoon. My name is Kate Ryan, and I'm the director of the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance at Adirondack Foundation. We're a coalition of childcare providers, employers, community organizations and parents across the Adirondacks and the North Country dedicated to ensuring all of our region's families are able to thrive.

I would like to use my time today to share with you a portrait of an Adirondack family childcare provider.

She lives in Franklin County. She has a 35-minute drive to the local grocery store and an hour and a half drive to the childcare resource center, critical partners in helping her to become a family childcare provider.

She's a mother, most likely with one or two young children under the age of 3 years old. Her childcare provider closed and she can't find anyone else to provide care. She leaves her employment and seeks to become a licensed family childcare provider.

She starts the process to become

licensed with the help of the local CCRC. Her home did not meet the requirements so she had to invest $500 for water testing and remediation, a thousand dollars for a backyard fence. Upon inspection, her wood stove was found to have had a chimney fire, and instead of having to pay $10,000 in repairs, she instead chooses to cap the chimney and remove the pipe. This all takes time.

She found childcare coverage and transportation to the CCRC and participated in the three-day in-person training sessions. After a long, expensive six months, she received her license as a family childcare provider. She did it all while caring for her children with no income.

Finally, she opens her first business to help financially support her family. On any given day, the first child arrives at 6 a.m. and the last child leaves at 6 p.m. In the evenings or weekends she's meal planning, cleaning, cooking, bookkeeping, shopping, communicating with parents, and

completing required activities to maintain licensure.

She's immediately hit with trying to balance the requirements of the business, the needs of the families that rely on her, and her own family obligations, all while spending large amounts of time creating lessons and activities that support the development of the young learners she is responsible for educating -- the most important part of the job.

In 2023, 21.3 percent of Franklin County children lived in poverty. The true cost of running a family childcare business outpaces the fee she can charge her families, so she goes without her own salary. In a year or two her own children become eligible for universal pre-kindergarten and she closes her business and looks for employment elsewhere. The children and families she has served are now without childcare and have to make their own decision regarding employment.

The cycle starts over, but our

families and local economy remain stagnant, without growth or opportunities for advancement. Our children go without consistent care and education and secure attachment to their providers, a critical if not the most critical part of child development.

Essentially, the system of childcare as it is today doesn't work. It doesn't work for our children, our families, our providers, our employers. It definitely doesn't work for the Adirondack region and other rural areas. We need universal childcare. We need investments in infrastructure and workforce.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. TETTEH: Thank you for opportunity to testify today. As mentioned early on, my name is Trudy and I'm the policy director at the New York State Network for Youth Success. And as the statewide after-school network, we are committed to increasing access to high-quality after-school, summer and

expanded learning programs across the state.

I want to read a statement provided to us from an after-school provider that I think directly speaks to how our school investments are vital for New York's youth, working families, and the state's economic future.

It says: "After-school funding has been life-changing for our communities and school districts, as it has provided safe space for youth in enriching and supervised settings. It creates jobs, helps families maintain jobs, promotes overall health and well-being for the youth and entire family unit."

As level funding streams support after-school in our state, I want to focus my testimony on the LEAPS grant and why we think there should be continued investment there.

LEAPS was a promising step forward for after-school, and it introduced much-needed reforms, including a revised funding allocation to help provide further financial support to providers and efforts to advance payments and streamline the contracting

process. And it also incorporated a Positive Youth Development approach, ensuring high-quality learning experiences that help young people thrive.

However, despite these important improvements, notable challenges -- or rather should I say opportunities -- emerged. Some after-school providers that previously relied on Advantage and Empire State grants did not receive this funding and have seen disruptions or anticipated closures.

The exclusion of youth age 13 and older from the grant has also left some middle- and high school students without the after-school support that they used to receive.

Additionally, delays in securing a technical assistance provider have left programs without key guidance and resources while workforce shortages continue to threaten the stability of the sector.

We believe that this year's budget can help chart a path towards a strong foundation, enabling expansive access to

high-quality, well-supported after-school programs by doing three things.

Firstly, we want to see an allocation of an additional $180 million to expand LEAPS. About $155 million of that would provide support to applicants that were eligible but not funded under the program, and also about $25 million to help restore access to after-school support for middle- and high school students.

Currently we know that about a third of eligible applicants receive funding, leaving about 48,000 youth who could benefit from after-school programs without access.

I secondly want to see the dedication of $5 million for school-age childcare and after-school quality supports through the network and our critical position as the statewide after-school network.

And then, thirdly, we echo the call to establish a permanent childcare workforce compensation fund to ensure after-school professionals receive fair wages and career development opportunities.

We know after-school, summer, and expanded learning programs are a lifeline for families and communities alike.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. O'CONNOR: Good afternoon. Raising New York is the statewide coalition that focuses on children age zero to five and their families.

These are our four top priorities.

Number one, ensure that the state adopts the recommendations of the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council. While we support all of the CPRAC recommendations, we're most focused on the child tax credit. We're excited about the Governor's proposal, but would like to see that be made permanent and include children up to age 18. And the north star will be the Working Families Tax Credit.

Our second priority is provide long-term sustainable investments in the childcare sector. Shanita said that better than I can, so I'm not going to repeat what

she said.

But I will tell you that members of the Child Care Availability Task Force, which I sat on for seven years, sent a letter just yesterday to the Governor and to legislative leadership urging them to address the workforce issue, which was the task force's number-one recommendation.

We strongly support school-age childcare and the New York State Network for Success. I won't repeat what Trudy just had to say.

Number three is ensure that all families have access to comprehensive maternal and child health programs, services and supports. To that effect, we are highly supportive of the Birth Allowance for Beginning Year -- BABY -- benefit. We just hope to see that increased and extended to 18 months postpartum, as opposed to just a one-time payment at birth.

We were also pleased to see the Baby2Baby newborn baby box initiative included in the Executive Budget, but this

leads me to our disappointment that there is no increase in home visiting, particularly the ParentChild+ program, and no move toward a universal, voluntary home visiting program.

In order for proposals like Baby2Baby to be successful, one-on-one human interaction in the form of research-based home visits are necessary. The state should pair the proposed initiative with strategic investments in home visiting, including restoration of 200,000 and an increase of 300,000 for ParentChild+.

Finally, number four is to increase early literacy. We are thrilled with the $7 million investment in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. We ask that that be paired with a $3 million investment in the Reach Out and Read Program to serve 95 waitlisted clinics across the state.

And since I have 48 seconds left, I will say that, again in terms of childcare, we had a call with some folks in New York City last week; they have a $240 million funding gap based on the fact that they

implemented the market rate and expanded eligibility. We need to make good on those promises and help New York City pay for those slots.

