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Administration for Children's Services**

**Testimony to the New York City Council
Children and Youth Committee**

March 16, 2026

Fiscal Year 2027 Preliminary Budget

Good morning. My name is Melissa Hester, and I am the Interim Commissioner at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). I am joined today by Winette Saunders, the First Deputy Commissioner; Margaret Pletnikoff, the Deputy Commissioner for Financial Services; and Stephanie Gendell the Deputy Commissioner for External Affairs; Nancy Ginsburg, the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Youth and Family Justice; Luisa Linares, the Deputy Commissioner for the Family Services Division; Ina Mendez, the Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services; and Elizabeth Wolkomir, the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Child and Family Well-being, are here and available for questions. I am also joined by the full ACS Cabinet and many of the senior leaders who lead ACS's work and helped us prepare for today's hearing.

Thank you Chair Stevens and members of the Children and Youth Committee for holding today's hearing on our Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2027. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you the important work that ACS is doing to keep children safe, and to provide support to children, youth and families. I also want to take a moment to thank the ACS team and our provider agency partners for their commitment, compassion and dedication to this important work. As you will hear more about today, our Preliminary Budget Plan includes important actions to help ACS build on our accomplishments and continue to move this important work forward.

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

Child care is a critical support for families, and we are thrilled that the Mamdani Administration is committed to strengthening and expanding the City's early childhood

system so that families across the city will have access to high quality, affordable child care.

Starting in 2022, ACS spearheaded an effort to substantially increase the number of children enrolled in child care with costs paid fully or mostly by an ACS-issued child care voucher. In 2022, approximately 7,500 low-income children were enrolled with an ACS-issued voucher and today approximately 71,000 children are enrolled.

As the Council and advocates will surely recall, at this time last year, the state had not committed to maintaining funding for these vouchers; we faced a billion dollar deficit and the prospect of thousands of families losing their child care vouchers. ACS is grateful to the City Council, as well as the advocates, for your invaluable partnership in advocating for additional state support for the child care assistance program (CCAP). Thankfully, this joint advocacy helped us receive additional state support so that ACS has been able to continue to recertify the vast majority of eligible families, allowing families to maintain this critical support.

We are encouraged by the additional CCAP funding in this year's state Executive Budget. Based on the City's analysis, the Governor's budget would allow us to continue our current policy of providing continuity of care for most low-income families and support the growing need among families on cash assistance served by the Human Resources Administration (HRA). While the current funding wouldn't immediately allow us to begin offering care to children on the voucher waitlist, we will continue to regularly assess enrollment across ACS, NYCPS, and HRA to see when this may be possible.

The City's FY 2027 Preliminary Budget includes \$1.1 million, when fully implemented, for 10 new staff to bolster our ability to maintain program integrity and compliance, safeguarding the over \$1 billion in federal and state aid for CCAP, as the child care system continues to grow.

Supporting Families and Communities

Supporting and uplifting families and communities so they have the resources, information, and services they need to thrive, is critical to our mission. We want families to get the resources and connections they need to foster healthy child development and relationships and so there is never the need for child protection involvement. Our prevention providers, Community Partnerships, Family Enrichment Centers, and Office of Child Safety and Injury Prevention, do this in every community of the City each and every day.

We have now completed our plan to expand from three to thirty Family Enrichment Centers (FECs), with the contract for the 30th FEC getting registered in January. FECs are welcoming walk-in family-centered spaces, open to all community members. Everything from the name, the furniture and the offerings are co-designed with families. These spaces are intended to enhance family and child well-being by promoting "protective factors", such as resilience and social connection. The 30 FECs are in various stages of implementation and are all now engaging families and neighbors in their respective communities.

We have also been intentional about our efforts to ensure that families in need are able to access services and supports, through ACS or other non-profit community-based providers.

