

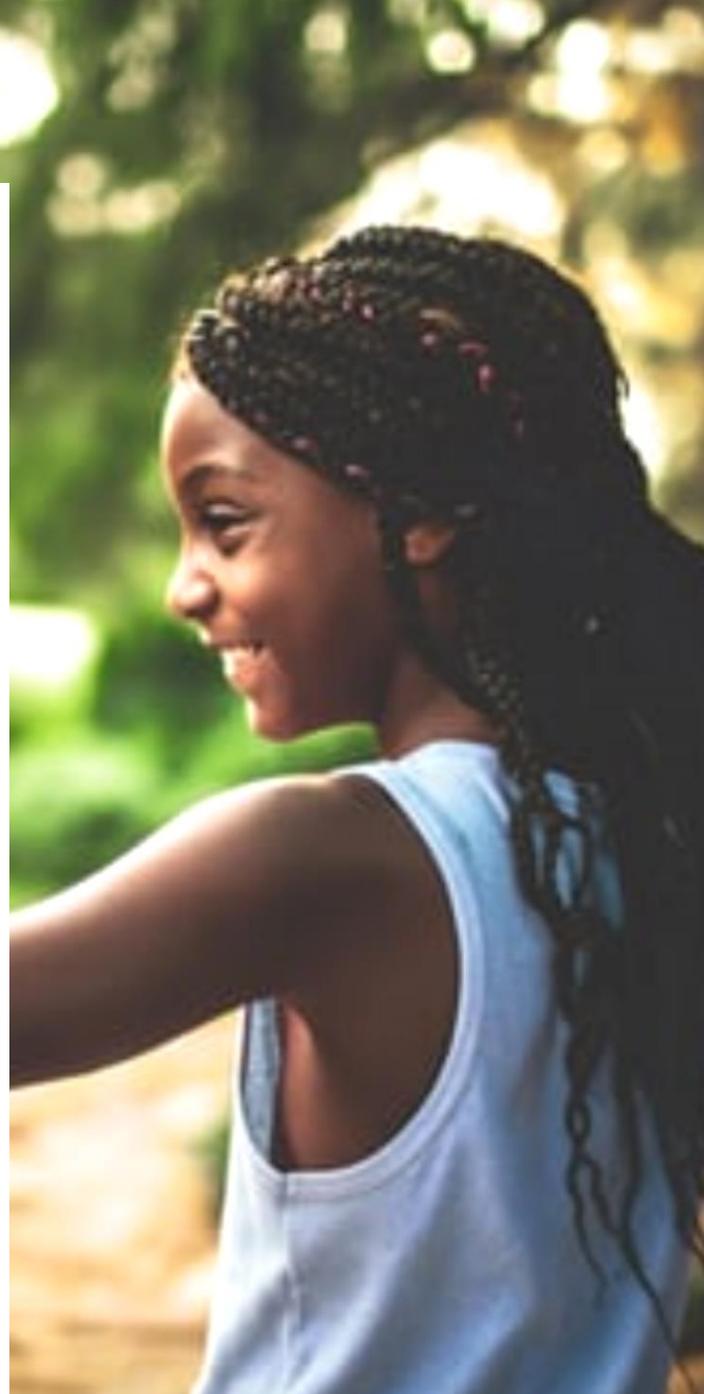
Review of the Proposed 2021 Monroe County Budget

Executive Summary

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The Children's Agenda

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Executive Summary

The Children’s Agenda offers this review of the proposed 2021 County budget and its impact on children and youth. It is a contribution to the local dialogue about how to best use limited resources to create a thriving community for families. Children are the poorest and most diverse segment of Monroe County’s population. This report was developed amid a sharp uptick in COVID-19 infections locally, ten months into a pandemic which has resulted in greater needs among Monroe County children and restricted access to services to address them. The United Hospital Fund estimates that 10,000 more Monroe County children will be pushed into poverty as a result of the pandemic. And all of our children’s health, learning, social interactions, and safety are markedly threatened.

During this time of extraordinary stress and vulnerability, it is more important than ever that community leaders and those in decision-making positions have children’s needs at top of mind. Reducing the negative impact of the pandemic on young people’s educational, physical, and social-emotional well-being – with [lifelong consequences](#) from increased childhood poverty, food insecurity, mental health issues, and learning loss - must take precedence over any political mindset of adults. **We must create a circle of support and protection for our youngest residents, particularly the most vulnerable.**

We center our recommendations on another groundbreaking aspect of 2020, racial turmoil and a heightened awareness of the structural racism embedded in public institutions like law enforcement, public education, and social services. These realities are by no means new in 2020, but the demand for change has a momentum that we hope will be sustained. All child-serving systems must be scrutinized for racial bias in their operations which leads to disparate outcomes for Black and brown young people.

The overrepresentation of African-American and Native American children in the child welfare system is a troubling and complex phenomenon.

Thirty-three percent of kids in foster care are African-American, but they make up only 15 percent of the child population [nationally]. Yet federal studies indicate that child abuse and neglect is actually lower for black families than it is for whites.

[Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Welfare](#), National Conference of State Legislatures, Sept. 20, 2020

Racial disparities in Monroe County’s Child Protective Services and foster care system rank in the “extreme” range for Black children when compared to white children in a [2019 analysis](#) conducted by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services.

We call on the County to build on its commendable initial steps taken in 2020 and take even bolder steps toward racial justice in 2021.