Thank you.

MS. ANDERSON: Hi, everyone. I'm Dona Anderson. I'm the executive director of the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute. We are located at the City University of New York.

I'm really excited to be here with all my colleagues and those who have presented earlier today, and I'm happy to say that I'm here to bring some good news.

New York has been really smart about how it has invested in childcare. And three of the systems that New York has invested in have smartly -- and that my organization has the honor to be able to operate -- really has laid the foundation for all the things that we've been talking about here today. So I want to highlight a few of those here first.

So first of all, I want to talk about the Aspire Registry. This is New York

State's early childhood workforce registry. This is an online platform. It's a data system that already exists, that already is utilized by a majority of childcare centers in our state and a number of our family and home-based centers, as well as some of our after-school programs.

And this is really the statewide system that offers a lot of information about what the workforce does, who they are, what kind of experience in education they have, and where there are areas of opportunity to improve.

And so working in conjunction with our CCR&R partners, we see this as a vital part of a substitute pool in the future. This is building on infrastructure that already exists. We are a statewide system that then augments the very local work that CCR&Rs are going to be able to do in this space. So it's thrilling to know that New York was smart enough to really start investing in that system 10 years ago.

The other system that I want to talk

about today is QUALITYstarsNY. This is our state's quality rating and improvement system for early childhood programs. We currently serve almost 2,000 programs across all different modalities, centers, school-based programs, home-based programs and others, including 4410 programs.

And this -- and what we are looking to do is of course expand this. QUALITYstarsNY works very closely with the director, the program leader, to measure their impact and to look at their own quality and how to improve that.

And one of the things that QUALITYstarsNY does, along with Aspire, is really provides not only a way to improve quality, it also provides a way for programs to be accountable and for you to hold us accountable and programs accountable for the significant public investment that you are making through the CCAP, through pre-K and 3-K, through all the public investments that these programs receive. These are the systems that help to really keep them

accountable and help improve their quality.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Assemblyman Hevesi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for your testimony. I appreciate it.

Ms. Ryan -- I'm just going to go down the list -- that was really, really helpful to hear that provider experience. And that can't be specific just to the Adirondacks, that's all across the state. And listen, when you're sitting here and telling us that the system just doesn't work, we're listening. So we very much appreciate that.

Trudy, it's good to see you. I have a couple of questions for you, if I can, about the LEAPS program.

So when the conversion to LEAPS happened, obviously -- not obviously -- OCFS focused on elementary school kids. Earlier today the commissioner of OCFS said they're about to put out an RFP to catch other kids, I think it was about 3,000 kids, that we

didn't get before.

Yet in your testimony you mention that that would cost, I think, 25 million. Am I right or wrong about that? So how is OCFS putting out an RFP without any money behind it?

MS. TETTEH: Thank you so much, Assemblymember, for that question.

So this 25 million is actually based on our calculations of how many students, middle- and high school students, were served by Advantage After School. We didn't have the data for Empire State After School Program. And then based on the information we had, it seemed about 35 percent were served -- 35 percent of the program served middle- and high school students.

So based on that number, we would have come to that $25 million or so.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: That's great. I appreciate that.

I'm going to move on to Ms. O'Connor. And Ms. O'Connor, just -- it's good to see you.

If I'm hearing you correctly, the Assembly should reject any assistance for literacy and reject the Dolly Parton Library, is --

MS. O'CONNOR: (Inaudible.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: No, absolutely. Just kidding.

Could you talk to me about home visiting for a second?

MS. O'CONNOR: I can talk to you about home visiting. I can talk about home visiting all day.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Now that I threw you off a little bit, we are completely for the Dolly Parton Library, just saying.

MS. O'CONNOR: (Inaudible.)

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: But yeah, home visiting.

MS. O'CONNOR: Home visiting. Home visiting improves health outcomes, it increases school readiness, it decreases child abuse and neglect. There are a couple of research-based programs across the state -- Healthy Families New York,

ParentChild+ and Nurse-Family Partnership. ParentChild+ sits at this table, so that's why we're talking about it here.

ParentChild+ actually goes into, on a voluntary basis, into homes to work with families, but also goes into home-based childcare programs to work with providers. And its focus is on early literacy, so we're a big fan of that.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Great. Thanks for bearing with me.

And Ms. Anderson, I'd like to -- we have no time, but I'd like to talk to you offline about the Aspire Registry and how we can maximize the use of that existing resource. We haven't really given that a ton of thought, so I'd love to brainstorm with you.

MS. ANDERSON: I'm happy to set up a conversation at any time. We have a lot of data and a lot opportunity.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Cool. Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senator?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

I was worried that the Assemblymember was going to steal my thunder; I had some questions about the Aspire Registry as well. But I'm very interested and I'm curious if you could expand on it more for us, tell us, you know, how many providers or actually childcare workers are currently registered there versus how many are in the workforce in general, and if there are -- what barriers you may see to having additional providers register with it.

MS. ANDERSON: So the Aspire Registry is the state's workforce registry, as I mentioned. The coverage, we have about 70 percent of licensed childcare centers represented in the registry. Our home-based providers are a little bit lower; we've got about 11 percent of family childcare providers and 17 percent of group family childcare providers.

But statewide, all across the state.

We've made significant improvements in

the last year to make it easier to get into Aspire and to utilize Aspire. There's now an app. It makes it just a lot easier, especially for folks who are on the go, to access what they need to access, to upload documents and really be able to utilize all the tools that are there as part of that.

We have about 40,000 users altogether. That includes not only childcare-serving folks but also trainers, coaches, a lot of these additional folks that are necessary, that are supports for our childcare providers, to make sure that they are qualified to do their jobs, that they have the proper education and backgrounds to be able to do that important work as well.

And of course always happy to speak more with you about the opportunities that might be provided.

But I will say we're doing some really exciting stuff around how to connect data systems behind the scenes so that it makes it as easy as possible for the end-user, for our childcare owners and operators and workforce

to be able to use the system, and that they are really reducing the administrative burden that's required.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you so much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: I guess I just have a question for Ms. Ryan.

Are you advocating that the requirements for newbie daycare are too stringent or too expensive and it's pricing people out? Because I -- it sounded like you're saying that it was really expensive to start doing daycare.

I mean, I'm thinking back when my son was born and we had what was called back then a babysitter, and it was $25 a weekend. You know, she did fine but she had three kids and they were all in the same little room. Now, she couldn't do that. You need so many square feet, you need so much recreation, you have to have a certain kind of food.

So I know there are a lot of requirements that are there, but those are all supposedly for the safety and well-being of the individual, of the young people. So

that's one of the reasons that it costs $23,000 and up for childcare now.

