

# From Barriers to Opportunity: Confronting Systemic Barriers to Early Childhood and Poverty-Reduction Programs

## Executive Summary

### INTRODUCTION

Families across New York State rely on an array of public programs and resources to support their children during their critical early years. But availability does not equal access. Today, far too many New York families do not benefit from local, state, and federal support they need to raise healthy and thriving children due to systemic barriers standing in their way. These hurdles are especially steep for people of color, immigrants, and other historically marginalized groups. It is part of the reason why New York has one of the **worst child poverty rates in the nation**, with nearly one in five kids experiencing poverty, and nearly one in four for Black and Latinx children.

**To remove barriers to access, we must first identify them.** EdTrust-New York, as the leader of **Raising NY**, a diverse statewide coalition of organizations on the frontlines of connecting

families to public services and resources, is uniquely positioned to do so.

Over the past year, we worked with partners<sup>1</sup> across the State to pinpoint the most common barriers keeping families from accessing high-quality child care and other public benefits, including SNAP and WIC, and develop recommendations to eradicate those barriers. Our coalition partners leveraged their deep ties in local communities to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research, fielding numerous surveys, collecting and analyzing original data, and recording hundreds of interviews. As a result, our findings and recommendations, summarized here and in a larger report, are rooted in the lived experiences of families and give parents and caregivers a voice in improving the programs that directly impact *their* lives.

<sup>1</sup>Key partners that gathered research and data for this report include Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance (BT3 Alliance), Help Me Grow-Long Island (HMGLI), New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), ECE on the Move (ECEOTM), the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy (Schuyler Center), and The Children's Agenda (TCA).

## WHAT WE FOUND: A SNAPSHOT

### CHILD CARE

The affordability and availability of child care in New York represents a crisis. More than 60 percent of the State is considered a child care desert, meaning that there are three or more children under the age of five waiting for every one available slot.

For families, recent changes to the State's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) have resulted in increases in the number of families now using this benefit, with over 125,000<sup>2</sup> children receiving subsidized care this year. Yet the percentage of all eligible families who use this benefit remains low, in part due to longstanding income and work restrictions. Currently, families are only eligible for assistance during their hours of work, which is particularly challenging for parents who hold second jobs or work evening shifts.

As one North Country parent put it:

**"THE CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM HAS BEEN GREAT SINCE THEY UPPED THE INCOME LEVEL. BUT CHILD CARE IS A NECESSITY, AND THERE SHOULDN'T BE LIMITS ON ASSISTANCE."**

Moreover, applying for child care subsidies is an **overly complex, bureaucratic, and time-consuming process**, keeping many families from trying altogether. Many more are **unaware that these programs exist** in the first place. Parents who do complete the

application still report **difficulty in locating an available slot** for their child, while parents who exceed the income threshold often find the cost of care prohibitively expensive.

For providers and educators, the prevalence of **poverty-level wages** has led to rampant financial insecurity in the sector, and they are leaving the field in droves. Faced with rising costs and the ending of pandemic-era aid and workforce retention grants, providers/educators are struggling to keep the lights on and are increasingly **forced to charge families higher rates** to cover their operational costs.

**Between 2019 and 2024, rural Essex County lost**

**40%** 

**of its child care slots.**

**Today, the county has only**

**42** 

**child care providers**

**for roughly**

**1,125** 

**infants and toddlers.**

<sup>2</sup>NYCCAP-Family-Child-Counts-2024Jun.pdf

Immigrants and newly arrived families face these challenges plus others, including restrictions on certain forms of federal aid based on documentation status, **difficulty accessing a computer** and/or the internet, **language barriers**, and a general lack of **awareness about eligible programs and resources**.

Together, these roadblocks have a real impact on parents' lives and their ability to raise a family. For example, in a survey of 75 newcomers in New York City focused specifically on parents selling candy and fruit alongside their children, **a staggering 83 percent said they had aspirations to pursue other lines of work, but had not been able to due to trouble finding child care**.

