

# The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund

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## New State Funding to Support Community-Led Investments



## The Child and Family Wellbeing Working Group

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# The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund: New State Funding to Support Community-Led Investments



## Our Vision

**The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund** (the Fund) is designed to fund community-led projects that strengthen families, reduce their vulnerability to contact with the child welfare system, and invest in supports that enhance family preservation, reunification, and healing.

Across New York State, parents and young people impacted by the child welfare system and other activists have increasingly called for dedicated state funding for community-driven resources to:

- ▶ Invest in family wellbeing;
- ▶ Improve neighborhood conditions;
- ▶ Increase economic opportunity;
- ▶ Eliminate poverty; and
- ▶ Ensure that families can get support without the threat of unnecessary family separation through the child welfare system.<sup>1</sup>

This Fund is the vision of the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund Working Group, a group of statewide advocates with lived expertise in the child welfare system and expertise in research, policy, and advocacy. The group came together three years ago to develop a framework and proposal for community investment of state dollars to address conditions that lead to high rates of child welfare involvement, particularly for Black and Latinx children, youth, and families in New York. The group examined projects within New York State and across the U.S. that

combine coordinated community-led planning to strengthen neighborhoods with local grant-making to fund trusted grassroots projects.

This paper brings together our collective learning and explains the proposed New York State Child and Family Wellbeing Fund. We welcome conversations about the Fund and we hope this document will generate those discussions.

## Background and Origin

New York State's family policy sets out guiding principles for all state and local government actions, programs, and services that impact children and families, requiring that they:

- ▶ Build on families' "inherent strengths";
- ▶ Include families as partners "in the planning, delivery and evaluation" of services;
- ▶ Be flexible and accessible, and "delivered in a manner which is culturally and linguistically sensitive" to families' needs; and
- ▶ Promote "economic security."<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, government actions affecting children and families must "prioritize early intervention" to support family integrity, with a "primary emphasis" on "establishing safe, nurturing environments which support the healthy growth of all family members."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, special attention must be paid to sustainability and diversity of services, and public and voluntary

providers “must be accountable to society, each other and the people they serve.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite these laudable pronouncements, poverty, failure to invest in community resources and infrastructure, and structural racism continue to drive the well-documented overreach of local Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies into the lives of poor families in New York, including unnecessary and traumatic child removals and family separation.<sup>5</sup> Black children in particular are disparately impacted by CPS because of challenges that impact families of all races, ethnicities, and economic class.<sup>6</sup> Observing that “New York has not escaped structural racism in child welfare,” in its 2024 report entitled *Racial Justice and Child Welfare*, the New York State Bar Association found that Black children and their families suffer the harshest impacts of CPS intervention.<sup>7</sup>

The conditions burdening families are well known, and require innovative thinking around how state dollars can better support children and parents.<sup>8</sup> Policymakers must consider how communities can exert more control over how government support is used, with a focus on building up local assets they identify as foundational to wellbeing.

### **How the Fund Will Advance the Health and Wellbeing of Families**

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund will use \$30 million to:

- ▶ Strengthen 10 communities across the state that bear the heaviest burdens of contact with CPS during a 5-year pilot period;
- ▶ Invest in small projects that are usually excluded from government funding, based in and substantially led by members of the same communities;
- ▶ Resource trusted organizations without ties to CPS;
- ▶ Center community expertise in resource decisions through a statewide advisory body that includes parents and young people impacted by CPS;
- ▶ Intentionally invest in the social fabric using the Asset-Based Community Development framework to build social capital and collective action as part of the grant-making process;

- ▶ Build long-term community capacity through technical assistance and capacity building resources;
- ▶ Reduce the likelihood of CPS intervention by investing in projects and resources known to reduce family stress and vulnerability to CPS intervention; and
- ▶ Spark joy by supporting child development, family activities, community gatherings, and neighborly care.

### **The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund advances the health and development of all New York children by investing resources in communities that have been historically disenfranchised and disproportionately targeted for intervention through CPS.**

In neighborhoods highly impacted by CPS, community groups and organizations provide concrete resources and material support, nurture social connections, and help children and families in times of crisis. However, these groups often struggle to survive and are excluded from accessing government funding due to onerous qualifications, complicated processes, and narrow prescriptions on the type of funding-eligible “services.” The Fund will resource community-driven initiatives and projects that strengthen families, reduce their vulnerability to CPS contact, and promote family preservation, reunification, and healing. The ultimate goal of the Fund is to facilitate and normalize a caring, community-driven resource-allocation approach, free of unnecessary policing and regulation of families.

### **The Fund will help reduce child welfare hotline calls and investigations, the majority of which are not about abuse but about poverty-related conditions framed as neglect.**

Instead of offering help with basic necessities, CPS often responds to Black, Latinx, and Indigenous families by removing their children and prosecuting parents in family court, causing monumental disruption to the families’ structure and everyday lives. Concentrated CPS presence in the most heavily-impacted neighborhoods undermines children’s wellbeing by interfering with parental authority, damaging children’s ability to form social relationships, and breeding distrust among neighbors and mistrust of

community service providers who are required by state law to be mandated reporters.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, many families experience CPS not as a “child welfare” system, but as a “family regulation” or “family policing” system.<sup>10</sup> In turn, the ruptured relationships in families and communities negatively impact children’s present and future health and wellbeing outcomes, resulting in immeasurable trauma and compounding social and financial disadvantage weighing on children and families.