But your testimony sounded like you were saying that it was overbearing for people that are living in the Adirondacks.

MS. RYAN: Although there are -- those are the barriers that exist, what I think I really want you all to leave today with is that we need to support the workforce providing the care and the education so that they're willing to jump through those hoops and stay in the career and the business so that they can grow and they can expand, they can access QUALITYstarsNY, they can provide, you know, continual service and education for the children in our region.

And so it's worthwhile for them to make that time and financial investment for themselves and for the community.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay, thank you.

Senator?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: No, we're good.

Thank you very much. Appreciate your work.

PANEL MEMBERS: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: I call Panel G: Albany Damien Center; Legal Services Access Alliance; SAGE; and Good Shepherd Services.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Are we missing anyone else who's here for this panel?

Nice to see you, Nic.

MS. RANGEL: Nice to see you. I know so many people. Hello, everyone.

(Laughter.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: For the record, one of those people was our counsel until recently.

MS. RANGEL: Yes. Hi, everybody.

Let us know when we can start.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Would you first introduce yourselves so that they know at the booth which is which?

MR. COOK: Sure. Bryan Ellicott-Cook, SAGE.

MS. RANGEL: Nic Rangel, executive director of Legal Aid Society for Northeastern New York.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Welcome the two of you. Ladies first.

MS. RANGEL: If I can be called such.

(Laughter.)

MS. RANGEL: Hello. I've been here all day. So have you. It's really wonderful to be here, Senators and Assemblymembers and esteemed colleagues. I just introduced myself; I'm Nic Rangel, I'm the executive director at LASNNY.

LASNNY's service area covers 30 percent of upstate New York, from Columbia County to Canada and the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation.

Today I'm here as a board member for the Legal Services Access Alliance. The Alliance is grateful for the opportunity to speak at this legislative budget hearing today.

We are a membership association that represents seven of the largest providers of free civil legal services outside of New York City and includes Neighborhood Legal Services, Legal Assistance of Western

New York, Legal Services of Central New York, Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York, Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York, Legal Services of Hudson Valley, and Legal Services of Long Island. All but one of us are grantees of the Legal Services Corporation, which is an independent 501(c)(3) led by a bipartisan board of directors at the federal level.

We collectively serve every county outside of New York City, and we employ over 900 legal service workers.

We are deeply grateful for the Governor's continued commitment of $35 million in her Executive Budget for the Eviction Prevention Housing Stability Program, through the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, OTDA. This vital program provides essential legal services and representation for eviction cases outside of New York City.

Further, the Legislature's additional appropriation of $15 million last year to expand this program throughout New York State

has helped bridge funding gaps when other pandemic-related sources have dried up.

And it's working. This program, through its various iterations since the first tranche of ERAP, has drastically expanded access to civil legal services across the state, helping keep more people in place by preventing evictions while also distributing millions in rent arrears and rent assistance. This helps keep rental units affordable and prevents foreclosures as well.

In fact, over 100,000 people have been served in the 57 counties outside of New York City with this program. Over 43,000 cases have been closed by Alliance members or their subcontractors. More than 325 jobs have been created. Though some positions remain difficult to fill and the vicarious trauma of eviction work contributes to issues of turnover, we are still very glad that we've been able to expand our services with so many new positions.

Six collaborations and partnerships

have been created with New York law schools to recruit and train new lawyers in housing defense and eviction law. We've created 35 paid legal internships that help to cultivate a more diverse and robust pipeline of civil legal service providers.

Twenty-five subcontractors have been engaged to further broaden services to tenants, and we've developed a statewide toll-free number including an intake portal to increase access for legal representation to tenants.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. RANGEL: Of course.

MR. ELLICOTT-COOK: I guess it's good evening, I guess. My name is Bryan Ellicott-Cook. I am the director of government relations at SAGE.

On behalf of SAGE and the LGBTQ+ elders and older adults living with HIV whom we serve, thank you to the members of both the Senate and the Assembly for holding this hearing today and providing a platform for

SAGE to present our state budget priorities.

Just to highlight, we are asking for the 650K of continued funding and 450K of new funding, given the attacks against TGNB and immigrant communities that we are seeing under the current presidential administration.

I'm going to keep this really short. My testimony's on the record.

I wanted to thank Senator Jessica Scarcella-Spanton, as a born and raised Staten Islander, for her dedication to the SAGEVets program. It's a program that I was the program manager of up until eight months ago. I come from a military and veteran family, and that program has saved lives of LGBTQ+ veterans, not only through discharge upgrades but by making sure that they are connected to the services that they sometimes distrust. That is the essential component of the SAGEVets program.

That is the same essential components that are part of our SAGEPositive program and our SAGETrans program. And we know now more

than ever than older adults of trans and nonbinary experience are going to go through hardships where they distrust our state and federal governments, and they're going to need folks like me to stand up for them, which means I need funding from all of you to make that happen.

I don't think I need to explain to any of you right now the attacks against LGBTQ+ people and that New Yorkers are scared. However, we know by evidence -- like last week, there was a bunch of you with me outside NYU that we are committed to keeping LGBTQ+ New Yorkers safe, whether they are young or aging.

So I wanted to say thank you for your support, and I welcome any questions. It's been a long day.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: I have one quick question. Do you have -- in your legal services, do you deal with undocumented individuals?

MS. RANGEL: So LSC-funded programs are prohibited under federal regulation from

serving undocumented individuals.

However, the state's Eviction Prevention funding has allowed us to subcontract with providers specifically for the provision of eviction services to undocumented households. And our program and all of the other ERAP recipients have done exactly that.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay. And do you get any direct federal funding?

MS. RANGEL: Yes. About 12 percent of my budget and a larger percent for other LSC programs receive federal funding. And in fact part of really why this funding at the state level is so crucial is that some of our state programs -- I'm sorry, some of our federal programs like HUD are subject to the funding freeze evaluations and could be at risk of being cut in the near future.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: And I guess if you lost that federal funding it would be devastating to your organization.

MS. RANGEL: Absolutely. Many organizations would shutter, would have to

end some of their very crucial programs. some of those programs include HIV/AIDS legal services. Again, I mentioned HUD programming, which is a right-to-counsel funding stream at the federal level. Potentially some of our domestic violence work, which does serve people who are undocumented.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: So, Mr. Cook, same questions to you. She said 12 percent of their budget comes from federal money. What percentage of federal money goes to your organization?

