In October 2023, The Children’s Agenda, Rochester Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative, Ibero American Action League, Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, Spiritus Christi, and the End Child Poverty Now Campaign collaborated to organize a community town hall on child poverty in Rochester, New York. A diverse group of community members gathered to share their experiences living in and working to overcome poverty – each emphasizing the complex and often daunting work required to access programs intended to support under-resourced children and families.

As each participant shared their story, a common thread became apparent: no matter which public resource was highlighted, the experience for each speaker was defined by the systemic barriers that blocked their ability to provide for themselves and their families in a time of need. These barriers included lack of knowledge about how and where to access programs and time burdens associated with getting to the right place to secure resources. Beyond simple and necessary administrative solutions, the participants spoke to deeper concerns about barriers that have long prevented families from receiving public assistance and accumulating resources that would prevent future generations from experiencing poverty. They emphasized that programs intended to support families often perpetuate the cycle of generational poverty through mechanisms such as income cliffs.

This report highlights key issues elevated by participants during the Town Hall: the challenges of stretching limited resources across many needs, housing, child care, benefit cliffs, and building public knowledge of existing resources. In the discussion of each issue, we highlight solutions recommended by participants with firsthand experience and corresponding evidence-based policy recommendations that center a whole child, whole family approach. The participants articulated plainly that children live and thrive in families and communities, and that their well-being is inextricably tied to the well-being of their caregivers, their families, and their communities.
A Community Town Hall

The Town Hall event was held on the evening of October 2, 2023. Intentional planning laid the groundwork for this successful community gathering, where parents and youth leaders were invited to speak about their experiences of poverty to an audience of engaged community members, advocates, elected officials, and their representatives. Local elected officials were invited to attend and were given an opportunity to respond to the community’s storytelling with commitment and solutions.

The event was held at Ibero’s Community Resource Center, which was selected in part for its location in the heart of one of Rochester’s highest poverty communities and its easy access on bus lines. Because the event was held during many families’ typical dinner hours, food was provided for all attendees. Additionally, child care was offered and utilized by more than ten families. The audience was a mix of families, youth, community leaders, professionals, and the faith community, and included The Children’s Agenda’s VIP (“Very Invested Parents”) group and RMAPI’s Single Mothers Cohort. As a result of this community- and family-oriented approach, approximately 110 people attended the town hall.

In December 2021, Governor Kathy Hochul signed the Child Poverty Reduction Act into law, making clear New York’s commitment to cutting child poverty in half, with attention to racial equity, in the next 11 years. The law established an ambitious poverty reduction goal, and holds the State accountable to reach that goal through the creation of the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council, which is charged with monitoring the State’s progress toward its goal.

This Community Town Hall was the first in a planned series of sessions across New York State, serving as opportunity to elevate community voice and experience navigating poverty and integrate it with the broader state-level policy conversation regarding child poverty reduction. Meaningful, effective policy change will only be possible with insight and direction from community members who have experienced poverty firsthand.

The following Elected Officials or their staff were in attendance: Assemblymember Clark, Assemblymember Bronson, Chief of Staff for Assemblymember Byrnes, Chief of Staff for Assemblymember Lunsford, Community Engagement Coordinator for Senator Cooney, Staff for Assemblymember Meeks, and two regional representatives from Governor Hochul’s Office.
Balancing Limited Resources

Parent speakers at the town hall highlighted the stress and strain that poverty imposes upon families. Parents spoke about the exceptional stress of making ends meet with limited financial resources, with several emphasizing that they frequently had to choose which essential bills to pay with their limited funds.

Sabrina Bender, a parent and youth leader, shared how she regularly has to prioritize and compromise on basic expenses. “Money is not meeting the needs for me and my daughter... wondering each week or month if I should even buy food... I always have to pick week by week, what bills to pay.”

It was clear that parents and families felt the strain of not having adequate resources to cover basic expenses and meet the wants, needs, and desires of their children. The State can do more to elevate some of this financial burden felt by families by increasing the resources in families’ budgets. In fact, robust refundable child tax credits and child allowances are among the most effective strategies for reducing child poverty and building family economic security.