**The Fund will support and strengthen families by funding community-based organizations that families trust and are responsive to the particular needs, desires, and aspirations of the children and families they serve.**

CPS are neither designed nor equipped to provide basic necessities or to enhance neighborhood environmental conditions. Yet, New York spends billions of dollars to investigate families and maintain children in out-of-home placements. Meanwhile, grassroots organizations that help children and families stay together safely and thrive are chronically underfunded.<sup>11</sup> In many neighborhoods targeted by CPS, these organizations provide concrete resources, foster social connections, and help families in times of crisis, but they struggle to keep their doors open and are locked out of accessing state dollars due to exclusive criteria and unduly complicated processes.

**Through its innovative, community-driven structure, the Fund will increase necessary and beneficial resources for families in neighborhoods with high rates of CPS contact.**

The Fund would invest \$30 million in state funding annually for a 5-year pilot to build a sustainable infrastructure for community-directed investment in supporting and building the capacity of small, grassroots organizations, projects, and initiatives.<sup>12</sup> It will use the Asset Based Community Development (“ABCD”) framework to explore and build on local strengths.<sup>13</sup> The Fund will improve the quality of neighborhoods by increasing investment in child, family, and community-strengthening resources,



building community relationships, connections and assets, and ending families’ vulnerability to harmful and unnecessary policing and separation.

Recent research confirms the effects of neighborhoods on children’s health, cognitive development, social mobility, and lifelong earnings.<sup>14</sup> Studies also illustrate the positive impact of specific neighborhood enhancements on children, such as safe play spaces and greenery; density of nonprofits and civic events; convenient access to critical family resources, like food and child care; and vibrant social fabric.<sup>15</sup> In short, everyday surroundings offer significant advantages to children *even if their own family is struggling*. Yet decades of redlining and structurally racist disinvestment have resulted in vastly inequitable neighborhood conditions. The Fund would be a promising corrective shift to ensure that more New York children live in neighborhoods that are equipped to support their wellbeing.

**By centering the experience and expertise of people most impacted by CPS and child poverty, the Fund counteracts the historical and ongoing impacts of community disinvestment.**

Through the Fund, decisions about local investments would be made in a unique way: neighborhood residents would engage in a community assets mapping process to decide for themselves what existing strengths, resources, and relationships should be supported with state dollars.<sup>16,17</sup> Grant-making will operate through local advisory committees that will determine the kinds of investments they want in their neighborhoods.

To ensure trust among families to be served, organizations that ultimately receive funding as grantees will have to demonstrate significant ties to the community and will be prohibited from simultaneously having contracts with CPS. This community-led grant-making process will strengthen and multiply neighborhood assets, with state dollars flowing to groups that are deeply embedded in communities.

**Each element of our vision for the Fund has been implemented in New York and in other states, including community-led planning and reinvestment efforts and participatory grant-making.**

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund blends these elements together to address the specific need for community investment in children, families, and communities in New York.

We invite readers to:

- ▶ Understand the need for and purpose of the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund
- ▶ Envision the types of groups and community programming that the Fund will support
- ▶ Learn how elements of the Fund have been implemented elsewhere
- ▶ Engage the Working Group with questions, concerns and input to help refine the vision

Join us in organizing and advocating for the Fund!



### Grounding Principles for the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund

The Working Group outlines the following values, which align with New York’s family policy guidelines, that guided us as we developed our proposal for the Fund.<sup>i</sup> We are committed to a Fund that:

- ▶ **Promotes responsive reinvestment** to counteract the harms resulting from decades of unnecessary CPS interventions and targeted disinvestment in concrete family and community resources and life-affirming social supports.
- ▶ **Maximizes community control, leadership, and self-determination** based on community strengths, needs, and aspirations as defined, experienced, and explained by community members. Collective decision-making enhances the likelihood that initiatives will be successful and strengthens the effectiveness and sustainability of community-led investments.<sup>ii</sup>
- ▶ **Invests in the leadership of impacted people** and leverages their expertise at both the statewide and local levels by following the lead of trusted community-members who have navigated CPS themselves and supported others through the same experience.
- ▶ **Organizes local participatory action** in communities to map assets and deficits and build resources for child and family wellbeing.<sup>iii</sup>
- ▶ **Supports the collective power** of individuals, associations, and institutions to access community resources, manage community assets, and create social capital through social relationships and networks.<sup>iv</sup>
- ▶ **Requires transparency and accountability** for all aspects of how the Fund will be established and operated, including how communities will be identified, how local participatory work will be resourced, how local decisions about funding will be made, which groups will receive state funding to meet the goals identified by the community, and evaluation of how those goals are met. This includes community-defined metrics of success and annual statewide reporting.