MR. ELLICOTT-COOK: I'd have to get back to you on that. But I can look into it and get back to you. We've already had one of our programs suspended. But a great deal of our HIV work is done through the Ryan White funding. So that's a big component of that.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Well, that's federal money --

MR. ELLICOTT-COOK: Yeah, exactly. But I don't have a percentage for you. I'm a

bad numbers guy.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Senate?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Also, I want to thank you both for your work. I know your organization, SAGE. I've known the legal services world and Nic Rangel forever.

Bryan, I know how hard this is if you are LGBTQ in this country at this moment. And yes, no doubt you're not going to get government money -- federal money. That might be the least bad thing that would happen, to be fair.

But I just want to remind everyone, we passed a constitutional amendment that went into effect in January that we're not allowed to discriminate against people based on their LGBTQ status. And it doesn't matter what the federal government says, we are still not allowed to discriminate against people in the State of New York.

So on a personal note I'm telling every LGBTQ family member and friend who lives in any other state in the country, come

to New York. We're still welcoming. We're still open to everybody coming.

And guess what, we usually just work everything out and live in peace here in New York, and that's my goal for us in the future. So I know it's going to be really tough going, but I think it's also really important that we do all stand together and that we make it clear this is New York. This doesn't happen here.

So thank you both for your work.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: I have a late entry: Assemblywoman Simon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: So thank you both for your testimony.

Bryan, thank you. It's great to see you here with SAGE, which is an organization I certainly have supported throughout the years.

Do you have any sense of the increasing numbers of seniors with HIV who would be more likely to seek your services going forward, particularly if we have federal cuts?

MR. ELLICOTT-COOK: So I believe, according to the data I have from my -- there's like up to 30 -- 36 percent new HIV cases amongst the state of people over the age of 50. And that's mostly because until recently you couldn't -- your primary care physician did not encourage you to get tested.

So yes, rates are going up. But I would say people who are living with HIV are living longer, which means they are in need of services for longer. So we are happy that people are living longer lives. However, they will need medications and services for longer.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Thank you.

And Ms. Rangel, just curious about retention of attorneys. One of the concerns I have had, and have recommended, of course, is to expand the student loan repayment program. Are the legal services attorneys with your organization similarly affected by that?

MS. RANGEL: Yes, of course. So we've

been working with groups like Empire Justice Center on counseling law students and undergrad students on loan repayment options if the Public Service Forgiveness Program is eliminated.

LASNNY and many legal service programs and LSC itself provide reimbursement to people who are making payments on their student loans. It does have to be after the payment's been made. But we're trying to help bridge that gap.

We do use funding from many sources, and I would say that supporting additional funding for IOLA is one way that we are bridging the salary gaps to help ensure that we're paying student loans but also that we're paying competitive wages.

And we would respectfully request that the Legislature add $2.5 million in funding to IOLA to continue the work that we're doing with IOLA on the Justice Infrastructure Program and many other programs that IOLA's supporting at the state level that's helping us with some of these federal challenges.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SIMON: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

MS. RANGEL: Of course. Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Brisport.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you both for being here and all the work you do. And Bryan, it's just such an incredible honor to represent the SAGE Center that's located in Brooklyn.

I was curious, in addition to your budgetary request, I know this is a budget hearing but are there any other legislative suggestions that you're looking at for what we should be doing in this new era that we are in?

MR. ELLICOTT-COOK: So we are part of the coalition for the Compassionate Care Act, around death with dignity, which I'm sure they spoke about yesterday in the Health hearing.

And we are also looking at a long-term home-based community bill of rights. We know that last year the Legislature passed the

Healthcare Bill of Rights, which was quite expansive.

However, given the state of how things are looking in the federal government, even though Senator Krueger did say that we here have Prop 1 and all the things that came in the Constitution with that, we are seeing a spike in fear when it comes to LGBTQ+ older adults having folks come into their home to even do like plumbing changes, adding grab bars to your shower. People are fearful of what it looks like for an LGBTQ+ person to invite someone into your home to do contracted work.

SENATOR BRISPORT: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Romero.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ROMERO: Thank you, Chair.

I don't have a question, but I'd be remiss if I didn't shout out Nic for the incredible work that you've been doing. Nic's a constituent of mine, and I just wanted to really thank you for the intense

work in legal services that you've been doing.

You're not necessarily within my practice area, but I've seen you as an attorney shine and be such a great leader and mentor for other attorneys. And it's really wonderful to see another attorney be a mentor like that and really shine and help other attorneys.

And it's great to see you here testifying and, you know, waiting all day. So thank you for the work that you're doing in the legal field. Thank you for the people that you're helping every single day.

And thank you for waiting all day to testify and for helping us kind of do the work that we are doing as legislators and guiding us in the work as we work through this budget. Thank you.

MS. RANGEL: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: And thank you both for your testimony, and this concludes Panel G. I am now calling Panel H.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you very much for your testimony.

Panel H: Supportive Housing Network of New York; New Destiny Housing; Immigration Law and Justice of New York; United Neighborhood Houses; and Essential Care Visitor.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Is Hunger Solutions New York here? Do you want to join this panel? Okay.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Just to double-check, if there's anyone else here who thinks they're scheduled to testify, come down, please.

(Off the record.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Okay, could everyone please introduce yourselves so the people in the booth know which names to put up? So I guess starting from my right.

MR. HEALY: Hi, everyone. Ryan Healy, advocacy manager, Feeding New York State.

MS. ZANGEN: Rebecca Zangen, chief

policy officer, Supportive Housing Network of New York.

MS. REQUENA: Gabriela Sandoval Requena, New Destiny Housing.

MS. HESDORFER: Krista Hesdorfer, director of public affairs at Hunger Solutions New York.

MS. GOHEEN: I'm Marcella Goheen, founder, Essential Care Visitor dot-com, and wife of Robert Victor Viteri, who resides in a nursing (mic out) -- nursing home (loudly).

(Laughter.)

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you, and welcome all. You can start wherever you wish to start.

MS. ZANGEN: Okay, let's go. Well, thank you, Chairs Krueger and Pretlow. My name's Rebecca Zangen. I'm the chief policy officer of the Supportive Housing Network of New York.

When we talk about how supportive housing can meet New York's housing and homelessness crises, we need to focus on two tracks: First, building new housing, and

second, ensuring the existing stock remains safe and stays open.

Regarding the existing stock, let's talk about NYSSHP, the New York State Supportive Housing Program, which we heard about earlier today. NYSSHP touches over 20,000 units of supportive housing statewide. Nine thousand of those units are dangerously underfunded. So the commissioner spoke about that this morning. They receive no other source of social service funding, so only 2900 per unit per year for individuals and 3900 to serve families, compared to modern programs like ESSHI that start at $25,000.