### **PUBLIC BENEFITS**

With New York State's high cost of living, a significant number of families turn to public assistance programs to help afford food, housing, and health care. This includes 2.8 million residents on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and 430,000 participants in the "WIC" program, targeted to the unique nutrition needs of families during and after pregnancy.

These critical programs, however, come with their own limitations. Our research found that challenges accessing SNAP and WIC, in particular, were pervasive. For example, on Long Island, families that contacted one of our partners seeking help for basic needs often **declined to be referred to SNAP**. Many local food agencies did not have enough **Spanish-speakers on staff** to meet demand, and they frequently faced **overloaded caseloads** and **limited capacity** due to staffing shortages.



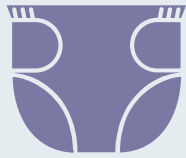
Out of the

**1,730**



**basic needs referrals tracked by Help Me Grow-Long Island,**

**62%**



**were about diapers.**

**But among those families who called about diapers and were then encouraged to enroll in SNAP benefits,**

**50%+**



**declined a referral for SNAP.**

Interviewees across New York shared how the cumbersome burden of applying for resources outweigh the perceived benefits, especially when considering other factors such as time constraints, lack of information, and the immediacy of their needs. Many cited overly restrictive program guidelines: for example, neither SNAP nor WIC covers the cost of diapers, despite diapers routinely being the single most requested item by parents. Others detailed how benefit amounts were insufficient, especially given the sharp rise in food and grocery costs in recent years.

As one Schenectady resident put it:

**“MORE THAN ONCE, I HAD TO LEAVE GROCERIES BEHIND WITH THE CASHIER BECAUSE WE DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH TO PAY, [OR LEFT] HALF-FULL CARTS IN A STORE BECAUSE THE GROCER DID NOT HAVE THE SPECIFIED PRODUCT REQUIRED BY WIC.”**



## BARRIERS ACROSS PROGRAMS

Many of the challenges described above are the result of inherent program shortcomings—meaning they can be addressed through better, more equitable program design and service delivery. Across child care and public benefit programs, we found striking similarities in terms of the barriers that were most pernicious in limiting parents’ access to resources. These barriers can be summarized as follows:

- 1 Lack of information:** Families are simply unaware that these programs exist and that they may be eligible for benefits; often little outreach is done to educate communities that need assistance the most. Caregivers surveyed for this report described word-of-mouth information sharing and personal connections as key to determining whether they knew of a program’s existence.
- 2 Difficulty applying for and securing benefits,** including:
  - a.** Tedious and time-consuming applications with extensive paperwork and intrusive follow-up, which often requires technological literacy and internet access;
  - b.** Inadequate staffing and lack of trauma-informed human support to guide families through the application process and assuage concerns over privacy often make parents hesitant to apply;
  - c.** Language barriers, difficulty accessing a computer and the

**“FILING FOR BENEFITS IS QUITE A TASK TO GATHER ALL THE INFORMATION. PEOPLE FEEL LOST AND HOPELESS. AND THE AMOUNT [OF ASSISTANCE] IS NOT ENOUGH TO COVER NEEDS.” – SURVEY RESPONDENT IN SCHENECTADY**

internet, transportation issues and proximity to services, and other administrative hurdles such as slow processing times and poor, unreliable communication.

- 3 Program-specific limitations,** which include:
  - a.** Significant eligibility restrictions and qualification requirements, such as home visits, blood tests, and refiling requirements, as well as certain work stipulations such as employment of 20 hours per week to be eligible for SNAP.
  - b.** Inadequate benefit levels, narrow list of items covered, and a lack of available service windows outside of traditional work hours, e.g. when food pantries or child care centers are open.
  - c.** Immigration status limits access to many programs, including many federal benefits, child care and direct to family credits.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