<sup>i</sup> See Endnote 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Columbia Justice Lab. (2022). Process Matters: Reflections from the Development of Harris County’s Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund and Recommendations to Guide Future Efforts. <https://justicelab.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/ProcessMatters.pdf>

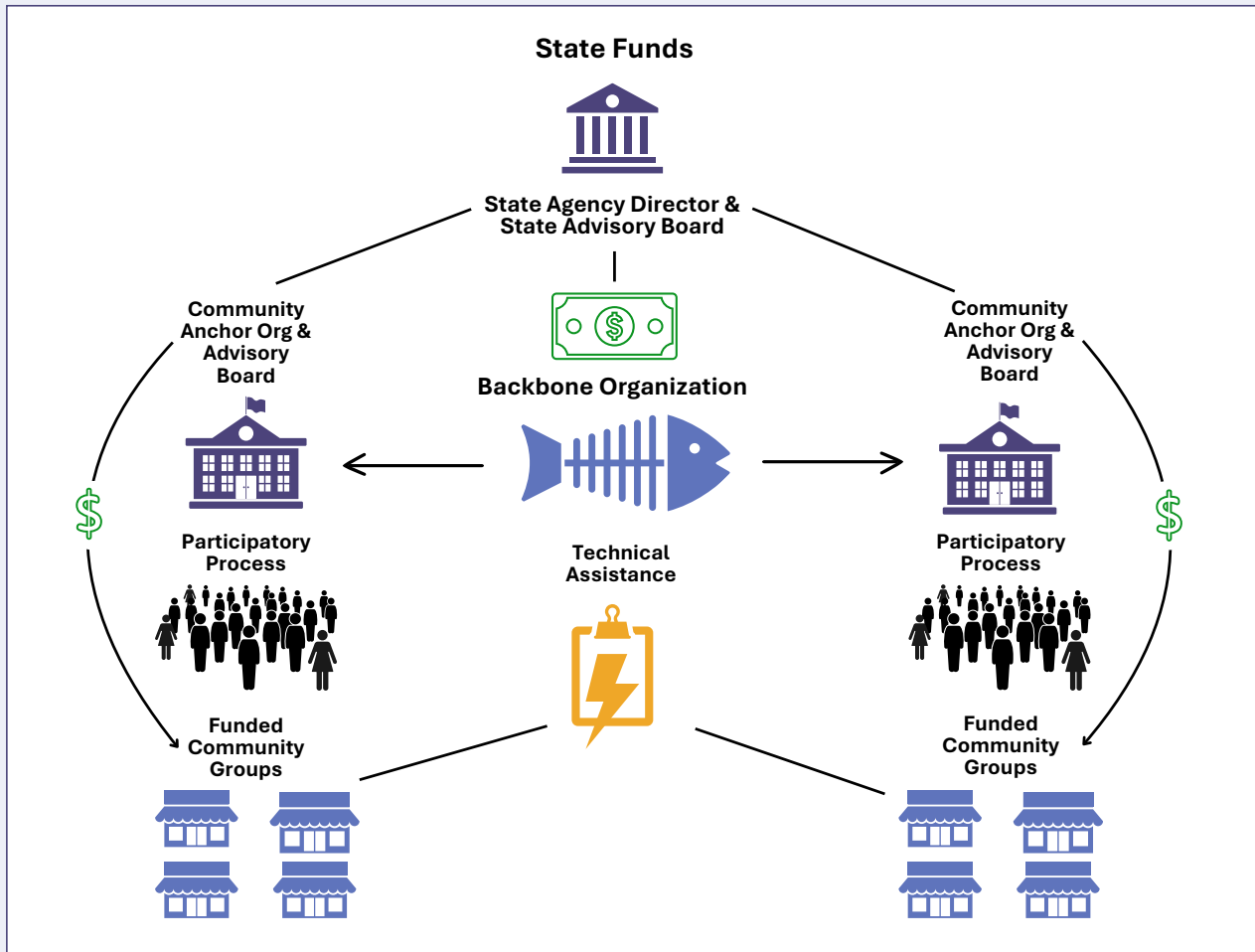
<sup>iii</sup> See Endnote ii: the discussion of innovative community engagement, assessment and decision-making actions undertaken in the Harris County Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund.

<sup>iv</sup> Nurture Development. n.d. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). <https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/>



## Nuts and Bolts of the Fund

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund invests in three types of statewide, local, and community groups: a statewide **Backbone Organization**, local **Anchor Organizations**, and **Funded Community Groups**. Each has distinct and complementary responsibilities to maximize community leadership and self-determination, based on community strengths, needs, and aspirations, as defined by community members. Collective decision-making would meaningfully represent community members' creativity and innovation at every stage of the asset mapping and funding allocation process.



### Communities Eligible to Participate

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund would begin with 10 eligible communities, defined as zip codes or small clusters of zip codes across New York State that have the highest combination of CPS impact (CPS reports, investigations, indicated cases, and foster care entries) and racial disparity (based on communities with the highest level of racially disproportionate involvement in CPS).<sup>1</sup>

Under the proposed legislation to establish the Fund, the eligible communities would be identified in partnership with an Advisory Board of 9 people appointed by the Governor, Senate, and Assembly, including people with lived experience, community leaders and providers, attorneys, organizers and policy advocates. The selection of communities, processes used by the Fund to select organizations involved in the local grant-making process, and grantees receiving investment through the Fund would be transparent, and made available to the public.

## Funded Community Groups

The Fund is structured to make public funds accessible by and accountable to community members. Community grant-making would invest in Funded Community Groups in each eligible community who provide on-the-ground support for families. These Groups must be:

- Trusted grassroots organizations that offer voluntary material supports, resources, or services and upend local racial inequities in resource access;
- Staffed by community residents, particularly families impacted by CPS; and
- Demonstrably capable of voluntarily engaging families.

