American Academy of Pediatrics

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NYS AAP

Good Morning Assemblymembers Crespo, Lupardo, Nolan and Hevesi, my name is Benard Dreyer, I am a pediatrician at Bellevue Hospital here in New York City, but I am also President Elect of the Academy of Pediatrics, a national organization representing more than 64,000 pediatricians across the country.

Here in New York, where I have spent my professional and personal life, I have been deeply involved in programs and projects to address, alleviate and resolve the significant negative impacts of poverty on children. During this time I have worked with many of the 6,000 pediatricians across the state in academic medicine, large hospitals, big networks and small practices. Unfortunately, despite the work and caring of many pediatricians and hundreds of other child advocates across New York, including parents, teachers, coaches, child care providers, and recreational and community services programs staff, even more of our children are living in poverty today than a decade ago.

In New York State today, we are struggling with child poverty in our cities, suburbs and in our rural communities. In our cities, from here in New York, across to Syracuse, Utica, Rochester, Binghamton and Buffalo, we are seeing very high numbers of children living in poverty. These are the children we can see and we can count.

In our suburbs the numbers are also going up, but they are much harder to count as families double and triple up and live in cars and campers. In our rural communities the children living in poverty hide in the hills and in the "cottages" and campers up long and winding driveways. What all of these children have in common is their struggle to survive and thrive in families that cannot make enough to provide them with a stable home, healthy food, access to appropriate health care, access to good child care and afterschool care, and a sense of safety and nurturing. It's not that parents struggling with poverty don't care, it is that they use most of their physical and emotional resources to help their families survive. There is often little left for safety and nurturing. We need to help them by doing our job to protect the most vulnerable children in our state.

I cannot sit here and tell you anything that you don't already know. We know that 50% of children are living in poverty in both Buffalo and Newburg, two cities at either end of our state. We know that today, Syracuse has the highest poverty rate of any city for African American and Hispanic families, over 65% for African American families and over 62% for Hispanic families live at below poverty.

In Rochester child poverty caught the attention of state leaders when the media reported that it was the only city of its size in the nation where slightly more than half of children live in poverty. And the numbers are even more devastating if you break them down along racial and ethnic lines, in Rochester, 59% of Latino children live in poverty, with black children following closely behind.

In New York City the numbers by borough are stunning. The Bronx has a 42% child poverty rate, Brooklyn has a 33.2% child poverty rate, Queens has a 20% child poverty rate, Manhattan has a 29.8% child poverty rate, and Staten Island has an 18.7% child poverty rate. Our very youngest New Yorkers are our poorest New Yorkers!! And here in New York City we have more than 20,000 children in our homeless system and more than 2,000 children are going from birthing hospitals to homeless shelters!!

Poverty hurts children. Poverty creates toxic stress which has been proven to produce negative health and mental health outcomes. Poverty impacts healthy child development in nefarious and negative ways. Children growing up in poverty have more health challenges, more developmental delays, are less ready for learning in school, and have more mental health challenges. Poverty is not good for children, especially our youngest children.

The science of early brain development tells us that the circuits and skills developed in the early years play out in a child's abilities to learn, socialize, develop coping skills, empathize, and become healthy children and healthy adults. And yet, as the numbers indicate, our youngest children are our poorest children. This is a disgrace for our state. Without intervention, these children are disadvantaged from their very first months. Yet it's not their fault, and it's not the fault of their families. It is the fault of an economic system that denies these families adequate wages for the work they do.

Poverty is not good for parents either. Parents who work lots of hours for little pay have little time or emotional energy to play with, read to, and pay attention to their young children. They are tired and frustrated and unable to rise above the challenge of trying to provide for a family on minimum wage or less in some cases. It is not that they don't care or don't want to do better. We know from scientific research that poor parents given more resources, and who are therefore under less stress, provide more nurturing and stimulation to their children, leading to better outcomes.

These numbers tell an important story. We know that hundreds of thousands of children across New York are going to sleep in unsafe housing, without adequate nutrition, and without access to quality health and mental health care. So what can we do? What should we do? What can you, our state leaders, do?

We know what to do:

- Raise the Minimum Wage: So working parents can take care of their families
- **Provide Paid Family Leave:** So parents can stay home when their children are sick
- Create Access to High Quality Infant and Child Care: So all children have access to age appropriate developmental stimulation and social/emotional experiences to assure school readiness

• Develop Affordable, Safe Housing, and, if Necessary, Housing Subsidies, (like Section 8):

So we can address and resolve unacceptable levels of family homelessness

- **Create Opportunities for Parents to Access Additional Education:** So parents can enhance their skills and their chances of accessing better paying jobs
- **Provide Environmentally Safe Housing, Child Care, Schools and Communities:** So children are not exposed to toxins and allergens in their daily life

Raise the Minimum Wage

Governor Cuomo took a giant step forward this month when he called for raising the minimum wage in New York to \$15 an hour. New York's youngest families are our poorest families. Work should pay. Parents who work full time should be able to take care of their children, put food on the table, and a stable roof over their heads. Right now this is not the case. Many families are poor not because they don't work, but rather because their work doesn't produce an income that can support a family. New York's struggling families deserve to make a decent wage for a day's hard work.