Priority Recommendations for 2021

PLACE A HIGH PRIORITY in 2021 on adopting changes to county policy, funding and practice to reverse racial inequities: The Children’s Agenda recommends that the county take the following actions to enact the County Executive’s stated commitment to pursuing racial equity.

- We repeat our call for broad, systematic, and ongoing strategies to root out structural racism through the adoption of an ongoing [racial equity impact assessment](#) to be applied at decision points when county laws, regulations, practices and funding are changed or approved. [Lessons learned](#) from existing assessments across the country should guide Monroe County’s initiative.
- THE PROMISE OF RACIAL IMPACT STATEMENTS:
FINDINGS FROM A CASE STUDY OF MINORITY IMPACT STATEMENTS IN IOWA
- We recommend that Monroe County Sheriff’s Office end its contracts with school districts to provide armed police as School Resource Officers, as has been done in the [City of Rochester’s budget](#). Police presence has not proven to keep schools any safer, and some studies show it correlates with higher rates of disproportionate suspension and arrest of students of color, as well as lower rates of academic achievement and graduation.¹

DEMONSTRATE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY by launching a children’s dashboard:

- The county should follow the lead of other local governments throughout the country and adopt a [Children’s Dashboard](#), comprised of both externally-facing and internally-facing data, to measure and guide its progress in reducing racial disparities and improving children’s health, education and success. The county’s Children’s Dashboard should amalgamate external data sources, such as [ROC the Future’s annual report card](#), ACT Rochester and Common Ground Health’s reports, and augment those with County-held data on Child Protective Services (CPS) reports, foster care placements, child care subsidy slots, and other indicators. The newly proposed data team within the Dept. of Human Services would be an important part of this initiative.
- We also recommend the restoration of the “Children and Families” section of the county budget document to advance accountability and transparency. We stand ready to consult with the Office of Management and Budget in its redesign.

¹ Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-term Education Outcomes.

STABILIZE THE CHILD CARE SUBSIDY SYSTEM through changes in absence policy: Monroe County’s child care subsidy system should be reformed to ensure that providers are reimbursed for a reasonable number of child absences from care. To improve stability and quality of care, Monroe County should create consistency wherever possible. Providers already charge private-paying families for their children’s absences, but they are unable to recoup expenses from the county for their subsidy-assisted families. The current policy of withholding subsidy payments when a child is absent creates instability in providers’ income and in the system as a whole. Paying for absences encourages more providers to accept subsidized children, stabilizes the income of child care providers, supports public health efforts, and ensures children have stable care arrangements.

USE THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN PROCESS to prioritize children: In its comprehensive planning process proposed to launch in 2021, the county should incorporate a section on young residents as an adapted “Youth Master Plan.” Such a plan, modeled on examples such as Palm Beach County, FL, would prioritize the needs of children, establish goals, align resources, and maximize youth potential and outcomes across county departments. Input should be obtained from youth, parents, community organizations, other levels of government and stakeholders.

Priority Commendations:

We applaud the County for the following actions and proposals that will benefit children:

More resources for early childhood developmental services (special children’s services):

- Increasing Preschool Special Education Related Services rates by 5% for all providers, aiding in the recruitment of needed new providers and encouraging retention of current providers;
- Hiring an additional three Service Coordinators for the county’s Early Intervention program, which will result in a more effective program that will reduce wait times for children in need of therapies and special instruction;
- Upgrading the pay scale for the entire service coordination team.

Expanding access to child care assistance:

- 2020 improvements in the child care subsidy program such as extending child care subsidy eligibility to low-income parents who are working while pursuing a 4-year degree;
- Lowering parent co-payments before the pandemic hit, and proposing an additional reduction in parent fees in 2021 to the lowest allowable rate (10% of parents’ income above the poverty line) once the public health emergency is over. During the pandemic, parent fees have been waived completely.

Data-informed decision-making in Human Services:

- Creating a new data team within DHS to support better decision-making and analysis around resource allocation, contract monitoring, and program performance monitoring.

Youth Bureau:

- Adding two Youth Engagement positions to the Youth Bureau, with one dedicated to providing re-entry services to youth as they are released from the Children’s Center.

Preventive Services

- Monroe County again increases investments in services designed to keep children out of foster care placement. A recent evaluation of county-funded infant and early childhood mental health-informed therapeutic visitation program, for example, showed promising results.

Creation of a new Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to diversify the county’s workforce and contractors, and to promote an affirmative and supportive working environment.

A Final Note: The Commission on Race and Structural Equity

In June 2020, Mayor Lovely Warren and County Executive Adam Bello announced the launch of the Commission on Race and Structural Equity (RASE).

In alignment with The City of Rochester and Monroe County’s priorities for racial equity and social justice, the Commission on Racial and Structural Equity (RASE) is charged with the following:

- Inventory and assess current local laws/policies that either promote or are intended to eliminate institutional and structural biases, racism, and inequities in the City of Rochester and Monroe County;
- Provide recommendations to enhance current local laws/policies to increase effectiveness, and/or “sunset” local laws/policies that are ineffective or no longer applicable; and
- Provide recommendations on any new local laws/policies which address identified gaps.

The Commission’s purpose is admirable. Once the recommendations are published, we call on the County to immediately begin the implementation of RASE Commission recommendations that will, when combined with other County actions, kickstart the reversal of decades of institutional racism.