MEMORANDUM IN SUPPORT
S.2038-A/A.2525-A

The Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy urges New York’s legislature to include in the Enacted Budget language as described in S.2038-A/A.2525-A, to strengthen the child welfare preventive housing subsidy to reflect increased housing costs and better address the needs of youth and families involved in the child welfare system.

The Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy is a 150-year-old statewide, nonprofit organization dedicated to policy analysis and advocacy in support of public systems that meet the needs of disenfranchised populations and people living in poverty. Schuyler Center strongly supports S.2038-A/A.2525-A to amend the Social Services Law (SSL) to 1) update the value of rent subsidies available to families involved in the child welfare system and youth exiting the child welfare system from $300 to $725, including annual increases based on calculations tied to inflation, and 2) extend the upper age limit that a young person exiting foster care can receive the benefit to 24, allowing youth who must leave foster care (‘age out”) at 21 to avail themselves of the subsidy when they are transitioning to independent living – exactly when they need it most.

Housing is critical to family stability and safety, and the child welfare housing subsidy is a vital support to families for whom unstable housing is a driving factor in their involvement in the child welfare system. The goal of the child welfare housing subsidy program is to stabilize housing for families and prevent child removals, expedite reunification of children in foster care, and help youth aging out of foster care who face high risk of housing instability and homelessness.

Under the existing program, families with open child protective services investigations, families receiving preventive services, families where children are reunifying from foster care, and youth ages 18 through 21 are eligible for the housing subsidy through their local department of social services (LDSS). LDSSs are authorized to provide eligible families and youth with a housing subsidy of up to $300 per month for up to three years or until reaching the limit of $10,800. The housing subsidy program is a mandated prevention service intended to keep children out of foster care or to expedite discharge from foster care. It is on a menu of critical preventive services authorized under SSL 409, and fully funded in the recently passed state budget.

The housing subsidy amount has not changed since the housing subsidy was created in 1988 (although the law was amended in 2019 to clarify that the subsidy can be used by families and youth living with roommates). With housing costs having nearly tripled since 1988, the low subsidy amount has rendered the subsidy largely ineffective at achieving its intended purpose of helping stabilize the housing of families and enabling young adults to transition from foster care to independence. For comparison, New York State’s median monthly gross residential rent is $1,390; in New York City, that jumps to $1,579. S.2038-A/A.2525-A increases the subsidy from
$300 to $725 per month (with $725 being the 2022 equivalent of $300), includes an annual increase using calculations tied to inflation, and extends the upper age limit for youth aging out of foster care to 24.

Each year, approximately 1,000 youth age out of foster care. As many as one-third of youth who age out of foster care experience homelessness, and many more experience unstable housing arrangements. At the same time, many families involved with child welfare face housing instability, contributing to stress and increasing the possibility of family separation.

With homelessness and housing instability at a crisis point in New York State, straining all of New York’s housing systems, it is imperative that New York invest in this housing support dedicated to youth aging out of foster care work, and to families involved in the child welfare system. These are two groups often lacking any family they can fall back on during difficult times. It is imperative for New York to modernize this vital preventive service this year.

Codifying these updates to the subsidy is also important because much of the federal pandemic economic supports, including emergency payments and rental protections, ended in 2021. For families facing potential contact with New York’s child welfare system, those preparing for reunification with their children, and for transition-age youth living independently, this legislation is a much-needed updating of a critical preventive service.

By including this piece of legislation in the enacted budget, New York has the opportunity to strengthen its housing subsidy program so that more youth and families may find stability and independence through housing.

February 27, 2023