The commissioner spoke about some of those other sources, and she mentioned New York City funding. Some of the 11,000 units that receive additional funding in NYSSHP also could receive state contracts like OMH or OASAS, but that leaves those 9,000 units with no other sources of funding. So those are the ones that we really want to focus on.

And the commissioner also mentioned

that NYSSHP was not designed to provide operating funds, but that doesn't mean that those programs don't need them. So we have found 7,000 units that have no dedicated operating stream, which puts those programs at serious risk.

We're very grateful the Governor acknowledged the need with an additional $17.8 million in her budget. However, it's not enough. We are asking the Senate and Assembly to meet that need at a more impactful scale, including $32 million in their one-house budgets and passing the Supportive Housing Modernization Act, led by Senator Cleare, who was here earlier, and Assemblyman Hevesi. Thank you so much. And sponsored by you, Senator Krueger, Assemblymember Romero, Assemblymember Simon. Thank you so much.

The legislation calls for a five-year plan to save the most underfunded NYSSHP programs and would also enable OTDA to issue a new RFP to specifically target those programs.

Here's just two examples of the programs that are most at risk, of the many we've collected. So right here in Albany, there are two buildings that serve 96 formerly homeless adults. The buildings are a hundred years old, facing underfunded staffing and dangerous building conditions, and they're at risk of being sold at market rate and have received an offer from a market-rate developer.

In New York City, Senator Krueger, I know you're very familiar with the Woodstock Hotel. It's a 120-year-old building serving almost 300 low-income and formerly homeless seniors, with a case management ratio of 1:48. They have significant capital needs and dwindling reserves.

I should mention that 65 percent of NYSSHP tenants are older adults, so it's also de facto senior housing.

And I have much more in my written testimony.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

MS. REQUENA: Good evening, Chair

Pretlow, Chair Krueger, members of the State Legislature. Thank you for holding this long but important budget hearing and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of New Destiny Housing.

My name is Gabriela Sandoval Requena. I'm the director of policy and communications at New Destiny. New Destiny is the only organization in New York that's solely focused on permanent housing solutions for survivors of domestic violence.

We implemented the first rapid rehousing program for survivors in New York City, and we're also the largest provider of supportive housing for those New Yorkers impacted by domestic violence in the state.

Why do we do this work? First, because domestic violence is the main driver of family homelessness in New York City, pushing more families into shelter than evictions. Because one in three New Yorkers across the state will experience abuse by an intimate partner in their lifetime. And because access to a safe and affordable home

often determines whether survivors leave their abuser and stay alive.

We submitted extensive written testimony, so I'd like to spend this time focusing on our number-one priority: That is, protecting domestic violence survivors living in the New York State Supportive Housing Program, or NYSSHP.

New Destiny operates five NYSSHP buildings, with a total of 177 homes for adults and children who survived the double trauma of abuse and homelessness. NYSSHP is supposed to fund basic case management and security, but it falls tragically short. The program provides $3,900 per family per year, which for New Destiny translates to about 91,000 per building.

So simply put, NYSSHP covers, essentially, one case manager and zero building security for buildings where we have domestic violence survivors. If New Destiny relied on NYSSHP only to provide 24-hour security and three case managers to maintain the generally accepted case management ratio

of 15:1, our staff would earn $5.51 per hour, which is a third of the minimum wage.

Like the other nonprofits that have NYSSHP contracts across the state, we are forced to constantly fundraise to try to bridge the gap and pay staff a livable wage and benefits -- yet it's impossible to make up the difference.

The shortfall leaves NYSSHP staff chronically underpaid, and domestic violence survivors unsafe and without the services needed to recover from the trauma.

New Destiny's grateful that the Governor included 17 million for NYSSHP in her budget proposal. However, it's not enough. We urge the Assembly and the Senate to increase NYSSHP funding by 32 million and to pass the Supportive Housing Modernization Act.

On behalf of New Destiny, again, thank you for the opportunity to testify, and happy to answer any questions.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. HESDORFER: 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, Summer EBT, and other child nutrition programs.

SNAP is our nation's largest anti-hunger program, providing monthly food benefits to more than 2.9 million New Yorkers. For nearly 40 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.

NOEP is a network of SNAP navigators based in community organizations across the state. These navigators help low-income New Yorkers determine if they may be eligible for SNAP and provide a helping hand through every step of the application process.

For the last two years, the Legislature has allocated an additional $2 million in NOEP funding to expand services

in high-need areas. Thanks to your investment, NOEP has added 24 new SNAP navigators and has reached more than 163,000 New Yorkers each year, providing an estimated 25-to-1 return on investment to the state.

Unfortunately that added funding is not sustained in the 2026 Executive Budget, and if it's restored, NOEP will be forced to scale back at a time when families are struggling to put food on the table. Seventeen counties across the state could see reductions or a total loss of NOEP services.

To sustain SNAP navigators statewide, we ask the Legislature to restore $2 million in NOEP funding, for a total of $5.624 million.

We also join many of our colleagues in supporting the $100 minimum SNAP benefit. Providing a more adequate minimum benefit would increase participation in SNAP and support food security for our seniors and people with disabilities.

We also urge the Legislature to establish a state fund to replace SNAP

benefits when families are the victims of EBT skimming and to ensure OTDA has sufficient funding to support a transition to EBT cards with enhanced security.

And finally, I'd be remiss not to mention universal school meals. Though it falls outside of the human services budget, it is a critical anti-hunger investment. We're thrilled Governor Hochul included full funding in her Executive Budget, and now we call on all of our lawmakers, including the long-time champions in this room, to make sure that that investment gets across the finish line.

Our written testimony notes several other priorities, from Summer EBT funding to SNAP for All. Together, these strategic investments can support food security for all New Yorkers. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MS. GOHEEN: Hello. Marcella Goheen, founder of Essential Care Visitor dot-com, and wife of Robert Victor Viteri, who is a resident in a long-term-care-facility nursing

home for -- we're on our ninth year.

In our testimony we highlight the need for innovative care infrastructures on the frontline amidst the devastating reality of a clear financial care war as the solution for the owners and the State Legislature and the DOH, who duke it out over what can constitute safe staffing. We have lived as long-haulers a magnificent journey through COVID of what nursing homes could be and what they are now, with little improvements and only a frustrating care gridlock that my husband daily depends on. He's nonverbal. He's a neurodegenerative 70-year-old who Mayor Adams just gave him actually -- I think he's the only nursing home resident in New York State that has a day named after him -- July 1, 2025, Robert Victor Viteri Day -- as a nursing home resident who advocates.

He worked in disability for 30 years. I am his voice.

