

COMMENTARY

Allowing kids to live in poverty is a policy choice

By Kate Breslin

New York has a devastating child poverty problem.

We also have Senate and Assembly leaders ready to invest in proven policy solutions to lift children out of poverty and into opportunity.

The question at this moment is: Do we have a governor who will do what it takes?

State leaders are (still) negotiating the first New York state budget created under the requirements of the Child Poverty Reduction Act. With the enactment of that law, state leaders on both sides of the aisle stood up and made a promise to do better: The law requires the state to act to reduce child poverty rates by 50 percent by 2033.

When children's lives are impacted by poverty, they are more likely to experience poorer health, housing instability, and negative developmental and educational outcomes. Research suggests that 30 percent of children in foster care would have remained with their families if they were not poor.

New York has more than a million children living in poverty or near-poverty, and a child poverty rate higher than 30 other states'. State budget choices affect daily life for millions of children — for the better, or not. Well into the second year since poverty reduction became state law, this year's budget should feature bold investments — investments that will take the state well down the path toward a 50 percent reduction in child poverty.

One strong example of policy that meaningfully reduced child poverty is the temporarily expanded federal child tax credit, which kept two million children above the poverty line. It worked. And then it expired, plunging millions of children back into poverty.

New York leaders can do better, starting with fixing our state's deeply flawed refundable child tax credit. Inexplicably, this child tax credit entirely excludes babies and children under age 4 and those experiencing the lowest incomes, while also providing minimal tax relief (just \$330 per year). The goal of reducing child poverty by 50 percent will be nearly impossible to achieve without expanding refundable tax credits.

While Gov. Kathy Hochul's budget proposal fails to make these straightforward poverty-fighting improvements, both the Senate and Assembly budgets propose including babies and toddlers in the state's child tax credit, and the Assembly proposed nearly enough funding to ensure the lowest-income families receive the maximum credit. Now it's up to Gov. Hochul to demonstrate her own commitment to New York's children and families by including these actions, among other poverty-fighting investments, in the final budget.

Child poverty is a public policy choice with difficult, sometimes devastating, impacts on the children and families who experience it — and every budget that is enacted without serious attention to solving this problem means our leaders have again chosen to allow thousands of children to endure homelessness, missed meals, inadequate clothing, and countless other tangible and intangible hardships.

Albany Times Union, Tuesday, April 25, 2023

Putting money into the pockets of struggling families means more children will have what they need to thrive, play, learn and grow. It means more children experiencing a school day without hunger. It means families feeling safe and secure knowing they have the resources to meet their children's needs.

Giving our children the opportunity to thrive should be reason enough for our state leaders to follow through on the promise of poverty reduction. New York has the tools; we need leaders with the will to use them.

Kate Breslin is the president and CEO of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy and is an appointee to New York's Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council.