

# **Brief Analysis: 2015 Proposed Monroe County Budget**



## ***Introduction***

The Children's Agenda has conducted an initial review and analysis of the 2015 Proposed Monroe County Budget. We have not yet received requested information from the County which we need to complete our full analysis. This document is a summary of our analysis to date as of December 3, 2014. We offer an overview, commendations, recommendations and concerns below.

The proposed 2015 budget is balanced and keeps intact the property tax rate of \$8.99 per \$1000 in assessed value, a rate that has been in place since 2008. The Operating Budget totals just over \$1 billion and the Grant Budget totals \$177.7 million. This represents an increase of \$5.6 M, or 0.5%, over 2014.

To close a forecasted \$31.3 M deficit, the County Executive proposes a mix of cuts and efficiencies. Cuts include:

- Eliminating all County support for child care subsidies for working families beyond what is required by New York State;
- A \$610,000 cut to local funding for Purchase of Service contracts which fund programs designed to prevent child abuse and neglect and out-of-home placements;
- Significant reduction in funding for the Youth and Family Partnership program that provided intensive support to youth with complex needs and their families.

We believe these steps are short-sighted and will cost Monroe County residents more in the future.

## ***Adopt a long-term approach***

We urge County Legislators - now and in the years to come - to take a different approach. Just as the proposed 2015 budget includes multi-year budget forecasting to reduce fiscal deficits, the County should craft a spending plan that incorporates long-term strategies to reduce losses, and create gains, for its children and families in the years ahead. If the proposed 2015 budget is passed without amendment, it represents a lost opportunity in this regard. It will contribute to downstream, more expensive needs for many struggling children and families. The County is creating a balloon payment coming due for taxpayers.

Our local challenges for children and youth demand thoughtful, focused and collective action on the part of every sector of our community and every level of government. This not a city problem - recent reports<sup>1</sup> have revealed growing poverty in Monroe County suburbs. In fact, a July 2014 article in the Rochester Business Journal indicates that there are more residents living in poverty in the suburbs of Monroe County than in the city.<sup>2</sup> The Center for Governmental Research reports that the number of families meeting eligibility guidelines for income-based child care subsidies grew 52% in Irondequoit, 31% in Henrietta and 17% in Greece between 2000 and 2012.

We commend local leaders – from the City of Rochester, Rochester City School District, Monroe County, local funders and service providers – who have committed to several initiatives such as ROC the Future that will foster alignment of goals and resources to tackle the difficult issues facing our children. A critical and commendable step toward this goal occurred in October 2014 with County Executive Brooks' participation in intergovernmental, public/private, annual State of Our Children joint address. We urge County leaders to deepen their support in these efforts, and to immediately use them to begin long-term, strategic planning for a Monroe County community where all children thrive and succeed. As a next step, we urge County legislators to come together to create an ad-hoc,

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/america-by-the-numbers/episodes/episode-107/> and [http://www.cgr.org/reports/14\\_R-1748\\_ChildCareSubsidiesinMonroeCounty.pdf](http://www.cgr.org/reports/14_R-1748_ChildCareSubsidiesinMonroeCounty.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rbj.net/article.asp?size=2&aID=210123>

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bipartisan, and public/private partnership committee for long term funding strategies for needed children's services across Monroe County.

In this current proposed budget, **we also commend the County for its continued commitment to the Family Assessment Response (FAR)** model of responding to certain reports of child maltreatment. FAR has evidence to support its effectiveness in preventing child abuse and neglect, and we support the County's decision to design and implement an evaluation of its use locally.

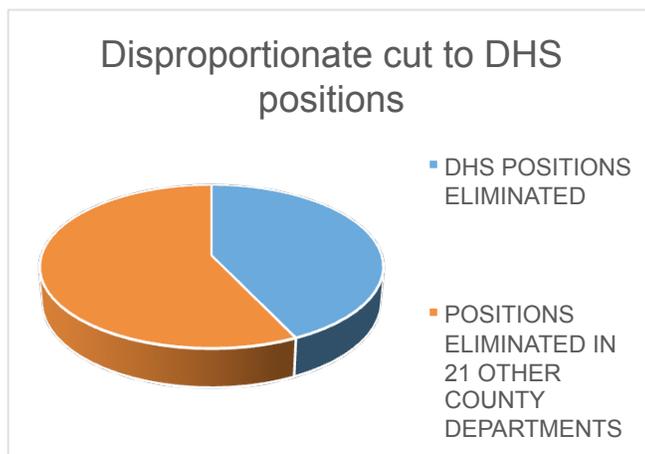
## **Questions and concerns**

As part of our efforts to ensure all levels of government make evidence-based decisions for what children need most, The Children's Agenda welcomes the opportunity to discuss these questions and engage with County leaders on creative, long-term solutions:

**CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES:** Families across all income levels face a challenge in paying for child care because it is expensive. What is a higher, better spending priority than improving life outcomes for children and lifting families out of poverty? Why reduce local spending on child care subsidies for low income working families at a time when Rochester is 2<sup>nd</sup> in the U.S. for poverty, and poverty rates are rising in Monroe County suburbs? Already only 1 in 5 of eligible children in Monroe County are served by subsidies due to inadequate funding from all levels of government – federal, state and local. Given the County's increased emphasis on "Work First" for those receiving assistance, what will happen to children when parents work or look for work?