It's care crumbs on the frontlines, and it's devastating. I'm going to keep it simple. I sat on four workgroups for the

Master Plan for Aging. I kept mentioning the word "nursing home," "nursing home," "nursing home," and it was dead silence. And that devastated me -- on the anniversary of five years of COVID, for all of Bob's resident mates who we lost. He was a miracle.

And it's 1:38, and it's an odd life that I live. I never thought I'd be in this position. But there is a solution, and I have hope.

And one of those solutions is a program that I've engineered and I'm delighted to let you know that the NYSOFA office and the Association of Aging has given us pilot money to navigate a Family Essential program, which I'm on my 11th week. And I'm here to tell you there is a need.

And you talk about the ombudsman program; nobody knows about it. What we do at Family Essential is we advocate, we educate, and we collaborate. And we navigate. It's a model of a peer-to-peer, and we work with a provider. And we answer questions for the families in several

different ways, and we help them get to the next step.

We had a win last week where two families were matched up, and they were able to be directed to the Nursing Home Diversion Community Program to get them into the community. You know, families on the frontlines don't know about any of the services. That's one thing being on the Master Plan for Aging. I'm a lucky person. I read a lot and I'm a word person, so I love words.

And I would ask the State Legislature to invest, both sides -- by the way, it's an honor to be here. There's $200 million you're saying that you were going to allocate to hospice and assisted living. Those should not just be capital dollars. They should be innovative programmatic infrastructures that are transformative.

And when I say transformative, I just don't mean programmatic. You know, my mom was just saved in Indiana by an iWatch. She fell in her bathroom in an assisted living,

and it saved her life. We got there before the nursing home people even knew she fell.

So I'll finish with we can do better. And I look forward to working with you. I want to meet with every one of you and show you our program so you can give us $500,000.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

MR. HEALY: And thank you to the chairs, ranking members, Senators and Assemblymembers for the opportunity to provide remarks. On behalf of our network of food banks and over 3,000 community-based partners, we're grateful for the chance to share our perspective.

To start, New York State has made significant progress in recent years on the issue of food insecurity. Two years ago the state budget expanded free school meals for over 350,000 kids. Last year our state opted into Summer EBT and increased funding for statewide hunger relief programs. This is excellent.

And this year we're encouraged to see

Governor Hochul's support for universal free school meals for all New York kids, an expansion to the state's Child Tax Credit, both of which would have a tremendous impact for New York families.

The truth is, however, we've a lot more work to do. Building off Governor Hochul's efforts to create a more affordable state, we need to make sure that every New Yorker participating in SNAP receives a benefit of at least a hundred dollars per month.

Despite the program's success in helping New York families afford a more nutritious and well-rounded diet, far too many New Yorkers receive inadequate benefit amounts. Ask yourself -- go to the grocery store today -- what can you afford with $23, the federal minimum benefit? And ask yourself would that sustain you for an entire month. The answer is of course no.

Guaranteeing a $100 SNAP minimum would raise benefits for about 110,000 New Yorkers. These individuals are typically older adults

making $16,000 per year, over a quarter of whom are actively participating in SSI, receiving disability assistance.

As Krista mentioned earlier, low benefit amounts are often cited as a major barrier for SNAP participation, suggesting that a higher minimum benefit could draw down more federal dollars into our state.

This initiative has strong bipartisan support in both the Assembly and Senate.

At its core, though, this issue is a matter of dignity for New Yorkers struggling to afford food. In addition to raising the SNAP minimum, vital nutrition benefits must be accessible for all New Yorkers regardless of their immigration status. This is a recommendation provided by CPRAC, the state's Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council. We fully agree. Immigrant New Yorkers contribute over $27 billion each year in state and local taxes. The very least we can do is ensure that monthly food benefits are available to all.

Additionally, we support a series of

other food and nutrition priorities such as fully funding HPNAP and Nourish NY at 75 million, restoring the $2 million legislative add-on to support the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program, replacing benefits for victims of SNAP skimming, and upgrading EBT card security for SNAP participants. Each of these initiatives are cost-effective ways to guarantee food is a basic human right.

And of course ending hunger and poverty will require bold action beyond food and nutrition programs. We need to ensure living wages for all workers, address the worsening housing crisis, and guarantee healthcare for all New Yorkers as a basic human right. Lot more to do beyond that.

But today our state can meaningfully address hunger and food insecurity through these investments and initiatives.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you.

Assemblyman Hevesi.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you,

everyone on the panel. I appreciate it.

I'm going to keep this relatively brief, although it's a little too late for that.

Mr. Healy and Ms. Hesdorfer, thank you for your comments on food insecurity. Very much appreciate it. We have certainly more work to do.

Ms. Goheen, I look forward to meeting with you to learn about the program and nobody gets points for subtlety here, so I'm grateful for your presentation, so thank you very much.

And Ms. Requena and Ms. Zangen, I want to end with you, if I can. So my limited understanding of supportive housing, from our friend Steve who's sitting behind you, is that New York State invented supportive housing in the 1970s. Groundbreaking. You provide a very simple idea -- provide services with housing.

But now it seems that a significant portion of our housing stock is just housing stock, and it doesn't provide the services.

Can you call the 7,000 units actually supportive housing anymore if they're not providing the services that we need like security or other services that these people need? And if it's not supportive housing, please, again, reiterate what we need to do to get it back to the gold standard supportive housing that New York deserves.

MS. ZANGEN: Well, I would say that we have an incredible community of nonprofit providers, like New Destiny and others, that pretty much scrape and scrounge and do whatever they can to meet the basic needs of their tenants.

But no, it's not living up to the standards that I think we as New Yorkers should be held to. We should be leading, as we did when we created supportive housing in the 1980s. And so I think the Supportive Housing Modernization Act -- thank you so much for introducing that -- is what we need to do in order to really bring those most at risk, most underfunded -- really, they're in a previous generation. Right? This is not

what we today in New York are building and calling supportive housing.

And I think one of the risks is as we're building new housing, the community pushback we get. And if people look at NYSSHP and say, Well, this is falling apart and there's no security here and I don't want this in my -- why is New York continuing to invest in this going forward -- that's a huge risk.

So I think the Supportive Housing Modernization Act and investing with $32 million in the first year of a five-year plan. I will say the 17.8 million in the Executive Budget is great and it is the largest investment they've put into the program in decades. But it would take us much longer than five years at that rate to bring us up to modern standards. I think that's too long to wait.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

MS. REQUENA: And if I can just add. So in our buildings in particular, we are able to provide some security, so we've been

able to identify the most at-risk hours. But it's just simply not enough, and it doesn't meet the promise of what supportive housing should be.

But we trust that with the support of the Assembly and the Senate, we'll get there.

