

STATE

City lawmakers, advocates press state for more money for child care vouchers

The governor's \$1.2 billion investment for child care vouchers won't be enough to reduce the city's waitlist that stands at more than 17,000 families.



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NEW YORK — New York City lawmakers and advocates are calling on Gov. Kathy Hochul to boost funding for child care vouchers to shrink a rapidly growing waitlist of thousands of families — or risk undermining efforts to expand access to child care.

Hochul's executive budget proposal earlier this year included an additional \$1.2 billion for the state Child Care Assistance Program, which provides subsidies to low- and middle-income families — a proposal that the Assembly and the Senate are supporting in ongoing budget negotiations. As part of the \$1.2 billion investment, the state increased recurring funding for the program by \$600 million statewide, a portion of which went to the city. Additionally, the city received \$475 million, contingent on a match from the Mamdani administration.

That money is expected to keep families already enrolled from losing their spots, but advocates say it's not enough to put a significant dent in a waitlist of more than 17,000 families across the city — up from 1,500 last summer. The city, as well as 35 counties across the state, have either closed enrollment or started waitlists as of mid-March.

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An analysis by Pete Nabozny of The Children’s Agenda — part of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care — and Lauren Melodia of the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School estimates that the city needs an additional \$1.14 billion to clear the waitlist or meet anticipated demand within the coming year.

“We are continuing to advocate at the state level for state policymakers to keep pushing for additional financial investments because we still have time,” said Lara Kyriakou, director of policy at All Our Kin, a national nonprofit organization that trains child care providers in New York City. Lawmakers failed to meet a March 31 deadline to enact a budget for the next fiscal year, but they approved a second weeklong stopgap spending bill Tuesday.

Hochul has not given any indication that she plans to allocate more money for child care. Nicolette Simmonds, a spokesperson for the governor, declined to comment on ongoing budget negotiations. But Simmonds maintained that the governor is putting the state on the path to universal child care, referring to increased investments in the Child Care Assistance Program. She also referenced funding the governor allocated to begin rolling out free child care for 2-year-olds and to strengthen 3-K.

She pointed out that the city saw a 189 percent increase in the number of families receiving vouchers between September 2021 and September 2025 — from 39,163 to 113,263. State funding for child care subsidies has increased from \$832 million to \$2.4 billion since the governor took office.

But lawmakers suggested child care plans could be undermined by the funding shortfall.

“We want to be able to celebrate the movement [on] child care together, but we cannot do that if we’re not providing the child care for people that need it,” City Council early childhood education subcommittee Chair Jennifer Gutiérrez said.

The city budget due at the end of June could be an alternative route to addressing the funding gap. But that path is also uncertain: Mayor Zohran Mamdani faces a \$5.4 billion budget shortfall. Earlier this year, City Council Speaker Julie Menin asked state lawmakers for \$577 million to “serve the current caseload and fulfill those families on the waiting list.”

“While the State’s increased investment in child care is a positive step, it still leaves hundreds of millions of dollars in unmet need and thousands of children on the waitlist,” Menin said in a statement.

Jenna Lyle, a City Hall spokesperson, declined to say whether the administration would seek more state funding or boost city dollars.

But Melissa Hester, who served as interim commissioner of the Administration for Children’s Services, which administers the vouchers, broadly acknowledged advocates’ concerns. (Mamdani appointed former federal child welfare official Rebecca Jones Gaston as ACS commissioner on Tuesday).

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“We will continue to regularly assess enrollment ... to see when this may be possible,” Hester said during a Council hearing last month.

Others suggested estimates of how much additional funding the city needs are premature.

“I really would love for ACS to figure out ... who’s enrolled in pre-K, who’s enrolled in 2K and these other programs so we can get an actual real number of what the need is in that space and how do we direct them to other programs in the meantime,” said Althea Stevens, chair of the Council’s Committee on Children and Youth.

It’s unclear whether the Legislature will push for additional dollars. But Assembly Children and Families Committee Chair Andrew Hevesi said he has “some concerns” despite initially thinking the investment was enough.

How we got here: The Child Care Assistance Program — funded with federal, state and county dollars — expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic as work requirements were lifted, allowing more low-income families to receive vouchers.

In 2023, the state increased the income eligibility threshold. But last year, the federal government reinstated work requirements.

Tensions peaked last year when then-Mayor Eric Adams and Hochul clashed over who should pay for a funding shortfall. As part of a final budget agreement, the state moved to pay half the cost and required the city to match that amount.

Families like Bronx resident Jaquelin Gomez say they continue to bear the consequences.

“It’s super difficult during the week with them [my children], especially with my oldest [son],” Gomez said. “To find somebody to pick him up is so difficult.”