We are continuing to collaborate with our sister agencies, including NYCPS, DHS, DYCD, and Health & Hospitals to both get the word out about the Support Line and ensure that they know how to access services for families without the need to make a report to the Statewide Central Register (SCR). We have trained over 27,000 mandated reporters across schools, shelters, hospitals and afterschool programs. As a result, we have seen a steady reduction in the number of reports from those we have trained: down 16% for education and child care reporters; down 16% from social service agencies and down 7% by health personnel.

In November 2023, we launched a Support Line staffed by MSWs, whose sole purpose is to connect callers to the resources they need. The Support Line now receives an average of over 300 inquiries each month, and I encourage you to share this resource with your constituents (the phone number is 212-676-7667).

With the aid of our Support Line and our collaboration with our prevention provider partners, we have also focused on increasing community referrals to prevention, so families can get connected to supportive services that help them address difficult challenges so that they and their children can thrive. We see these efforts working, with new enrollments in prevention up nearly 10% last year, and community referrals increasing from 12% of prevention referrals in January 2023 to 25% in January 2026.

Earlier this month, ACS, along with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and Deputy Mayor Arteaga, announced Strong Foundations, our new collaboration with DOHMH, for which you see the intracity transfer from ACS to DOHMH. This program funded at approximately \$20.1 million over three years, with \$19.2 million from ACS, will enable DOHMH to expand programs that support new parents and their children, reaching more families in the community. Specifically, the funding will support: 1) expanded eligibility for Nurse Family Partnership (called NFPx), to include late registrants (pregnant people in their 3rd trimester up to the birth of the child and people with previous live births Nurse Family Partnership- populations typically not eligible for the program); 2) expanded capacity in the perinatal and early childhood mental health clinics to serve more families and offer additional clinical, peer and material supports; and 3) expanded trainings, funding perinatal mental health certification and establishing a 3-year fellowship to develop a pipeline of staff with perinatal and early childhood knowledge and skills to support families with young children.

Building and Sustaining a Culture of Safety

There is no mission more important than keeping children safe from harm—and this remains our north star. For ACS, safety means protecting children from the harms of abuse and neglect, as well as from the harms of avoidable separation from their families.

At the same time as we are working to reduce unnecessary reports, if a child is not safe, calls are warranted and we need to be sure that our child protective staff have

the tools and skills needed to identify those children truly in danger and to connect families to services and supports, and foster care if necessary, so children can be safe. The average child protective caseload is currently 7.6, which is well below national standards and greatly strengthens the capacity of our child protective teams, who do their work with all the skill, compassion, teamwork and professionalism for which they are trained and supported. In January, we launched our new Clinical Support Program for child protection, which provides our teams with licensed professionals who have expertise in mental health, substance abuse and intimate partner violence. Through the newly enhanced program, these experts add critical insight to our work and can engage directly with families to offer hands-on support and connections to services specific to each family's needs.

Earlier this month, we launched a new citywide child safety campaign to get the word out to parents and caregivers about keeping children safe from preventable injuries. These messages include how to put children to bed safely, how to store toxic household products, and the importance of window guards, especially as we head into nicer weather. We hope that you can share these messages on your social media pages too. We have included sample images at the end of this testimony.

Providing the Highest Quality Care and Support at the Children's Center and For Children and Youth in Foster Care

The number of children in foster care has continued to decline each year. At the end of 2025, there were 6,292 children in foster care, down from nearly 6,400 at the end of 2024 and over 7,500 just five years ago. We have also seen the number of children

at the Nicholas Scoppetta Children's Center decline to an average of 61 children in FY2025 compared to 74 in FY2024.

While the numbers of children at the Children's Center and in foster care continue to decline, it remains critical that we provide the highest quality care and support the children in our care.

