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## NY needs to invest in its child welfare system to make us all safer | Opinion

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**Brian Parchesky** Special to the USA TODAY Network

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Last month, in her State of the State address, Gov. Kathy Hochul proclaimed her support for New York's children and our systems to help ensure that are well cared for. Unfortunately, in her budget address this week she did not prioritize helping children in the child welfare system.

While a lot of New York's political rhetoric has been focused on fixing our criminal justice system and making our communities more secure, no one seems willing to commit to investing in the people and programs which can help make our children safer, provide them with a pathway to success and, as a result, keep our communities safer.

Last year, Berkshire Farm Center served nearly 8,500 children in 55 New York counties. Of those 8,500 children, 100% of them came to us with a history of trauma exposure and/or family crisis. By providing opportunities for growth and change with New York children and families, we are not only empowering them to reach their full potential but also working to reduce crime and create safer communities. However, unless Hochul and the legislature invests in those providing those programs, we will have one hand tied behind our backs as we work to implement proven programs to get our children back on better paths.

Simply mentioning concern for children's mental health is not enough. New York State needs to prioritize providing care for those children and families in the child welfare system before it is too late. We need support to increase staffing for those providing care in group homes, foster care and residential treatment center. There is a wave of bad consequences which is about to come crashing down on all of us. Program providers — like group homes — can't pay staff enough to keep them working in these jobs. The vast majority of those working these often emotionally difficult jobs do so because they care about the children and families they are helping and understand that they are making a difference. However, some staff feel pushed to their own economic breaking point and forgo positions helping our kids for less rewarding but higher paying jobs. With less staff, we can serve fewer children and families and, for our staff who stay in these positions, it is becoming increasingly likely that they get burned out and also leave for other professions which means we can serve even fewer children.

Who suffers when we can't help New York's children and families? The answer is simple: all New Yorkers. Across the state, counties have limited capacity to care for these youths who need care, counseling and comfort. County offices regularly call Berkshire Farm Center and are pleading with us to help, and too often we are not able to because we simply don't have the resources.

We know that these programs make a difference for children, families and communities. Now, we need to invest in them. For too long, we have ignored those who work with youth in crisis. These programs have been underfunded for years but now between the pandemic and inflation we are even further behind.

Hochul and the Legislature can no longer push this problem off for another year. In the current New York State budget, child welfare workers are slated to receive a paltry 2.5% increase in their pay. In times of inflation well above 6%, this amounts to a pay decrease for staff who perform a critical role in our state's social fabric. We need to do better.

Our staff needs an 8.5% cost of living adjustment as a starting point to get back on-track. Don't just look at it as an investment in our people. Look at it as a commitment to New York's families and communities that we're going to do what is necessary to provide support.

That will make a difference to all of us in the long run.

*Brian Parchesky is the president and CEO of Berkshire Farm Center & Services for Youth, a non-profit organization focused*

*on healing and strengthening children in a family setting by providing programs and services in 55 of New York's 62 counties.*