We urge you to make sure that New York doesn't just talk about raising the minimum wage, but that it actually happens this year for the children and families across our state. We need to have a minimum wage that raises families and children above poverty!

Provide Paid Family Leave

While the federal Family Medical Leave Act provides for unpaid leave for families, families need time to take care of themselves without fear of losing the income they depend on. The city stipulates the use of up to 5 paid sick days to care for a family member; the State of New York has no such provision. NYS should create and support a Paid Family Leave Program that supports families to take paid time off at the birth of a baby, an adoption, and the need to care for an ill or fragile relative. Paid Family Leave is a necessity in today's world, where most families depend on two incomes just to make ends meet. Families should not be forced to decide between loving and caring for a family member and finding themselves thrown into poverty.

Paid Family Leave should be a right, not a privilege. Most developed countries have generous Paid Family Leave policies; the US is far behind. New York State can show the way. We can and must do better.

Create High Quality Accessible Infant and Child Care & Literacy Supports

All families need access to high quality, safe and accessible care for their children while they are at work.

We support the investment of additional resources to bring New York closer to truly Universal Pre-K. The evidence is overwhelming that Pre-K can and does level the playing field for children

entering elementary school. It mitigates the reality that zip code is destiny. All children need access to high quality Pre-K. Children cannot wait. They need access to Pre-K now, as promised.

We also want to see significant additional state investment to build and maintain high quality infant and child care. Early brain development/learning skills and key social/emotional development is directly related to the quality of care that infants and toddlers experience. The state must step up and invest state dollars to assure that all infant/toddler programs are high quality and accessible.

And older children need a safe place to learn and play after school, so their parents can be assured that they are safe until the family can be together after work for the evening hours. Afterschool programs should not be an afterthought, they need to a universally available option for all working families.

In addition we urge the legislature to assume some responsibility for early literacy programs across the state. Evidence based programs like Reach Out and Read improve parent child bonds, support healthy parenting, and improve children's early literacy skills, leading to better school outcomes. Other states support Reach Out and Read with state dollars. As pediatricians we see the benefit of Reach Out and Read for children on a daily basis. New York should begin to support statewide early literacy programs this year.

Develop Affordable Safe Housing for Low Income Families

Finding and keeping safe, affordable housing remains a challenge for many families in both our urban areas and our suburbs. The state needs to work with localities and with housing developers to assure that families have safe, stable and affordable housing. It is imperative that the state spearhead various options like housing subsidies, tax incentives, and site improvements, to encourage the creation of affordable, safe housing for working families. The state should also support community improvements and community supports to encourage rehabbing or recreating deteriorating buildings in challenged communities. The state should also explore providing supports for families who wish to relocate to safer, more secure communities. If we can't invest in making communities healthy, child friendly, and safe, then we should support families who want to leave for safer areas. Zip codes should not be allowed to become prisons of poverty. Zip codes should not be destiny.

Opportunities for Educational Advancement or Enhanced Job Training Should be Available Across the Life Span

All New Yorkers, but especially those in low income families, should have access to higher education and job training to improve their earning power. The opportunity to engage in educational options should be available to parents, with the stipulation of accessible, affordable, high quality child care for their children, and the supports of paid family leave, or classroom leave when appropriate. We should encourage parents to further their education through free access to community college and tuition assistance. Educated parents have a better chance of raising educated children.

New York Needs to Insure a Safe, Toxic Free Environment for all Infants, Toddlers and Children

New York needs to strengthen its oversight and review of toxic materials and pollutants in communities across the state. We need to assure that housing, child care, schools, community centers, and parks and playgrounds are free of toxic chemicals and pollutants. Much work has been done, but there is more to do, especially in low income communities which often bear an unfair burden of environmental challenges.

One option we support would be to pass legislation which creates regulation to "green" schools and child care centers, and force the reduction of toxic substances in children's toys, food and clothing. We also would support legislation that requires the disclosure of all pesticides used in lawn and garden care. Passage of the Children's Safe Products Act would go a long way to protect all of our children from toxic substances. Children in low income families in low income communities are already at risk. The additional health burden created by toxic environmental chemicals is unfair, and increases already critical health disparities.

We urge you to carry the message back to your colleagues in the legislature and in all of state government that we cannot and must not ignore the needs of our poorest children. We know what to do....and in many instances we even know how to do it. What we need now is the political will to assure that all children and families living and struggling with the burdens of poverty are given a hand up to get out of poverty and into the middle class.

No longer should our youngest children be our poorest New Yorkers. We need to invest in our children and parents in smart and proven ways to help them achieve their aspirations for a better life. We know what to do....Now is the time to do it.

We stand ready as the pediatric community across the state to help in any way possible. We already see these children and families in our offices, clinics, and in our emergency departments. We want to work with you to make a real difference for the most vulnerable children and families. Together, with targeted and adequate state investments, we can address and confront child poverty in New York State.

For more information, please contact:

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