Over the past year, we have further enhanced our policies, protocols and staff trainings to further support a safe and trauma-informed environment for youth residing at the Children's Center. This work has included physical changes including a restructured entrance area to include more modernized security equipment, an additional medical triage operation to support more timely medical clearances at admission, a new bedroom sleeping area for younger teen girls (e.g. 13 year olds) separate from older teens; and a paint/furniture/decoration color scheme that is more trauma-informed. In the coming months, we will be launching a new allowance program for youth ages 13 and older who are residing at the Children's Center and opening a new Music Studio.

The FY27 Preliminary Budget includes additional support for our work at the Children's Center, so that we can maintain a safe and secure site and better meet the needs of youth. Specifically, the Plan includes a baselined amount of \$4 million starting in FY27 for additional Children's Center Staff and Support Services. This includes funding for 13 additional staff including: a behavioral health manager, a deputy director of intake, and additional special officers to provide 24-hour security and support for the facility. The funding also supports expanded chaperone services to ensure youth at the Children's Center can get to and from school regardless of where their home school is,

and other appointments such as visits, court and doctors. In addition, the funding reflects an increase to Medical Consultation Services at Bellevue Hospital to account for collective bargaining adjustments.

The FY27 Preliminary Budget also includes city funding to support the state mandated foster care rates that ACS is required to provide for foster parent stipends, adoption subsidy and KinGAP subsidy. This includes \$215 million in FY26 (which is comprised of \$165 million in the FY27 Preliminary Budget and \$50 million that was added in the November Plan); \$263 million in FY27 and \$313 million baselined starting in FY28. As you may recall, the state increased these rates several years ago, but did not include additional state funding in the foster care block grant. ACS long-supported the higher rates and appreciates the City baselining these funds that the State did not provide.

The New York City foster parents, adoptive parents and relatives who commit through kinship guardianship, open their hearts and homes to children in need and we are so grateful. When children need to come into foster care due to a safety concern, we continue to focus on finding kinship homes, with nearly half of all foster children currently living with relatives or close family friends. We have also focused on increasing the number of foster homes recruited, and thank the Chair for helping to coordinate last year's foster parent recruitment day with Council Members throughout the city. Once children are in foster care, ACS and our providers work diligently with families so that children can return home as quickly as possible, and if that is not possible achieve permanency through adoption or KinGAP.

We are also focused on supporting youth while they are in our care and as they transition to young adults. Last year, the city invested in the Youth Safety and Support Initiative, which enabled us to expand Fair Futures programming to over 5500 youth by FY29, College Choice to over 400 youth and included funding for a new Career Choice program. Recently launched, Career Choice provides support to youth in foster care to attend a vocational or job-readiness training and financial assistance to successfully complete the program as a pathway to independence. Additionally, Career Choice includes an ACS partnership with DYCD Advanced and Earn program. The first youth to join this program are currently seeking their mechanics certifications.

This year, ACS, in partnership with the Center for Fair Futures and the Mayor's Office of Community Health, launched the Soul Care Pilot, a partnership to enhance mental health and wellness for youth ages 13-26. Based on feedback from young people, Soul Care aims to enhance mental health and wellness for youth in foster care by empowering youth to care for their own mental health in ways that resonate with them – taking a writing class, doing pottery, joining a gym, going to dance classes, experiencing the joy of a Broadway show, etc. The Soul Care pilot includes collaboration with five foster care providers and Fair Futures Coaches to provide youth with supportive one-on-one coaching and guidance focusing on mental health and well-being with referral, through specially trained Fair Futures coaches and referrals to local programs and alternative therapy providers that align with youth preferences and needs.

Strengthening Supports for Justice-Involved Youth

ACS is also focused on providing services and supports to justice-involved youth, both in the community and for those who are ordered into our care. As part of last

year's Youth Safety and Success Initiative, ACS received funding to expand two programs that have demonstrated effectiveness at reducing justice involvement. The first is Girls JustUs, a highly successful gender-responsive juvenile justice diversion program targeted at girls and was operating in Brooklyn and is now expanding to serve the Bronx in FY26 and Queens in FY27. The second program is Assertive Community Engagement and Success (ACES), an evidence-based program for high-risk youth that have been involved in the justice system. This program provides social pathways from gang and gun violence to young people ages 16-24 and is in the early stages of being expanded citywide so that over 500 young people will be able to participate each year.