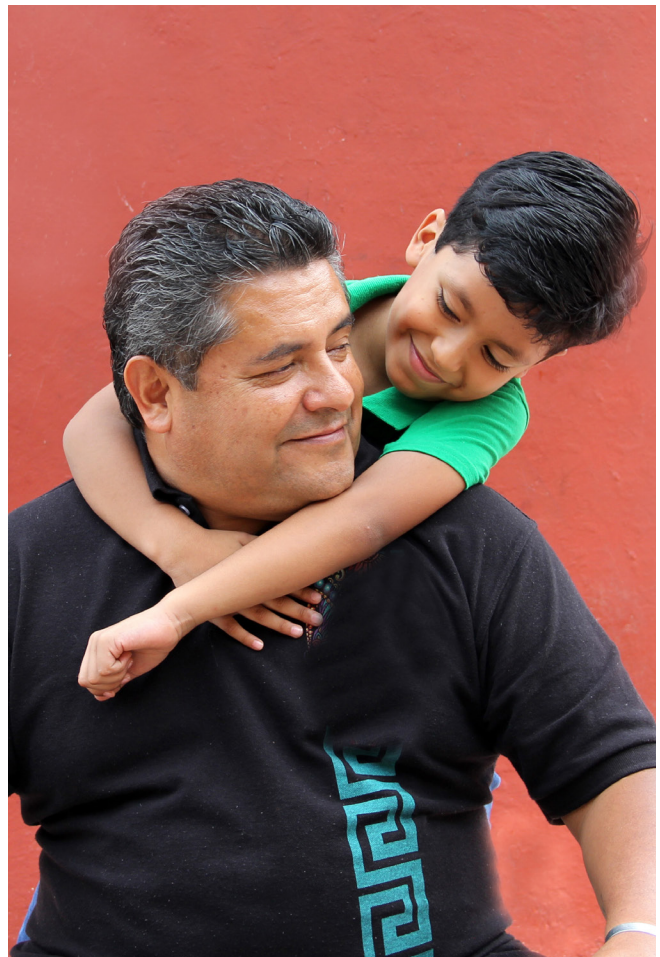
To ensure that families who need help can access it, New York State should make the following changes to child care and other public benefit programs:

- ❖ **Broaden and deepen outreach to parents** via targeted, creative strategies and multi-lingual navigators capable of reaching eligible populations and educating them about programs and benefits.
  - Increase transportation and child care assistance for in-person applicants, and expand program offices and hours of operation to more neighborhoods to help people complete applications.
- ❖ **Streamline and improve the application (and recertification) process across programs**, allowing families to apply to multiple programs and services online, all in one place.<sup>3</sup>
  - Eliminate language barriers, remove unnecessary paperwork requirements, and ensure applications are user-friendly and easy to navigate.
- ❖ **Increase workforce and program capacity**, including more frequent in-person human touch points, technology upgrades, timely communication, and culturally-appropriate and trauma-informed training for staff.
  - Make significant investments in the human services workforce to ease overburdened caseloads, shorten waitlists and wait times, and raise wages to recruit and retain qualified staff.
- ❖ Where possible under federal guidelines, **eliminate unnecessary limits and restrictions** on access to public benefits, including certain work requirements, and **increase benefit levels** for families.

A six-year-long project by the New York Immigration Coalition found that

# 4 OUT OF 5

immigrant families said they would *not have been able to apply or enroll in early childhood education without direct, in-person assistance.*



## CONCLUSION

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New York State has set an ambitious goal of cutting child poverty in half by 2032. Doing so will depend on our ability to get public benefit programs, services, and resources into the hands of families—especially people of color, immigrants, and other historically marginalized groups—who need help the most.

Yet our State’s current system of support often falls short. Families feel like they are constantly hitting dead ends (that is, if they know about available resources to begin with). A litany of obstacles—from

