

## [Advocates Express Concern over Westchester Cuts](#)



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Westchester providers and advocates are concerned about how new County Executive Rob Astorino's first round of budget cuts will play out – and what it may portend for the next four years. Now, they are hoping to share those concerns directly with Astorino at a meeting scheduled later today.

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On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Astorino announced \$16 million of cuts to current year programs as the first step towards closing what is estimated to be a \$166 million annual deficit. Several aspects of the planned cuts seem clear. Others, including cuts to Community Optional Preventive Services (COPS) and family shelter programs, have yet to be finalized.

“Thirty-seven percent of these reductions come out of the Department of Social Services and most of that is services for children,” says Cora Greenberg, Executive Director of the Westchester Children's Association. “The County Executive has said that layoffs are a last resort. We'd like to think that cutting services for children should be the last resort.”

Of the \$5.8 million in social service budget cuts, the largest portion, \$3.3 million, comes from projected savings due to reductions in the County's foster care census and/or the placement of children in less restrictive and therefore less expensive levels of care.

“There is no reduction in services to kids in care,” says DSS Commissioner Kevin Mahon. “This is a good story, a great story. A year and a half ago we started looking at our kids in care and how we could provide better services locally so we could either get them home faster or step them down faster.”

Greenberg appreciates the success of this effort but differs as to what to do with the savings from having fewer young people in care. “If you can save \$3.3 million in foster care, you should be plowing that money back into services,” she says. “Where are these kids going? Just because they are leaving care doesn't mean they don't need services to keep them safe. We have to do better than that.”

The second major area of savings is in child care subsidies where Astorino plans to reduce expenditures by \$1.5 million. The savings will come from three areas – reducing a “scholarship” program that provides subsidies to families with income exceeding 200 percent of the poverty level, increasing parent co-pays for families with income between 100% and 200% of poverty, and ending new admissions to the Title XX child care program.

“This is a level of subsidy not available anywhere else,” says County spokesperson Ned McCormack of the “scholarship” program. “We are coming back to the mandated targets.”

Mahon stated that the increase in parent co-pay from 15% to 20% would have varying impact on families depending on where they fell within the 100%-200% of poverty income bracket. He estimated that the maximum increase for a family of three would be \$80 per month, bringing total monthly parent fees to just under \$300. “And, it is for families,” he emphasized. “If you have two or three children, you only pay once.”

The County plans to get \$750,000 in savings through reduction in expenditures for family shelters. “We don’t have that many people in our shelters,” says Mahon. “We have vacancy factor that will allow us to reduce costs.” Mahon indicated that the County would be meeting with providers to go over its estimates of how reduced occupancy can reduce contractual expenses.

Finally, the County is looking to its Community Optional Preventive Services (COPS) programs for an estimated \$272,000 in County tax-levy savings. “These are optional programs. By definition, these programs serve low risk kids,” says Mahon.

However, Mahon says that no final decision have been made on how or where cuts to COPS programs will be made, despite the fact that individual programs received letters outlining their budget reductions. “They went with a number and they were supposed to react to the department,” says Mahon. “We have a meeting next week to talk about the impact. We are clearly not going to put our selves in position where we bring kids back into care. We just want to make sure we understand totally what each one of these programs does and the impact. We have time and we want to do this right.”

Greenberg argues that cuts to COPS programs are counterproductive on a number of fronts. From a cost benefit standpoint, she stresses that the County will be giving up far more than it saves. Westchester pays only 35 cents on the dollar for COPS programs. Consequently, the \$272,000 cut will cost the County twice that amount in Federal and State aid.

And, she says, these services make sense programmatically. “These are the programs that keep kids safely at home. One program, for example, keeps young children out of psychiatric hospitals. If you don’t have alternatives to detention, PINS diversions and these other things, you are going to wind up with kids in jail or in much higher-end residential placement. That is what these programs are preventing.”

Greenberg will be one of several advocates and providers who will meet to express these concerns at meeting scheduled with County Executive Astorino this afternoon.