Based on our current expectations, each Funded Community Group could apply for and receive grants that may range from \$20,000 to \$150,000 during each grant-making cycle. This provides the opportunity for recurring funding over the five-year period. Having access to recurring grants will also provide the Funded Community Groups with the time and space to achieve measurable impact.

A central feature of the Fund is making public funds accessible to groups untethered to presumptions or accusations of child maltreatment. Traditional child welfare Prevention Services generally require a family to be labeled as “at-risk” of child maltreatment. This approach is stigmatizing, makes families vulnerable to separation, and subjects them to the punitive approach of focusing on changing the behavior of individual parents instead of on strengthening the family unit, i.e. with economic and concrete supports. Therefore, Funded Community Groups would be precluded from receiving funding from CPS for the duration of the grant period.

## The Asset-Based Community Development (“ABCD”) Approach

Each community’s priorities for investment will be found through the Asset-Based Community Development (“ABCD”) approach. ABCD is a structured, sustainable process that builds local capacity to mobilize individuals, strengthen associations, and build neighborhood institutions by coming together in community to identify local assets and solve problems.

The process starts with outreach to bring together informal community leaders, members of associations and grassroots organizations, and staff of neighborhood institutions. Importantly, this connective process begins with individuals, families, and neighbors. Working together, these diverse community representatives identify local assets, such as: the skills of local residents; the power of local associations; the resources of public, private and non-profit institutions; the physical infrastructure and space in a community; the economic resources and potential of local places; and the local history and culture of a neighborhood.<sup>ii</sup>

In contrast to a more traditional deficit model, where communities or groups of people are assessed on the assets and resources they lack, ABCD does not start with the question “What do you need?” Instead, initial conversations center what residents can achieve on their own or with minimal outside resources, in recognition of the inherent power of community. Planning processes begin by asking:

- First, given what our gifts are and the resources we have, what can we do in the neighborhood?
- Second, while using our own resources, what purposes can we fulfill with a little bit of help, such as an organizer, some money, or something else?
- Finally, what purposes do we want achieved that depend entirely on outside resources?
- Moving in this sequence is a reminder that institutions and government dollars are there to support community capacities, not take the lead.





## Anchor Organization

An **Anchor Organization** in each neighborhood would be funded to lead the ABCD process to map assets and determine neighborhood priorities for action. Anchor organizations would hire ABCD facilitators who receive training in the model and lead the process: connecting with parents and young people, neighborhood leaders and groups, organizations and institutions who can contribute to strengthening, healthy, and sustainable family support in ways that the community prioritizes.

**Anchor Organizations** will:

- Be trusted local groups led and staffed by community residents;
- Have a demonstrated capacity to build trust with and engage community members;
- Have the capacity to administer local grant-making processes responsive to community priorities established through an Asset-Based Community Development process; and
- Not have a contract with a local Department of Social Services providing foster care, adoption, or primary or secondary preventive services pursuant to Social Services Law during the grant period.

Once the ABCD process is complete, the Anchor Organization will lead a community Request for Proposals (RFP) grant-making process. Working with a locally-convened Community Advisory Board, it would solicit grants from local groups. After the Anchor Organization has formed a Community Advisory Board and administered the grant-making process, it will oversee the Funded Community Groups for evaluation and accountability. Findings from the ABCD process will be shared with the Backbone Organization as well as the Fund's Director and Advisory Board.

By employing Anchor Organizations to build a local community assessment and grant-making process, and to identify and select Funded Community Groups, the Fund would center the expertise and power of neighborhoods and support flexible, home-grown approaches to community projects and services.

## Backbone Organization

To manage contracting and provide capacity-building support to the Anchor Organizations and Funded Community Groups spread across 10 communities in New York State, the Fund would invest in a statewide **Backbone Organization**. The Backbone Organization would function as an intermediary between the state and the local Anchor Organizations and Funded Community Groups, responsible for administering required state contracts, reporting and oversight of the funds.

The Backbone Organization will have previous experience managing large, complex state or city contracts and community subcontracts, and will be charged with helping Funded Community Groups translate their proposals into deliverables-based contracts. The process will, in and of itself, function as technical assistance to groups inexperienced with contracting and state or city grant processes, which can support the Funded Community Groups in independently securing future city and state funding.

This structure heeds grassroots demands for contracts that support “time, space and grace” in program design, reduce fiscal and administrative burdens, and use best practices that make contracting accessible to smaller organizations, like lengthening application deadlines so understaffed organizations have time to apply.<sup>iii, iv</sup> The Backbone Organization will also provide Funded Community Groups with support to develop internal systems, such as program evaluation and data collection, that would enable them to access additional private and public grants.

## Director and Advisory Board

The Fund will be led by a Director at the New York State Department of State and a nine-person Advisory Board, which will work with the Backbone Organization to identify and support Anchor Organizations that will lead the ABCD process. As part of the grant-making process, the Fund's Director and Advisory Board will ensure that decisions about allocating resources to achieve local priorities are community-led. Throughout this process, the

Director and the Advisory Board will receive input from the Backbone Organization, the Anchor Organizations, and directly from participating community members, who are invited to communicate directly with the Director and Advisory Board.

## Sustainable Investment

The structure of the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund would provide double benefits: immediate investment in community programs and resources that directly benefit families, as well as long-term investment in the capacity of community groups to access state, city, and philanthropic funding to draw resources to disinvested communities. The Fund's grantee selection process relies on the collective power of individuals, associations, and institutions—especially people directly and indirectly impacted by CPS. Building relationships and networks to identify, access, and strengthen community assets creates valuable social capital.