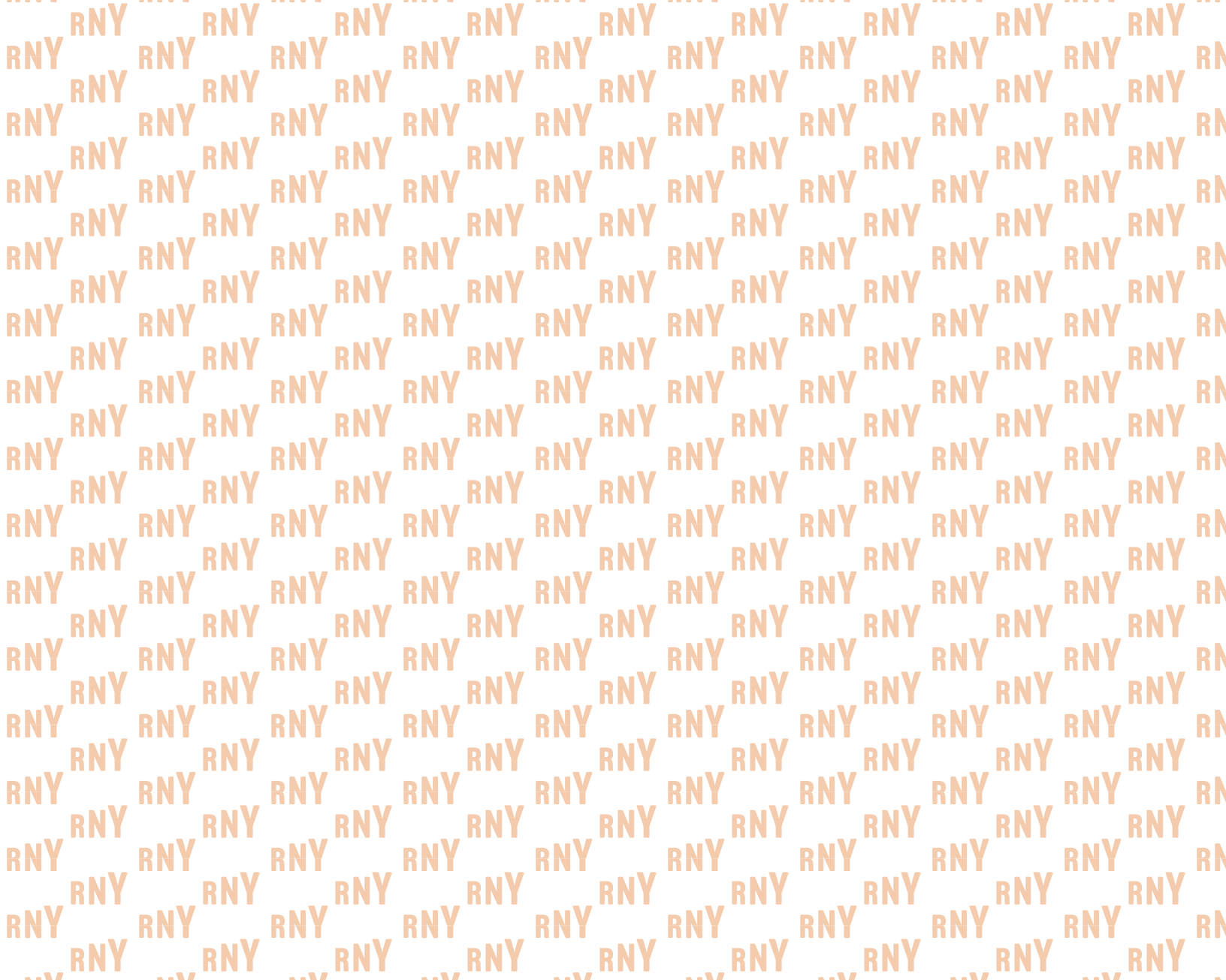
dizzying and time-intensive applications to understaffed agencies and arbitrary program restrictions—keep critical support out of reach for thousands. This has left parents frustrated, providers/educators underpaid, and programs overwhelmed.

With common-sense changes and smart investments, however, New York can ensure that its public benefit programs are truly accessible and basic needs are met, preventing hunger and hardship throughout the State.

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**Raising New York, coordinated by EdTrust-New York, is a cross-sector, statewide coalition of parent, early childhood, education, civil rights, business, and health organizations dedicated to advocating for policies and system changes that will benefit families of infants and toddlers, with a focus on improving long-term outcomes for low-income households, children of color, and those in other underserved groups.**

# **RAiSiNG NEW YORK**

Supported families. Thriving children.  
A stronger New York.