ASSEMBLYMAN HEVESI: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Murray.

SENATOR MURRAY: Thank you, Chairwoman.

And thank you all for being here. I want to say a specific thank you to Krista and Ryan for all of your efforts, especially with the universal free meals. I know how hard you worked on that, and I think this is the year we're going to get this done. It's well -- well past due.

And it was interesting earlier today talking to the director of Aging that I kind of didn't think about it, but found another group that benefits from it, and that is some of the seniors who are the primary caregivers for their children -- their grandchildren. So it's beneficial all the way around, I

completely agree.

I also agree with increasing the amount of SNAP from 23 to 100. I think 23's ridiculous. But I have a concern about doing it right now before we fix the problem of the chip technology and the security. We all know the fix is the chip technology. We know that.

And then when I learned last night in doing research -- and what I further found out today about the fact that the Department of Labor's already using it. The New York State Department of Labor is already using the chip technology. Why we don't have it in place -- I don't think the effort's been made like it should be.

I think we can do it. I think we can do it right now. And I worry about increasing the amount right now when we have people stealing the funds. I worry about setting up a fund to replace the funds when we have the people stealing the funds, rather than fixing the problem.

I don't mind either one of those

proposals -- once we fix the problem. But I'm concerned about us just benefiting the criminals more than we should right now when I feel like the fix is right -- right there within our reach.

It's more of a statement, but I just -- I feel like we're right there. I'm supportive of everything you're saying. But we have to fix the problem, and I'm not convinced that we can't do it immediately, this year. We've got to roll up our sleeves and make that our number-one priority.

I also wanted to touch on one thing regarding domestic violence and housing the victims. This may be a little off-track, but I want to talk about animal care and the fact that one of the big issues is are you finding it a problem, the fact that many of the shelters, many of the places do not -- you cannot take the animals with you. And many times people will stay in a bad situation because they don't want to leave their animal. And I understand that completely.

How can we fix that? What can we do?

I mean, I understand the limitations, but do we need to put more focus on this? Anyone.

MR. HEALY: I'll just jump in and say Senator, I hear your concern around SNAP skimming. And I think it's not one or the other, I think it's to do all of these. Right?

We do need to improve the card security for the nearly 3 million New Yorkers participating, right? And at the same time we also need to do what other states like New Jersey, New Mexico now have done and say that, you know what, $23 a month is just woefully inadequate.

So I think that you're right to highlight that issue, and we fully agree. We'd love to work together with your office on that. But at the same time I think for New Yorkers currently participating, they deserve more than $23.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblyman Ra.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you, Chair.

I wanted to start with supportive housing. So last week I had a great meeting

with a group that was up for the advocacy day, and one of the great things -- I always tell people, you know, it's never a waste of time when you're here and talking about your circumstances and how the state can better serve you. But it was eye-opening to learn that there's these different -- depending on when these different pieces of this program were founded, that you have way, way out-of-date rates. And to Chair Hevesi's point, how do you provide services if you're getting a rate that's based on almost 40 years ago, it makes zero sense.

So can you talk a little bit about that and how we modernize that system so that we're providing adequate funding so the services can be provided?

MS. ZANGEN: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think that we should be -- we're serving the same population and the expectations of service are the same. And the commissioner spoke to that this morning.

So I think modernizing with the Supportive Housing Modernization Act and just

bringing the rates up to that same level is the way to start.

And the second piece is making sure -- supportive housing requires -- we call it a three-legged stool: Capital to build the housing; operating to basically fill the gap between what the tenant can pay -- because they're very low-income -- and what it costs to run a building; and then the services, which funds the case management, the social services and all the things that people retain their housing when they have special needs or disabilities.

So we need all three of those things, and NYSSHP is only one piece. And we actually have, under HCR -- three years ago the Governor and the Legislature had the foresight to create a supportive housing preservation program, which is capital under HCR. But we can't access it because we don't have the operating funding. We have 7,000 NYSSHP units with no dedicated operating funding. So we're leaving money on the table.

The programs that need that capital the most to actually fix their roofs, fix their boilers, fix their elevators -- add an elevator if they don't have one -- all of those things. They need that more than any other program. They can't access it because they have no operating funding. They can't put it together in a 30-year budget showing cash flow, which is what you need to access that type of capital.

So the Supportive Housing Modernization Act actually also helps us with that capital piece.

I hope I answered your question.

ASSEMBLYMAN RA: Thank you.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Senator Rolison.

SENATOR ROLISON: Thank you, Madam Chair.

This is a question for New Destiny Housing, Gabriela. And thank you for what you're doing in the area of providing housing for domestic violence victims, for families.

And did you say that you're doing work outside of New York City as well, in other

communities? Or --

MS. REQUENA: We are to some degree. So yes.

Our supportive housing program, we have one -- our newest building actually is in Westchester County in New Rochelle. And that is the only project that we have outside of the five boroughs.

And then our rapid rehousing program that only operates within the five boroughs of New York City.

SENATOR ROLISON: So specifically to DV-related housing supports, what would you say the need would be in the five boroughs?

MS. REQUENA: Tremendous, in one word. It's huge. I mean, in order for a survivor to flee abuse, they have to literally become homeless, especially if they're low-income. So they enter the shelter system. In New York City, the emergency shelter system has a six-month cap and then they have to enter a different shelter if they're able to remain in the DV system.

And then they're likely to linger

there for years unless they're able to get a rental assistance program or enter supportive housing. But the supply does not meet the demand.

SENATOR ROLISON: So with your initiatives now in Westchester County, do you have -- again, I know it's very tremendous there too. But do you have any sort of sense of what a number would be with the need for the housing for DV victims and their families?

MS. REQUENA: Well, I don't have -- I can certainly look for more numbers for you.

But for instance, in our building in New Rochelle we have 77 units that are set aside for domestic violence survivors and they're completely full. And we know we have received more applications for those 77 units, so there were some folks unfortunately we had to turn away.

SENATOR ROLISON: Which is unfortunate. But thank you for what you're doing. Is that specific to Westchester as well too, Westchester?

MS. ZANGEN: Yeah.

SENATOR ROLISON: And we could follow up on this, but I would be interested -- because I hadn't heard this number before, and pretty active in that space is -- what's like the statewide number?

MS. REQUENA: Well, just to give you perspective, it's one in -- one of every three New Yorkers in the state will experience intimate partner violence. And chances are that most of them will need some sort of housing support in their journey.

SENATOR ROLISON: Okay, thank you.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Assemblywoman Shimsky.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SHIMSKY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just have one question that's kind of a tip ball for all of you. How would you recommend that we get the word out to people who need your services? What are the best ways to reach out to people?