Ultimately, we expect that the Fund's intensely community-driven asset mapping, grantee selection, and resource allocation processes will identify trusted organizations, projects, and initiatives that will benefit from investment, as well as engage neighbors and groups in collective action to improve the safety and health of their community.

- i According to our preliminary analysis of child welfare data from across New York State, the 10 local communities eligible for the Fund would be found within New York City and some of the following counties: Albany, Broome, Erie, Monroe, Nassau, Niagara, Oneida, Onondaga, Orange, Oswego, Schenectady, Suffolk and Westchester.
- ii McKnight, J. (2018). Learning 15 – Associating Associations: The Power of Convening. [https://johnmcknight.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/learning\\_15\\_-\\_associating\\_associations\\_-\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_convening.pdf](https://johnmcknight.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/learning_15_-_associating_associations_-_the_power_of_convening.pdf)
- iii Restorative Justice Initiative. n.d. Funding Community Restorative Justice and Transforming City Government's Relationship with Communities. [https://restorativejustice.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Funding-RJ\\_Transforming-Report-One-Page-1.pdf](https://restorativejustice.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Funding-RJ_Transforming-Report-One-Page-1.pdf)
- iv Downstate Coalition for Crime Victims. n.d. Equitable Pathways to Healing: How Procurement Practices Can Transform New York City's Responses to Survivors. <https://downstatecoalition.org/procurement>

## Learning From the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund

Because our proposal for the Fund begins with a community-led inquiry, there are multiple opportunities to learn from communities and examine the impact of the grant-making process.

First, each of the 10 communities eligible to receive funding will participate in a process to identify, assess and build on community resources. Anchor Organizations in the 10 communities leading this process will share their findings with the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund's statewide Director and Advisory Board. Lessons learned from this process will inform future grant-making by the Fund, and made public.

Anchor Organizations also will work with the statewide Backbone Organization to collect information about the grants made in the 10 communities, including the impact of the investments. This information will be reported to the Fund's statewide Director and Advisory Board

and included in annual public reporting during the five year pilot period.

Annual reports from the Fund will be shaped by the Backbone Organization, with inputs from Anchor Organizations. These reports, which will be available to the Legislature and the public, will include:

- ▶ The extent to which grants enhanced family preservation, reunification, and healing;
- ▶ Recommendations for structural changes and investments at the state and local level to increase capacities of community-led organizations to strengthen child and family wellbeing; and
- ▶ Any other findings that the Fund's Director and Advisory Board deem relevant.

This annual reporting, and the Fund's location within the New York Department of State, would ensure oversight of the Fund's activities and provide ample opportunities for disseminating lessons learned from the pilot.



## Infusing Resources to Bolster Existing Strengths and Fill Gaps: How the Fund Will Strengthen Families and Reduce Unnecessary and Harmful CPS Investigations

By infusing resources into communities with the highest rates of CPS contact, the Fund will bolster existing natural strengths and fill gaps in resources; those resource gaps, compounded by racism, primarily drive CPS contact with families.<sup>18</sup> The devastating effects of anti-Black racism in New York's CPS is well-documented.<sup>19</sup> The New York State Office of Children and Family Services has publicly tracked the disparate impact of CPS on communities of color for more than a decade.<sup>20</sup> A 2022 report by the New York State Bar Association found that "[w]hile the legal child welfare framework today ostensibly acknowledges the integrity of all families, racial, cultural, and class biases are deeply embedded in the policies, structure, and practices of the child welfare system and predictably result in less respect and support for Black families."<sup>21</sup>

New York is not unique in this regard. Nationally, CPS overwhelmingly intervenes in families along racial lines: over half of Black children in the U.S. (53%) will experience a child welfare investigation compared to one-third of all American children.<sup>22</sup>

Reflecting this nationwide reality, in 2022 the American Bar Association adopted a resolution and issued a report urging its members to educate legal professionals about "anti-Black systemic racism within the child welfare system, stemming from the history of slavery

in the United States and perpetuated by over-surveillance of and under-investment in Black families in America, which is pervasive, ongoing, and a root cause of the disproportionate involvement of Black parents and children within the system."<sup>23</sup>

The resolution further urges state governments to recognize implicit and explicit bias and acknowledge collective responsibility for challenging laws, policies, and practices that devalue Black families.<sup>24</sup> The resolution urges the legal profession to "recognize the inherent strength of Black families, to value Black cultural and ethnic identity tied to race, and to follow the lead of Black parents, children, and kin with lived experience in child welfare in taking constructive steps to end the legacy of family separation and design a public approach to family support that best meets children and parents' needs in the future."<sup>25</sup>

The Working Group acknowledges the historical and contemporary conditions facing Black families and seeks to mitigate and change these long-standing characteristics of CPS involvement. We have designed the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund to focus state dollars on investments chosen by the communities historically impacted by CPS.

“Throughout their lifespan, parents and caregivers often face heightened stressors, including financial strain and economic instability, time demands, concerns over children’s health and safety, parental isolation and loneliness, difficulty managing technology and social media, and cultural pressures.”

