

## Westchester children's lobby isn't playing game with county board candidates

WHITE PLAINS — After watching child-care centers and day-care programs get squeezed from Westchester County's \$1.8 billion budget, a child-advocacy group is learning a new lesson: Politics.

Westchester Children's Association launched a campaign of its own aimed at letting the public know where candidates for the Board of Legislators stand on key children's issues.

Called Vote for Kids, the push includes candidate surveys, voter-registration drives and letter-writing campaigns.

Though the group isn't endorsing any candidates, it has published candidates' answers to its survey.

"Everybody says they're for kids. We're just trying to put some meat on the bones," said Cora Greenberg, executive director of the nonpartisan, not-for-profit group based in White Plains. "We're really just trying to get people engaged. ... We're educating folks why it's important to vote in an election."

The Board of Legislators and county

executive have a lot of sway over programs like child care, youth programs, immunization clinics, public **transportation** and parks.

Of the 25 respondents from both parties, all of them indicated they support child-care subsidies for low-income people.

Nearly all of the candidates, excluding Republican Michael Smith of Greenburgh, support **funding** youth employment and funding children leaving foster care.

In Smith's response on top priorities for children and youth, he said it was important to make Westchester more affordable for parents and grandparents; promote **businessgrowth** and protect parents' property rights by achieving appropriate terms for the affordable-housing settlement.

His opponent, Legislator John Nonna, D-Pleasantville, indicated that child-care subsidies and scholarships were important, as is providing adequate monies for youth

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programs. It was important to ensure programs are run efficiently, he wrote.

Though Nonna indicated the county should subsidize youth programs, mental-health services and children leaving foster care, he did not say whether youth employment should be included in the budget.

Five Republicans and one Democrat did not respond to the survey including Peter Michaelis, Terrence Murphy, Democrat John Fitzpatrick and Legislators James Maisano and Sheila Marcotte.

The results are published in a 26-page report that is available at [wca4kids.org](http://wca4kids.org).

Day-care advocates were vocal last year after County Executive Rob Astorino cut funding for programs such as child-care scholarships and raised fees for parents, a move that advocates viewed as hurting working parents.

They organized rallies, a march and turned up at county board meetings and budget hearings.

This is a continuation of those efforts, Greenberg said.

Astorino again defended his position, saying the county has been generous; it still spends \$29 million on child care, he said.

But it's also important to not look at these matters in a vacuum, he added. Money spent on mandates including employee pensions and health-care contributions is

money that is not directed to other social services.

"We have to have some sensible, reasonable costs so core programs don't suffer," he said. "Taxpayers have been generous. You've got to bring more balance. ... Until we fix the system, there's going to be less monies."

The Vote for Kids efforts, which include a legislative scorecard, are intended to show how incumbents voted on the budget as well as what candidates view as priorities.

Because the children's group is funded through private donations and foundation grants — and not through the county — it was able to complete the survey and lead voter-registration drives.

"We've had hundreds of people send messages to the county executive and legislators," Greenberg said. "We think kids are really a top priority. We're going to keep on going."

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