**PREVENTIVE SERVICES:** Why is the County reducing Net County Support for Purchase of Services contracts by \$610,000? Why is Youth and Family Partnership chosen for a substantial reduction? Why cut preventive programs designed to benefit youth and families and save taxpayer dollars by reducing the need for out-of-home placement and other expensive remediation services?

**DEPT. OF HUMAN SERVICES STAFFING:** In the proposed budget, DHS is slated to lose 38.5 full-time positions. Assuming that the 7 Supervised Visitation workers are replaced with privately-funded equivalent positions, that still results in 31.5 fewer workers providing DHS services and programs. DHS staff make up 21% of all County FTEs but comprise 75% of all positions eliminated in the County. Why is the Dept. of Human Services losing a disproportionately high number of FTE positions? Will caseloads increase – and if so, by how much? What impact will that have on the quality of services provided?



**STARLIGHT PEDIATRICS:** What is the current model of health care for the highly vulnerable children and youth in foster care in custody of the County? Who is the pediatrician/adolescent medicine specialist in charge of the care of these children? How many children does he or she directly provide patient care for in a given week? How are needed services for these medically complex, needy children and youth, like behavioral and mental health services, provided?

**EVIDENCE-BASED HOME VISITING:** What are the appropriations and projected number served for Nurse Family Partnership and Building Healthy Children? These important programs provide support

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to young mothers and result in much improved outcomes for both mothers and babies, saving money in the long term.

### **We offer the following recommendations:**

- 1. Reverse child care cuts:** Restore the \$406,000 reduction of local dollars in the child care subsidy program for low-income working parents. County budgets show that State funding for Monroe County's subsidy program has gone up 5.8% in the past 5 years, while the County's own spending has declined by 24%. Monroe County has lost 7,178 subsidy slots since 2001. Child care subsidies are investments that pay off in sustained employment for parents, lower demand for public services, and increased school readiness.
- 2. Restore the Youth and Family Partnership (YFP) program:** YFP is an innovative, cost-saving program that brings together Probation, Mental Health and Human Services' staff and funding to provide intensive support aimed at preventing expensive out-of-home placement of high-risk youths, which averages over \$110,000 per child per year. In the past the County expanded this program because of its success in preventing residential placement. Since then the number of new placements to group institutional care and length of stay has trended downward. A cut to this program will lead to higher expenses for future County leaders and taxpayers.
- 3. Detail what the "increased services" for children and youth will be as noted by the County in its new model of care at Starlight Pediatrics.** The original model of care in Starlight Pediatrics was touted as a national model for innovation, and Monroe County justifiably received kudos for it. Children and youth in foster care are among the neediest, most medically complex and vulnerable children served by any health system. In addition, the County has legal guardianship/custody of these children and youth. They must be provided for in a setting that meets, and preferably exceeds, the standard for medical care for children in New York State.
- 4. Disclose the programs funded with Purchase of Service (POS) contracts and explain why the County is cutting \$610,000 in local support for preventive programs. We recommend that DHS implement public evaluations of services funded with POS dollars.** Given the County's projection of an increased need for these programs in 2015, it is not clear how a lower appropriation will allow children and families to access the services they need. We have not seen the current agencies and programs funded with these dollars and cannot make specific recommendations, but we urge the County to award contracts to programs that provide evidence of effectiveness and ensure that all vulnerable children at risk for abuse and neglect are appropriately served.
- 5. Ensure smooth transition and effective oversight for the Supervised Visitation program:** This program exists to provide a safe place for a child living in foster care to visit with their biological family. As the Supervised Visitation program moves toward full private staffing by April 2015, care must be taken to: 1) create a supportive and smooth transition process for the children involved; and 2) ensure robust oversight of the outsourced program to ensure that quality services are being delivered.
- 6. Set a clear direction for reporting possible child abuse:** The elimination of the local child abuse hotline has been proposed in the past, given that the State operates a child abuse hotline that serves a large majority of NYS counties. Some fear that without a local resource,

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our community will lose linkages with local services for children and families in trouble because State workers will not have that expertise. A transition to the New York State hotline must be strategically delegated with widespread and repeated communication with mandated reporters and community members about the change.

### ***Looking ahead***

Since its founding 10 years ago, The Children's Agenda has joined forces with private and public partners, including Monroe County leaders, to achieve gains for Monroe County's children. Yet problems persist, and many life outcomes for Monroe County's children are worsening, making these partnerships more important now than ever before. We call on County legislators and others to effectively engage community partners in long-term problem-solving and planning to make the next ten years a decade of progress.

Appealing, innovative long-term solutions to these persistent problems abound, including: pay-for-success contracts and financing; tax incentives for family-friendly employers; inter-municipal and inter-agency agreements for cross-sector anti-poverty efforts that shift resources to evidence-based preventive programs; "no wrong door" practices for integrated intake and eligibility that take the whole family into account, etc.

There are solutions that we can all get behind. We can join together as a community to implement solutions that are rooted in research, collaborative in nature, and take the long view at what's best for kids and our pocketbooks.

As always, The Children's Agenda stands ready to meet to discuss proposed changes and to offer data, research, and evidence-based recommendations to County leaders as they grapple with critical decisions facing the needs of vulnerable children and youth.