—U.S. Surgeon General, excerpt from the *Parents Under Pressure* report (2024)

### **A significant stressor for families living in marginalized neighborhoods is a crippling lack of easily accessible, quality resources and family support services.**

Recently, the U.S. Surgeon General emphasized that, “throughout their lifespan, parents and caregivers often face heightened stressors, including financial strain and economic instability, time demands, concerns over children’s health and safety, parental isolation and loneliness, difficulty managing technology and social media, and cultural pressures.”<sup>26</sup> Financial strain and economic instability in the form of never-ending bills, food insecurity, under- and unemployment, housing insecurity, and inadequate access to mental and physical health care exemplifies the kind of “steady, unchanging (or slowly changing) oppressive conditions that must be endured daily.”<sup>27</sup>

Decades of research confirms the benefits of healthy neighborhood conditions and networks such as greenspace and walkability, proximity to healthy food sources, and robust civic groups that contribute to community self-efficacy. Community assets such as well-kept playgrounds, healthy food sources, transportation lines that put jobs within reach, and even a shady canopy of trees foster health and reduce stress.<sup>28</sup> Greenspaces enhance children’s cognitive functioning and social wellbeing.<sup>29</sup> For families, the “social infrastructure” of cities and towns—libraries, community centers, recreational facilities, houses of worship, cultural events, and civic organizations—provide gathering spaces that help connect parents to one another and

strengthen community problem-solving.<sup>30</sup> Low-income and poor neighborhoods are often sorely lacking in many of these neighborhood features that de-stress and connect children and families.

### **The social fabric, like economic policy and the physical landscape, profoundly shapes family life.**

Dozens of studies show that collective efficacy, defined as “the working trust and shared willingness of residents to intervene in achieving social control,” directly impacts a host of challenges that stress families.<sup>31</sup> In neighborhoods where residents look out for one another and band together to solve problems, health is better and crime is lower, even when socioeconomic disadvantage is the same.<sup>32</sup> Collective efficacy has been shown to impact domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, adult depression, children’s development and behavior, as well as health issues like asthma.<sup>33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38</sup> In the 2022 RAPID Project survey conducted by the Stanford Center on Early Childhood, parents named free resources through libraries, community events, religious organizations, and their children’s pre-school and extracurricular activities as providing key support.<sup>39</sup>

Parents report that community resources are one of the most important sources of emotional, social, and financial support for themselves and their young children—even small exchanges of neighborly care combat isolation.<sup>40</sup> Acquaintances made at the playground or school drop-off form a network of wide, informal connections that support parenting and serve as a pathway to resources.<sup>41</sup> Community groups pull people together to solve problems.<sup>42</sup> Collective action builds solidarity and combats injustice, trauma, and despair.<sup>43</sup> Taken together, these layers of connection and action enable neighborhoods to support and protect their children and families.

### **The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund will enhance the ability of groups to develop community assets and improve neighborhood environments.**

Neighborhood assets that support family life are inequitably distributed in New York—a product of past and present racist policies that allocate drastically fewer resources to communities of

color, particularly Black communities, making them more susceptible to CPS contact. Research illustrates that the majority of Black children and families in the U.S. live in neighborhoods historically under-resourced as a legacy of intentional disinvestment, residential segregation, and environmental inequities.<sup>44</sup> As scholar activist Dorothy Roberts notes in her influential book, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, “[m]ost children reported to the child welfare system are poor, and Black children are more likely to live in poverty than children of other groups.”<sup>45</sup>

Additionally, intense state oversight and intervention of families by CPS not only negatively affects the parent-child relationship,

it also “interferes with a community’s ability to form healthy connections among its members and to participate fully in the democratic process, contradicting the vital role of families in fostering children’s moral development free from state control.”<sup>46</sup> The likelihood of CPS intervention is highest for families in neighborhoods that lack meaningful access to community assets associated with child and family wellbeing. By infusing state funds into these neighborhoods across New York State, the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund would help revitalize and empower communities that have persevered through historical and present underinvestment and over-intervention.



## Moving Beyond Traditional Government-Community Dynamics: How the Fund Will Partner With Communities

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund is structured to maximize community engagement and decision-making at every stage of the planning, grantee selection and grant allocation processes. This design would enhance community connection and reorient the relationship between community members and government to facilitate genuine community leadership. This approach is consistent with New York’s family policy guidelines that recognize “families who are the consumers of services should be partners in the planning, delivery and evaluation of those services.”<sup>47</sup>

Often, government efforts touted as “community engagement” fall short of genuine community leadership by seeking input after a plan is announced or a project is already underway. Additionally, the accountability methods used are not robust, such as one-time focus groups, town halls, surveys, or advisory boards composed of “the usual suspects:” well-connected and familiar institutional leaders. This results in many traditional efforts at community engagement having the opposite impact on community members, with organizers claiming that the community “didn’t show up.”

As a result, community members are often rightfully cynical about “partnering” with government, while having to navigate the negative effects of state action and inaction in their neighborhoods: economic disinvestment, concentrated poverty, over-policing, the absence of safe and stable housing. Even when people with lived experience with CPS, for example, are “included” in decision-making, they are often tokenized, withheld necessary information, or navigating a hostile environment that undermines their ability to effectively and confidently participate.

### Neighbors and organizations rooted in the community know firsthand the community’s strengths, assets, needs, desires, and aspirations.