The FY27 Preliminary Plan also includes \$194.5 million of state funds replacing city starting in FY26 for ACS. This "At-Risk Youth" funding is from the state and is part of a larger adjustment of \$300 million state funds replacing city funds across several city agencies. We are still awaiting final details from the state and OMB regarding these funds, but we are pleased that the state is adding these funds and acknowledging our shared commitment to New York City's Youth.

There are currently over 340 young people across our two secure detention facilities, Crossroads and Horizon. While the number of young people has risen in the secure juvenile detention centers, the total number of 16- and 17-year-olds in custody in New York City has significantly decreased in the last 10 years. In January 2013, there were over 300 16-and 17-year olds held on Rikers Island. In 2016, there were 200 and today, there are less than 200 who are 16 and 17. Second and relatedly—youth are primarily in detention pre-trial and we are seeing increased lengths of stay—this is due to the fact that the youth have complex, serious cases that take a long time to move

through the court process--- over 73% of the youth are in detention due to a murder or murder related charge.

ACS strongly believes that despite the increase in census, young people ordered to be detained should be receiving age-appropriate services in the juvenile system. We are doing this every day and our efforts to ensure youth in our care receive a trauma-informed and education-centered experience as possible is both taking hold and being recognized. Last year, the Nunez Monitors alerted the Court that their work pursuant to the agreement we entered into voluntarily was complete: The Nunez Monitors stated: *"The various reforms implemented by ACS have **decreased violence and improved safety** and have showcased ACS' and facility leadership's commitment to design and sustain a durable vision for the facility's operation that addresses youth's individual needs and supports the staff who work at Horizon.... Fundamentally, **the Monitoring Team's goal is to become unnecessary**, and **ACS has demonstrated its internal capacity to identify and address its problems and challenges without the need for external oversight**...Now that ACS has achieved Substantial Compliance with the three final provisions in the Fourth Voluntary Agreement, it appears the **Monitoring Team's work with ACS is complete.**"*

The FY27 Preliminary Budget Plan includes additional investments so that we continue to address the needs of the youth in detention. When fully implemented, the initiative includes \$8.1 million in city funds starting in FY27, which adds 40 staff, as well as additional funding for expanded cleaning and barber services to ensure the safety and well-being of young people while they are in our care. There are also expense funds for the development and operation of additional classroom space at Crossroads.

As the Council knows, ACS has been working with DDC to construct an Annex at Horizon, which will not only expand capacity but also create additional space for classrooms, programming, vocational training, health and mental health services and dining. The Annex will also include a new exercise pavilion, due to open in FY27, and 7 of the additional staff will support programming in this new space, while the additional 33 staff will ensure safety and security at both sites. For secure detention, our capital budget includes funding for the Horizon Annex and the capacity expansion project at Crossroads, which will provide additional space prior to the Annex's completion. All of these investments are aimed at enhancing ACS's ability to meet the needs of the increased census of older youth in detention.

Conclusion

As you can see, the ACS team and our provider partners have made much progress this past year, ensuring New York City's children, youth and families have access to the services and supports that help them to thrive. As we move forward, we remain committed to listening to the voices of the parents, children and youth directly impacted by our work, and remaining on the path that enables us to make the best decisions for each family, child and youth we encounter.

Thank you Chair and members of the Committee for your continued support, collaboration and commitment to making New York City a better place for children, youth and families.

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**AN EMPTY CRIB MEANS BIG
SAFETY. KEEP PILLOWS,
BLANKETS, AND TOYS
OUT OF THE CRIB.**

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KEEPS
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**A SAFE SLEEP SPACE STARTS
WITH ONE TINY MOMENT—
PLACING A BABY ON THEIR
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