MS. HESDORFER: So I can jump in here. We have a number of constituent resources,

outreach resources that we'd be happy to share with anyone here and others, to make sure that families in your community know about our SNAP application assistance services, but also programs like summer meals, Summer EBT, WIC, school meals, all of the different resources that are available for folks. So I'd be happy to follow up with that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SHIMSKY: Oh, that would be great.

MS. REQUENA: For New Destiny, we have staff that are collocated in the New York City Family Justice Centers. So there is one Family Justice Center in each borough. Folks can call 311 to be connected directly with a Family Justice Center in their borough, and from there we can service them.

MR. HEALY: I'll just add from Feeding New York State. So we can follow up with your office. We have 10 food banks around the state, 3,000 community-based programs. And so some folks can actually plug in their zip code with their local food bank and find

pantries and emergency feeding programs in their community.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SHIMSKY: And that would be true statewide and not just in the city.

MR. HEALY: That's right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SHIMSKY: Yeah. Okay.

MS. GOHEEN: We're in the city in Long Island, for our pilot, so it's a website and word of mouth and families on the frontline. But just go to our website and you'll see our FEP hub.

MS. ZANGEN: For individuals and families that need access to supportive housing, the entry point is usually the local continuum of care. And -- but unfortunately, you know, the demand for supportive housing just far outstrips the supply. So I know like in New York City there's about 9,000 people with active supportive housing applications waiting to be placed into housing. And then, you know, each continuum of care outside of New York City would kind of manage the application process as well.

But that's the entry point.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SHIMSKY: Okay. Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Senate?

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you.

I think it's just me. So I thank you.

So we actually had another panel on food and hunger last night, so I think a lot of the issues that our two representatives were talking about were issues that we focused on a bit more yesterday, and I think we are familiar with the real concerns out there for the emergency food world.

And frankly, real concerns that the federal government is going to radically reduce eligibility and benefits for SNAP, WIC, other -- school meals program, all the food and nutrition programs we're counting on. So it's pretty scary.

And on supportive housing, which -- I have more supportive housing in my district than I think any other district in the State of New York. And it works great when it works. But if you don't have adequate funding, it doesn't work.

And the thing that you didn't mention but we all know, particularly for those 7,000 units in the old contracts, another thing: Your population are now senior citizens. And so there are additional services and demands because they're folks who might not have been, you know, unhealthy earlier when they first got into your buildings, but are now, and are aging in place. And they're not going anywhere.

So you need that. You certainly need the security. I have visited several of the buildings under the old contract. And I was a little disturbed that the state's statement was, Well, some of them have other funds so we don't have to worry about them.

So just please answer that. One, really, has anybody got like secret cash bank accounts somewhere, you don't need more state money?

(Laughter.)

MS. ZANGEN: Does anybody else want to respond on that?

Well, on that, the additional funding,

NYSSHP would absolutely not have survived if our providers didn't access other contracts. Like it's 1987 rates. You cannot operate for 40 years.

And, you know, frankly many of the providers in the group of 9,000 that don't have other contracts, it's a miracle. You know? It really is a miracle.

So the other -- the other 11,000 that access OMH contracts for supportive housing, OASAS, possibly federal funds for supportive housing, they just did what they had to do to keep their programs open.

So I actually do believe that if we're trying to be really strategic about how we move our portfolio into the future and be a good steward of the state's resources, we should start with those 9,000 units that don't have any other source of funds. Not that the other programs that have multiple sources don't have their own funding challenges, but it's certainly not as dire. So I do want to focus on those that are only NYSSHP.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Right. Okay, thank you. I think that's my last question for now, and it's four seconds to go.

Assemblymember.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: We'll let the four seconds trickle away.

Assemblyman Anderson.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all of you for being here, sticking it out with us through the evening to talk about such important subject matter.

It's good to see two incredible advocates -- well, many incredible advocates in all of you. But I send special congratulations to Ryan and Krista for your successes with getting the school meals. We just have to make sure we push it over the finish line.

So I have two quick questions for the panel. Any of you all can jump in. So I represent the 31st Assembly District and have parts of South Queens and JFK Airport. And I

had an opportunity over the summer two summers ago to tour one of my ESSHI housing developments in my district -- or just outside of the district, but serving individuals who originally had addresses in the district.

Can you share some problems with the program and what the executive proposal that the Governor has put forth does to work to resolve those, given that you guys have a lot of older building stock? That's the first question.

MS. ZANGEN: So ESSHI is the newer program. And, you know, I think overall it has been quite a successful program. You know, the intent is to create 20,000 units over the course of 15 years. We're waiting -- you know, we're about halfway through, waiting for the eighth RFP to come out, and I think they've awarded close to 9,000 units. So, you know, almost half.

I think, you know, we're continuing to make the same mistakes over and over again. Which is they started ESSHI in 2016 with a

rate of $25,000 per unit per year, and then now it's 2025, it's almost nine years later, and there's been no increase to the starting rate.

So, you know, we keep making the same mistakes where we don't -- we don't follow inflation, right? We don't have COLAs.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: So does the Governor's executive proposal which bumps it up to 3100 at least put it on the right track, or is that something will --

MS. ZANGEN: I believe so.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Okay, so that's good to know.

And then just for folks who are watching the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative is just -- I know acronyms are sometimes inaccessible.

MS. ZANGEN: Yeah. Can I add one thing on that?

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: Please.

MS. ZANGEN: So what's good about the Governor's increase is of course that, you know, the starting rate needs to be higher in

order to deal with 2025 costs, right, not 2016 costs.

It doesn't address the older contracts that actually started at 25,000 and only got 2 percent increases. And some of them started out below 25,000 because they were concerned about being competitive. So when they submitted their response to the RFP, they undercut themselves. And even though the contract is only a five-year contract, once it expires there's no opportunity to submit a new budget and say, Now that we know our costs, at least bring us up to what the starting rate is for other new programs.

So the Governor's proposal does not address those older contracts. And I know New Destiny has that.

MS. REQUENA: We have one building.

ASSEMBLYMAN ANDERSON: We'll talk offline. I had a food question, too, so --

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: Thank you very much. And this ends Panel H/I. Hi.

(Laughter.)

PANEL MEMBERS: Thank you. Thank you

very much.

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: I want to thank you all for your testimonies. And I think it's nice weather -- I don't know what's happening out there, people, but anyway, thank you all for coming.

CHAIRWOMAN KRUEGER: Thank you very much.

This hearing is closed?

CHAIRMAN PRETLOW: This hearing is closed, yes.

(Whereupon, at 6:09 p m., the budget hearing concluded.)