The federal Children’s Bureau has observed that “families and youth are our best sources of information about the strengths and needs of their families and communities, yet, historically, we make decisions and plans in the absence of their input. Moreover, where input is sought, it may not receive meaningful consideration.”<sup>48</sup>

Individuals and groups in neighborhoods are also key providers of mutual aid, often raising and distributing resources to help families with concrete resources during times of crisis, such as housing, food, and money for utilities, as well as other supports such as parenting groups, breastfeeding support groups, voluntary home visiting programs, and multi-generational community support centers.<sup>49</sup>

### Families want intentional investment outside of punitive systems.

Family support is most effective when delivered by trusted community helpers rather than by CPS or organizations contracted with CPS. Parent participants in a research study in New York City stressed that support and resources for families should be completely delinked from the local CPS agency. In New York City, that agency is the Administration for Children’s Services (“ACS”).<sup>50</sup> Key findings illustrated that:

- ▶ Connections to economic supports were the least common services provided by the agency;

“*Make it easier, don’t make it like a challenge to get help. Make it easier, make it down the street, make it in my neighborhood, make it someone that I know, maybe, or someone that I would have seen, just parents, and whether it’s taking the kids to school or just through the normal avenues of life. That’s what makes people feel reliable. It’s because people are there. In the places that we come from, trust is few and far between. It has to really come from people who know what it’s like, and people who live in neighborhoods that are hyper policed.*”

—Parent who experienced CPS, excerpt from the *An Unavoidable System* report (Fall 2021)

- ▶ ACS intervention inflicts lasting and layered trauma, including harming children physically and emotionally, and actively harming families instead of helping them;
- ▶ ACS does not respect parents’ cultural practices and values, and violates norms of privacy and autonomy for parents and children;
- ▶ ACS involvement damages the relationships that parents and families need to thrive; and
- ▶ Parents lose their jobs and identities, and live in fear as a result of ACS involvement.

Unsurprisingly, 88% of the parents in the study said they did not trust that ACS had their family’s best interest in mind, and that support and resources should come from people, networks, and organizations outside of ACS.

### Increased access to capital is critical for community-led groups in neighborhoods with the highest needs.

Black and brown-led community organizations are often locked out of formal and informal access to capital and support to grow.<sup>51</sup> Small groups face two major barriers in accessing and managing government funding. First, state and city contracts are structured as reimbursements, requiring nonprofits to do the work first and get paid for it later—often months or years later. To

## Examples of Similar Community-Led Reinvestment Funds

**To refine the structure of the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund, the Working Group has learned from groups in New York and across the country that have developed and implemented community-led planning, reinvestment efforts, and participatory grant-making processes.**

New York's Child and Family Wellbeing Fund builds on similar, tested models of community-led decision-making to support grassroots groups and neighborhood development. We have structured the Fund to maximize collective decision-making and meaningfully leverage community members' creativity, innovation, and power.

**New York State's Project RISE (Respond, Invest, Sustain, and Empower)** is one example of how state dollars can be directed with local input. In the fall of 2022, New York State's Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) initiated Project RISE, a \$28 million effort aimed at addressing the root causes of gun violence and creating safer neighborhoods. The stated goals of the project are to:

1. Build a local community's capacity to implement and sustain programming to address the underlying factors contributing to violence in the community; and
2. Enhance responses to violence within the community through increased community partnerships and programming with a healing and equity lens.<sup>i</sup>

Following public meetings for community members to discuss challenges facing their neighborhoods and potential investments, communities established a Project RISE Steering Committee to set priorities and approve how to appropriate state dollars. The structure that emerged included local organizations serving as fiscal pass-through entities for state funding that was provided up-front instead of through reimbursement. These same groups also provide technical and administrative support to RISE grantees.

**New York City's Neighborhood Safety Initiatives Program**<sup>ii</sup> is a similar effort coordinated by the Center for Justice Innovation, in which New York City's Housing Authority (NYCHA) tenants from all five boroughs joined a participatory budgeting process to decide how government funding should be allocated in their communities. Neighborhood Safety Initiatives employs organizers who work alongside residents to assess



local resources and needs. These organizers also offer capacity-building opportunities, enabling residents to plan and implement their own community initiatives. The program recognizes that “the fundamental pillars of community wellbeing—[including] vibrant public spaces, positive activities for young people, [and] economic opportunities—[are] key to building sustainable solutions for our communities.”<sup>iii</sup> The program was developed as part of the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety, an initiative dedicated to bolstering community wellbeing across New York City's 30 public housing developments. To date, the initiative has engaged 365 NYCHA residents across five boroughs, impacted 60,000 NYCHA residents and directed \$550,000 to community-led programs. Neighborhood Safety Initiatives has funded community assets including youth-designed murals, green spaces, and recreational areas that promote community connectedness and strengthen the social fabric of neighborhoods.

These two successful initiatives are community-led approaches to investing government funds similar to the Fund:

1. They employ strategies at the city and state level for directing public dollars to build community assets in partnership with local residents; and
2. They direct public funds to both build local capacity and increase child and family wellbeing in disproportionately impacted communities.

<sup>i</sup> New York State Governor Kathy Hochul. (2022). Governor Hochul Announces \$28 Million to Combat Gun Violence, Increase Opportunity for Youth and Strengthen Public Safety in Seven Cities Across New York State. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-28-million-combat-gun-violence-increase-opportunity-youth-and>

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<sup>iii</sup> See Endnote ii

cope, large agencies must often take out loans to cover payroll and rent—paying interest on crucial funds that arrive too late.<sup>52</sup> Small groups cannot afford to employ the same waiting strategy. Second, many small groups lack the staffing infrastructure to manage government contracts, which often come with voluminous paperwork, data entry, and auditing requirements.<sup>53</sup> As a result of these systemic barriers, the majority of public dollars flow through large organizations.