Housing & Housing Insecurity

“...I was homeless at 16 years old... so I’ve been on my own since I was very young... And when I moved forward, turning 18, going to DSS... Being happy, like that was the ticket of my life. To have my own home, to have somewhere to call home.”
- Candace Cabral, parent

During the town hall, nearly all of the speakers detailed struggles at some point in their life with finding and keeping affordable, safe housing. These experiences were multigenerational, and many who had struggled in their adult lives also grew up in families who had struggled.

Often, the speakers navigated Department of Social Services (DSS) systems only to find that subsidies were insufficient to afford safe housing or were ineligible to be applied to their current housing situation. Sabrina Bender shared that her current housing situation was not approved to receive DSS funds. She added, “I can’t get rental assistance. Most of the houses for rent want three times the amount just to move in.”

Lack of housing and shelters specifically for families with children was a common struggle shared by parent and youth speakers. Miles, a youth leader with Teen Empowerment, shared that “For the nine years I’ve been here, I’ve been in three different shelters, two different hoods, and I’ve been homeless all before the age of 15... at first I did terrible in school because of a lack of resources.”
Struggles to find and afford child care presented layered challenges for parents, with speakers detailing the ways in which each point of failure in the child care system represented another obstacle to their ability to provide for their children. Navigating the complex and time-consuming system of applying for child care assistance became merely the first step of an ongoing struggle to find and maintain care that met their families’ needs. Once approved for assistance, some parents found that the rate paid by the state was too low to be accepted by high-quality programs, especially those most able to provide specialized care for children with chronic illnesses and disabilities.

Recently, the barriers experienced by Deondra Dukes – who knew she would be denied the child care assistance she needed to advance her career if she informed DSS that she was in cosmetology school – have been reduced. Due to changes enacted in the last year, school and occupational training now count as eligible activities for child care assistance on their own, without additional work requirements. Categorical eligibility, implemented in 2023, allows families who have already proven their income eligibility for programs like SNAP, Medicaid, and WIC to skip the burdensome process of proving their income eligibility again for child care assistance. Nevertheless, barriers remain in the form of difficult applications, discrepancies among counties, work requirements, and rules that exclude children in some immigrant families.

Long waiting lists and program closures related to inadequate staffing were among the biggest threats to the participants’ ability to maintain employment after being approved for assistance. Sabrina Bender stated: "I’m struggling trying to find someone weekly, day-by-day, trying to put [my daughter] in school and it’s not healthy."
One parent expressed that upon learning what her child care provider earns, she began to wonder how she took care of her own family. This realization underscored the theme of shared struggle between families and members of the child care workforce, and the understanding that until child care workers are paid a living wage for this crucial work, the children and families that rely on them will not have the high-quality care they need and deserve.

**Benefit Cliffs Limit Employment**

A theme throughout the speakers’ remarks was the interplay between participating in state or local programs/services and maintaining or growing employment. For example, a recipient of disability assistance will likely need to work while receiving assistance because the amount of the benefit is insufficient to make ends meet. This introduces a new stressor to their life: they must worry about losing their assistance for earning just a dollar over the income limit. **That abrupt loss of benefits due to a new income level is referred to as a “benefit cliff” — toppling over the edge can leave a family or individual in a more precarious position than they were in prior to gaining employment or earning increased wages.**

Benefit cliffs prevent families from establishing generational wealth and security for their families, requiring them to live on the edge of getting by because if they earn just a little too much or have too many assets or savings, they no longer qualify for help they still very much need.

Participants expressed the sentiment that cliffs are like having the rug pulled out from under you just as soon as you start to do better for your family. Losing disability benefits, housing assistance, child care, and/or Medicaid as income increases ends up setting families back further than the income gained through a new job or a raise.
Throughout the evening, numerous participants spoke about lack of information as a significant barrier to participation in public programs. Knowledge about where and how to access specific programs, along with knowledge of the very existence of the programs, is crucial to being able to participate in, and benefit from those programs. However, many parents and young people described a word-of-mouth web of information-sharing that results in community members’ personal connections determining whether or not they know of a program’s existence.

Danielle Jones, a parent speaker, emphasized this point, noting that, in order to access the programs needed to support your family, you have to know where to find resources, know the right people, and have thick skin.

Deondra Dukes, a parent participant, spoke about a resource she learned about that could have helped her family had she had access to it earlier. She emphasized that now that she knows about it, she will share it with others in her community: “I have to get that information and then spread it to people. There is a lot out there, but nobody knows about it.” This sentiment made clear: poverty-fighting public programs cannot achieve maximum impact without appropriate outreach and community knowledge.

