

March 27, 2023

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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

Ahead of NYS Budget Deadline, Organizations Providing Attorneys for Children in Family Court Demand Increased Funding to Keep Children Safe and Ensure Quality Representation

(NEW YORK, NY) - The Legal Aid Society, Lawyers For Children, The Legal Aid Society of Suffolk County, Inc., The Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo, Inc., Citizens Concerned for Children, Inc., the Children’s Rights Society, Inc., The Children’s Law Center, Inc., Sullivan Trail Legal Society, Inc., Legal Aid Society of Rockland County and The Legal Aid Society of Rochester released the following statement ahead of New York State’s budget deadline, calling on Albany lawmakers to appropriate \$15 million in increased funding to ensure quality of representation by Attorneys for Children (AFC) providers for children in Family Court:

“Our organizations are [in crisis](#), plagued by staff departures, dangerously high caseloads and an inability to attract prospective employees due to insufficient compensation.

“Years of flat funding and pandemic-era budget cuts have led us to this moment, and it’s unsustainable, jeopardizing the provision of quality representation to children, the overwhelming majority of whom are Black and Latinx, who desperately require the services of skilled and committed attorneys.

“Simply put, our budget request is a drop in the bucket, but has the potential to have an outsized impact on the need for equal access to justice that plagues the Family Court system. Albany lawmakers must include this modest request in any final budget.”

Background

For too long, AFC non-profit law offices have been denied [sufficient funding](#), threatening their ability to protect children’s rights and provide children with the holistic representation they need.

Children are legally entitled to representation in Family Court so that their voices are heard and their rights protected in the wide range of Family Court proceedings that can determine the future trajectory of their lives. As distinguished from all other legal service providers serving children, including 18-b attorneys, the AFC non-profit law offices represent children in 90 percent of proceedings in New York City, and the majority of these matters statewide.

AFCs also represent young people who are arrested and face delinquency allegations in Family Court. This includes children as young as 12 and many young people who previously faced criminal proceedings in adult court prior to the landmark “Raise the Age” changes.

AFC offices provide desperately needed holistic representation, and administer wrap-around social work support, educational advocacy, immigration representation, protection from sexual exploitation, and a myriad of other necessary services.

New York’s AFC office program is housed within the New York State Office of Court Administration (OCA) budget and has remained virtually flat for two decades. To date, AFC offices remain the only legal service provider offices that have not had meaningful budget recovery from pandemic-era cuts and decades of flat funding. AFCs have also been excluded from the raises recently granted to 18b panel attorneys, civil legal services offices, and court personnel.

Without this immediate funding, Albany will jeopardize New York’s most vulnerable children by denying those who are dedicated to their representation a living wage. This failure has also created structural deficits that threaten the sustainability of many of these vital programs.

In a [letter](#) to Governor Kathy Hochul, Judge Erik Pitchal, President of the New York City Family Court Judges Association raised the alarm that this lack of funding for AFCs, “infringes daily on the fundamental constitutional rights of indigent children, most of whom are Black and Brown.”

AFCs are seeking an increased allocation of \$15 million in New York’s 2024 Fiscal Year budget. Governor Hochul and the Legislature [failed](#) to include this allocation in the preliminary budget proposal and one-house budgets, respectively. Budgets reflect values, and AFCs urge the Governor and Legislature to demonstrate their commitment to children across New York State by granting this desperately needed request for increased funding.

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