In New York City, for example, large social service agencies account for about 70% of all social services spending,<sup>54</sup> and contracts under \$100,000 make up less than half of one percent of all City contracts.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, smaller community groups are more likely to be led by people of color and trusted in the neighborhoods where they are located.<sup>56</sup> Large providers, usually with longstanding ties to CPS, tend to be less trusted and are less likely to locate their services in disadvantaged neighborhoods—this paradigm is leaving many families and communities behind. A 2013 study of nonprofit contracting in New York City found that in contracts focused on children and family services, there was a mismatch—funding was less likely to go to neighborhoods with the highest needs.<sup>57</sup>

Child and Family Wellbeing Fund grants will support a range of projects and activities, based on the interests of community-members, which may include:

- ▶ Concrete supports for families in crisis, such as rent, child care, food, and other necessities;<sup>58</sup>
- ▶ Direct cash transfer and guaranteed income projects;
- ▶ Afterschool, child care, and family activities in the community;
- ▶ Peer support, navigation, and mutual aid; and
- ▶ Greenspaces and improvement of public spaces for families.

Enhancing community conditions for family flourishing requires leveraging a neighborhood’s specific assets. By investing in civic processes that amplify local expertise, the Fund will help correct the harms suffered by communities with the highest rates of disparate CPS involvement.

## ***Moving Forward***

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund offers New York State a powerful opportunity to change how it supports children, families, and communities impacted by CPS. Rather than prioritizing services that require families to risk contact with CPS, the Fund would direct overdue resources to trusted community organizations. The Fund also uses a community asset lens, recognizing that communities may already have groups providing support for families facing precarity and crisis. The Fund offers a way for New York State to invest in trusted community organizations that enable children and families to thrive.

Communities with the highest levels of child welfare involvement are also communities with deep histories of poverty, systemic racism, and years of underinvestment. Despite these challenges, they have developed innovative ways to care for themselves and their neighbors. By lessening reliance on CPS and instead investing in community-based solutions, the Fund not only would support children and families but also ensure that state funds go where they will have the most impact. The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund is an evidence-driven example of how policymakers, advocates, and communities can use public funds to create a future where every family has access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to succeed.

To learn more about the Working Group and its activities, including how you can support making the Fund a reality in New York State, visit:

<https://forms.gle/S3jpF4v4uxjsYiWs5>





# Appendix

## The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund Design Summary

<b>State Funds</b>	<p><b>Move state funds to 10 communities highly impacted by disproportionate involvement in CPS.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A nine-person state Advisory Board would select a Director of the Fund as well as oversee selection of Backbone and Anchor Organizations. Advisory Board members would be appointed by the Governor and Legislature, including people with lived experience with CPS, community leaders, providers, attorneys, organizers, and policy advocates.</li></ul>
<b>Anchor Organizations</b>	<p><b>Fund Anchor Organizations in each community to lead a participatory planning and asset-building process to determine community grant-making priorities.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Organizations in selected communities with no current funding for work in CPS can apply to become Anchor Organizations.</li><li>• Each Anchor Organization would hire a facilitator, form a Community Advisory Board and run both the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) community inquiry and local grant-making processes.</li></ul>
<b>Funded Community Groups</b>	<p><b>Fund 6-8 groups in each community who are providing on-the-ground support for families.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Groups and organizations in selected communities, with budgets of less than \$5 million and no funding from CPS can apply for grants that may range from \$20,000 to \$150,000. In addition, Anchor Organizations may support micro-grants, such as for small civic events like block parties or emergency cash transfers.</li></ul>
<b>Backbone Organization</b>	<p><b>Use a Backbone Organization as an intermediary between New York State and participating communities to support Funded Community Groups with contracting and fiscal reporting.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Selected for a term of 5 years to coordinate the community grant-making process with the Anchor Organizations and the distribution of funds to Funded Community Groups.</li><li>• Works at the direction of the Director and the Advisory Board to identify potential Anchor Organizations to lead the ABCD process within each of the 10 communities.</li><li>• Helps Funded Community Groups translate their proposals into deliverables-based contracts and supports fiscal reporting. The process will, in and of itself, function as technical assistance to groups inexperienced with contracting and financial management, which can facilitate future city or state funding.</li></ul>
<b>Technical Assistance</b>	<p><b>Provide technical assistance to community groups to support capacity-building.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Each Funded Community Group can apply for an additional grant for technical assistance to support capacities such as database development and outcomes tracking that can facilitate scaling-up. For groups without a 501(c)3, the Backbone Organization can advise on how to achieve that designation.</li></ul>
<b>Transparency and Public Reporting</b>	<p><b>Annual public reports on the Fund will be shaped by the Backbone Organization, with inputs from Anchor Organizations, and the Advisory Boards working with communities where grants are disbursed.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reports will include the extent to which grants enhanced family preservation, reunification, and healing.</li><li>• Reports will include recommendations for broad structural changes and investments at the state and local level to increase capacities of community-led organizations to strengthen child and family wellbeing; and</li><li>• Reports will include any other findings that the Fund’s Director and Advisory Board deem relevant.</li></ul>

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