Community members are eager for better ways to access the programs and supports they need and are eligible for. Our state and local governments can – and should – work to better publicize, coordinate, and streamline enrollment and eligibility for programs that support children and families.

"I think about the parents that maybe don't know about the resources or they get overwhelmed when they're trying to get through the systems, and that can leave them in that cycle [of poverty]."
- Danielle Jones, parent
Recommendations

Throughout the Town Hall, participants raised a vast array of challenges faced by families, as laid out above. While the challenges are many, there are policy solutions that the State could advance now to address many poverty-related barriers and better support families. These include:

- **Addressing barriers to program participation by:**
  - Exploring opportunities for better coordination among programs, to move closer to a single point of entry for all public programs. As a starting place, explore whether, wherever possible, programs can directly enroll or refer to other programs with similar eligibility.
  - Approaching public awareness and advertising for public programs with intentionality to reach parents in spaces they regularly utilize – like schools, pediatric offices, libraries, and community grocery stores.
  - Examining and addressing the impact of means testing and benefit cliffs on families and implementing changes that protect rather than penalize.
  - Ensuring all eligible children remain continuously enrolled from birth to age 6 in Medicaid and Child Health Plus health coverage, without the need for burdensome renewal paperwork and verification.

- **Strengthening economic supports for families including through:**
  - Ensuring the maximum state child tax credit reaches the lowest-income New Yorkers and increase the credit amount to meaningfully impact family budgets; and
  - Strengthening the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) so all working New Yorkers may access the credit, including those filing with an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN).
  - Building stronger housing supports for families by:
    - Funding the Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP), which would create a state-funded voucher that would operate much like the federal Section 8 program.
    - Increasing the Public Assistance (PA) housing allowance to a level that stabilizes housing for more families. Currently at a statewide average of $347 for a household of four, the PA housing allowance was last adjusted more than 20 years ago — in 2003.

- **Strengthening New York’s child care access by:**
  - Creating a permanent state child care fund to increase child care worker compensation. This fund should be sufficient to offer all child care workers compensation parity with similar positions in the public school system.
A whole child, whole family, whole community approach is essential to the work of meaningfully reducing child poverty. Breakdowns in one system create ripple effects that can manifest in direct and indirect adverse consequences downstream. In a clear example of this, Shanterra Randle-Mitchum, Director of Programs at Teen Empowerment, shared that her concern about one student’s absence from school led her to learn that the student had been needed at home to care for her younger siblings while her mother worked. The indirect effects of system failures may be less obvious, but they have lifelong impacts on the development, education, and futures of New York’s children.

Among the major takeaways from the Town Hall was the burdensome nature of participation in public benefits programs. Community members shared stories about the compounding stress, time, and onerous requirements necessary to navigate every system that they interacted with. As parents strive to meet the complex demands of a life in poverty, the role of government should be to ensure that systems meant to serve as a safety net are not a barrier to stability and future prosperity for families.

These barriers lie at the very heart of our work to reduce, and eliminate, child poverty. As long as barriers and gaps in knowledge linger in our systems, policy approaches to combatting poverty will have limited efficacy. Housing, nutrition, economic supports, education, and health are all interacting issues that impact the overall health and well-being of children, families, and the communities in which they live.

All children deserve a stable childhood free from the hardships of poverty, and parents and caregivers who are not constantly battling the stress currently associated with navigating public benefit systems. Data and lived experience show us the path to ending child poverty in New York State. All that is necessary is the political will — and the investment — to make lasting change for our children and families.
Thank you to The Children’s Agenda and the Rochester Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative for their vision and partnership in planning this community town hall. It is their dedication to community-driven solutions, as well as their deep ties and trusted presence in the community, that made this event possible. We would also like to thank Teen Empowerment for ensuring that the voices of Rochester’s youth, which are all too frequently absent from conversations on child poverty, were centered.

We are grateful to the Ibero American Action League for hosting the event in their Community Resource Center, which served as a familiar, welcoming, and centrally located gathering space. Finally, we would like to thank Reverend Myra Brown of Spiritus Christi for her thoughtful guidance and organizing that helped make this event impactful and meaningful.

The thought and intention that went into planning this town hall will serve as a model for future events in which community voices and needs are centered in discussions of poverty and public policy.

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