



Funding children's services saves money in the long run

Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino recently sounded the alarm about looming deficits in the county's current and future budgets. To get a start on righting this picture, he announced a series of savings and cuts, totaling about \$16 million, to be enacted this year. We were dismayed that more than one third of this amount, \$5.8 million, was to be realized through savings and reductions in the Department of Social Services, the part of county government that is charged with safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable children and families.

We believe that cutting services to children is the last place any government should start when trimming expenses. Why?

Investments in children have a high rate of return. Programs such as child care or community-based mental health and youth services help prevent the need for higher-cost interventions later on. Affordable child care allows families to stay gainfully employed and contributing to the economy.

Community youth services keep youngsters engaged in safe, productive activities and away from gang involvement, drug abuse and other anti-social and self-destructive behaviors.

Community-based mental health services strengthen families, and avoid costly out-of-home placements. Moreover, many county expenditures for children's services are eligible for matching state or federal dollars, and also allow nonprofit contractors to leverage private philanthropic donations.

Moreover, children can't wait. Unlike maintenance

on computers or parks, children's development cannot be put on hold. If we miss the opportunity to help a 15-year-old juvenile delinquent change his life, we are likely to be dealing very soon with a 16-year-old inmate. If we miss the chance to nurture a 3-year-old with quality care and early education, that chance is gone forever, along with the opportunity to build the social and pre-literacy skills that are so important for academic success.

Children rely on government help. More than other age groups, children rely on government services. For example, about a quarter of Westchester's children rely on public insurance for their health care. Nearly 6,000 Westchester children who are reported abused and neglected each year rely on government workers and publicly funded services to keep them safe. Thousands more rely on publicly supported community programs to keep them safe and busy after school, help them with severe emotional problems, or provide tutoring to help them succeed in school.

As revenues shrink and the tax burden on county residents grows, our government must be prudent in asking taxpayers to support only the most essential services with the highest return on investment. Research shows that services to children are among the best investment any government can make, and that they benefit not only the children and their families, but taxpayers and the larger community as well.

As our elected officials look for ways to reduce county expenses, we believe that there are items in our county budget that should be scrutinized for possible savings before making reductions in children's services, such as the \$22 million in overtime throughout the budget. We urge the county executive to cut services only as a last resort, and, when pursuing reductions in county contracts, to



target all contracts — such as with law firms and construction companies — that do business with the county, not just service contracts with nonprofit agencies.

When families trim their own budgets, children's needs come first. We urge county leaders to keep the needs of children at the top of their agenda, just as we all do with the needs of our own children.

Cora Greenberg