PUTTING KIDS IN THE PICTURE

In this year's state budget, New York had an opportunity to transform the way we serve the needs of children. The promise the Governor made to "ensure our communities are not surviving, but that they are thriving" raised expectations for bold, transformational change. However, with the notable exceptions of Early Intervention and continuous Medicaid coverage for children from birth to six, our elected officials mostly opted for investments that are for one year only, not ongoing. They failed to properly respond to the importance and urgency of the situation families are facing. Consequently, children and families will continue to stretch and make do rather than thrive. New York children and families deserve better.

Early Intervention for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities did, following years of deterioration, see some improvement. New York committed to a 5% increase in the rate paid for in-person Early Intervention services with an additional 4% for services in rural and underserved areas. While this may stem some of the loss of providers to higher paying sectors, it falls short of solving the crisis caused by decades of stagnant rates. Our government has, once again, failed to grasp what is at stake. Early Intervention can change the trajectory of a child's life, but only if providers are there when kids need them.

Child care, similarly, came up short of the transformation that was possible. As previously committed, this budget did provide $1.8 billion toward child care assistance. We acknowledge that this commitment of state funds avoids a crisis that would have occurred with the expiration of federal relief funds. However, help paying for child care does no good if there is no child care available. Because this budget failed to invest in a permanent state child care fund to increase workforce compensation, these essential workers will continue to be among the lowest paid workforce in the state and programs will continue to close. Legislators passed on the opportunity to transform New York from a state of vast child care deserts into a place where child care is abundant, rewarding and available to all.

Making New York a **more affordable place to raise a family** saw real potential in the proposal of the Working Families Tax Credit. This one initiative could bring tax relief to 2.3 million New York families. Instead, a smaller number of families will receive a one-time, one-year supplement to the Empire State Child Credit. At $324 million, that investment is less than half of what was committed to the film industry last year. Children are young for only a short time and evidence shows that child tax credits work, not only in the short-term but by providing lifelong benefits such as better health and education outcomes. The failure to make our tax system work better for families in a sustained way is one we will all pay for.

Health coverage was the one area where New York took advantage of an opportunity made available by the federal government and adopted continuous enrollment in Medicaid and Child Health Plus from birth to age six. Once approved, this will ensure that as parents' income goes slightly up or down, their children do not lose health coverage. We thank the Governor, legislature and Health Department for making this significant change.

There are many provisions in the budget that will make a difference in the lives of some children such as extending Paid Family Leave to cover prenatal care; more funding for various infant and maternal health programs; potential increases in the stock of affordable housing; mental health care workforce improvements, including pilot funding for Daniel's Law (named after Daniel Prude); and increasing the rate paid for child care during evening, night and weekend hours. We thank those legislators who championed children through these programs. However, we cannot help but be disappointed by the lack of transformational, sustained investments that could have positively altered the course of children's lives, especially those children who are most vulnerable because of poverty, racism, health inequities and trauma.

In our democracy, the people speak and the government responds. However, children rarely have a voice in that decision-making process. They rely on us to speak for them. The Children's Agenda will continue to speak boldly for children until every child in every community in New York has the opportunity to thrive.