

January 8, 2024

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul:

We, the undersigned, urge you to increase the cash assistance payment standards and afford tens of thousands of New Yorkers greater dignity, autonomy, and opportunity. Specifically, we request that your proposed budget include: (1) an increase in the basic needs cash assistance allowance, including an increase in the amount of the personal needs/special needs grants; and (2) an increase in the amount of rent assistance made available to cash assistance recipients to reflect the actual cost of rent across New York State. The current levels of these benefits – a key part of New York’s statutory safety net – have not been updated in decades. The State cannot afford to allow New Yorkers to experience deep poverty, housing instability and homelessness, adverse health outcomes, poor long-term economic prospects, and a host of other negative collateral consequences.

Increase the Cash Assistance Basic Needs Allowance

The basic needs allowance is designed to help people pay for necessities like clothing, diapers, hygiene products, over the counter medication, and transportation. But because the basic needs allowance has not been updated since 2011, and has never kept pace with inflation, it is woefully inadequate to cover these essential expenses. The utility supplement portions of the basic needs grant have also not been updated since they were established, in 1981 and 1986, respectively. The result is that a family of three with no other income receiving cash assistance is granted only \$389 a month to meet their basic needs, including money for utilities. The personal needs/special needs grants for which certain homeless New Yorkers are eligible in lieu of regular cash assistance have not been updated since 1997 and are even more meagre. A family of three is expected to survive on \$189 a month for all their cash needs. Meanwhile, a single adult anywhere in the State, including New York City, is expected to survive on \$183 per month for their basic needs. If they are in a certain type of shelter, they receive only \$45 a month. Each of these cash grants must be increased as soon as possible. Every dollar these grants are increased will help New Yorkers meet their most basic needs.

Increase the Cash Assistance Shelter Allowance Amount to the HUD Fair Market Rent

New Yorkers also desperately need an increase in the cash assistance shelter allowance. The current cash assistance shelter amounts are so low that there are literally zero habitable rental units priced at the level of the shelter allowance anywhere in New York State in the private market. See [REPORT-No-Keys-to-Safe-and-Decent-Housing-in-NYs-Safety-Net-8.23.23.pdf](https://empirejustice.org/reports/REPORT-No-Keys-to-Safe-and-Decent-Housing-in-NYs-Safety-Net-8.23.23.pdf) (empirejustice.org) For example, in Albany, the cash assistance shelter allowance for a family of three is \$309. Data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development indicates

that there are simply no apartments that meet basic housing quality standards in the private rental market for \$309 in Albany County. In fact, HUD's data and analysis for every county in New York States shows that there are no units in the private market at or even near the meager cash assistance shelter allowance. Federally subsidized housing and federal tenant-based rental assistance are not a viable alternative. Most waitlists for these programs are closed and are years long.

The appropriate measure of housing costs in New York State should be the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Fair Market Rent. Your administration has already recognized this. In December 2021, you signed into law a bill that sets maximum subsidy levels at 100 percent of the HUD FMR for a subsection of cash assistance recipients (New York City families with children experiencing or at imminent risk of homelessness and who are eligible for a supplement called FHEPS). Your administration also used this standard in 2021, 2022, and 2023 when you approved limited funding for rental assistance (the Rental Supplement Program) set at up to 100% of the FMR for certain low-income households experiencing or at risk of homelessness state-wide.

New York Cannot Wait

Increasing the basic needs allowance, including the personal needs and special needs grants, and the maximum rent allowance for cash assistance recipients to the HUD FMR is vital: it will immediately help lift affected New Yorkers out of deep poverty in every community comprising our great state. The New York State Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council 2023 Progress Report indicates that the Council is considering many important recommendations, including increases in benefits levels and indexing benefits levels to changes in the cost of living over time. See <https://otda.ny.gov/cprac/reports/CPRAC-Progress-Report-2023.pdf> at 23, 27-28. But many of the crucial changes to cash assistance need not await the completion of the Council's work. New York State has failed to act for far too long. In three of New York State's largest cities, Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo, 1 in 4 people are living in poverty. Black and Indigenous community members experience poverty at twice the rate of white community members and children experience poverty at a persistently higher rate than the overall population. Numerous studies already show that programs with higher payment standards improve the quality of life and economic outlook for individuals and families in critical ways, with marked improvements to stability, employability, physical and mental health, and food security.

Everyone is feeling the pressure from raising inflation, and as the purchasing power of a dollar has gone down, the suffering of New Yorkers expected to live on less than \$200 dollars a month has become nearly unbearable. New York State residents continually feel more trapped in the indignity of poverty, and we believe the time is long past due to reevaluate the programs we have in place. Increasing payments in cash assistance programs is an investment in our neighbors and sets us on the path to alleviating poverty now in the most effective and straightforward way possible.

Respectfully submitted,

African Services Committee

Asian American Federation

Association of Legal Aid Attorneys

Barrier Free Living

Broadway Community

Bronx CLT

CAMBA, Inc.

Center for Elder Law & Justice

Citizens' Committee for Children of NY

City Bar Justice Center

Coalition for the Homeless

Nancy Kantor

Community Service Society of New York

Community Voices Heard

Early Care & Learning Council

ECLI-VIBES

Empire Justice Center

Enterprise Community Partners

Erie County Bar Association Volunteer
Lawyers Project

Families Together in New York State

FPWA (Federation of Protestant Welfare
Agencies)

Family & Children's Association (FCA)

Family Promise of Greater Rochester

Frank H. Hiscock Legal Aid Society

Henry Street Settlement

Hetherington Consulting

Homeless Services United (HSU)

Housing Works Inc.

Vicki Lens, PhD, affiliation Hunger College,
Silberman School of Social Work

Indivisible Rochester

Labor-Religion Coalition of NYS

Legal Services of Central New York

Long Island Cares, Inc. – The Harry Chapin
Food Bank

Long Island Coalition for the Homeless

Make the Road New York

Met Council on Housing

Mobilization for Justice

National Center on Law and Economic Justice

New Economy Project

New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

New York Legal Assistance Group

Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition

New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation

Tenants Political Action Committee

NYC Family Policy Project

The Bridge Project

NYS Kinship Navigator

The Bronx Defenders, Civil Action Practice

OLA of Eastern Long Island

The Center for Independence of the Disabled, NY

Open Hearts Initiative

The Children's Agenda

Prevent Child Abuse New York

The Community Service Society of New York

Queens Volunteer Lawyer Project, Inc.

The Corporation for Supportive Housing

Riverside Edgecombe Neighborhood Association

The Education Trust – NY

RMAPI (Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative)

The Health & Housing Consortium

Robin Hood

The Housing Council at PathStone

Rochester Housing Authority

The Legal Aid Society

Rural Migrant Ministry

The Legal Aid Society of Rochester, NY
United Neighborhood Housing

S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth, Inc.

United Tenants of Albany, Inc.

Safe Horizon

Urban Pathways

Safety Net Activists & Safety Net Project at the Urban Justice Center

Vocal NY

Sanctuary for Families

Volunteer Lawyer Project of CNY, Inc.

Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy

Volunteers of Legal Service

Suffolk Progressives

Welfare Rights Initiative

Supportive Housing Network of New York

Western New York Law Center

Western Queens Community Land Trust

Win