



**Rebecca Jones Gaston  
Commissioner  
Administration for Children's Services**

**Testimony to the New York City Council  
Children and Youth and Finance Committees**

**May 28, 2026**

**Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget**

Good morning. My name is Rebecca Jones Gaston, and I am honored to serve as the Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services.

I would like to thank Chair Stevens, Chair Lee, and the members of the Children and Youth and Finance Committees for convening today's hearing on the Executive Budget for City Fiscal Year 2027.

I am joined today by my colleagues: Deputy Commissioner for Financial Services Margaret Pletnikoff; Deputy Commissioner for External Affairs Stephanie Gendell; Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Youth and Family Justice Nancy Ginsburg; Deputy Commissioner for the Family Services Division Luisa Linares; Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services Ina Mendez; and Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Child and Family Well-being Elizabeth Wolkomir.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge Melissa Hester for her steady and compassionate leadership as Interim Commissioner. During a period of transition, Melissa guided this agency with care, integrity, and deep commitment to children and families, and I want to thank her and congratulate her on her new role as Executive Deputy Commissioner of People, Operations and Technology.

As someone who was adopted from foster care, I often say that I was "born into the system." Child welfare is not simply the work I do — it is personal to me. It shaped my life, my sense of purpose, and my understanding of what children, youth, and families need not only to survive, but to heal, grow, and thrive.

Because I know personally what systems can mean in the life of a child, I approach this role with both urgency and hope.

My professional journey has taken me from frontline practice in child protection and foster care to leadership roles at the state and federal levels, including serving as Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families during the Biden-Harris Administration. But across every role, every system, and every community, one lesson has remained constant: meaningful and lasting change only happens when we remain grounded in the voices, experiences, strengths, and hopes of the people most impacted by our decisions.

That belief will guide my leadership at ACS.

I also recognize that this work does not happen in isolation. The well-being of children and families depends on strong partnership across systems and sectors — including providers, advocates, community leaders, and our partners in the judiciary. Lasting progress requires all of us working together with shared accountability and a shared commitment to safety, healing, fairness, and opportunity.

I believe deeply that safety and connection must coexist. Children should be safe, and families should have the support they need to remain together whenever possible. Communities should be seen not simply through the lens of need, but through the lens of strength, wisdom, and possibility.

Children are not cases. Families are not problems to solve. Communities are not deficits to manage.

They are people with stories, strengths, hopes, and potential. And our responsibility is to build systems that recognize humanity and respond with accountability, compassion, and intention.

As Commissioner, I am committed to continuing the work of strengthening a child welfare system that is more responsive, more equitable, more preventive, and more humane. That means ensuring child protective intervention is focused on where children are truly unsafe, while continuing to invest in the community-based and family-centered supports that help families thrive before crises occur. It means listening closely to young people and families with lived experience and recognizing them as partners in shaping solutions. And it means continuing to transform how we support young people involved in the juvenile justice system — seeing them not for the worst moment in their lives, but for their potential, resilience, and future.

I also want to be clear about the tone and spirit I hope to bring to this role. I believe in stewardship. I believe in partnership. I believe in accountability rooted in compassion. And I believe systems change happens when we are willing to listen, to learn, and to act with intentionality.

I also believe none of this work is possible without a skilled, supported, and well-resourced workforce. Every day, ACS staff, provider partners, attorneys, clinicians, case planners, direct care staff, and so many others carry enormous responsibility on behalf of children and families, often under incredibly complex circumstances. If we want stronger outcomes for children and families, we must continue investing in the people who make those outcomes possible.

I look forward to building an honest and constructive partnership with this Council as we work together on behalf of New York City's children and families.

Today, I will provide an overview of the FY2027 Executive Budget, which is projected to be \$3.51 billion, including \$1.4 billion in City funds. As you know, the Mamdani

Administration asked each agency to identify a Chief Savings Officer and carefully examine opportunities for savings and efficiencies. I want to thank ACS's Chief Savings Officer, Margaret Pletnikoff, for leading this work thoughtfully and intentionally, with a continued focus on minimizing impacts on the children, families, and providers who depend on our services.

### **Child Care Assistance**

Affordable child care is essential for families, so I am extremely pleased that the Mamdani administration has prioritized expanding access to quality child care throughout the City. ACS's budget furthers this commitment in a number of ways.

Due to advocacy from the Mamdani Administration, the City Council, and many others, the State and City have come to a number of budgetary agreements that will enable New York City to expand and maintain access to early childhood education. As it relates to ACS, the funding from the City and State in ACS's budget will enable us to continue to recertify the vast majority of families receiving low income child care vouchers from ACS. The funding will also allow the City to support the growing need for child care vouchers among families on cash assistance served by the Human Resources Administration (HRA).

In addition, we are extremely pleased to share that the FY27 Executive Budget restores and baselines Promise NYC at \$25 million. This funding will enable ACS to maintain city-funded, community-based child care. This funding supports approximately 1,000 slots. Historically, Promise NYC was funded for one year at a time; baselining the funding for this crucial program creates certainty and stability.

## **Supporting Children, Families and Communities**

I have dedicated my career to identifying ways to support and uplift families and communities—so that they can be safe and thrive. As I take on this role, I remain committed to lifting up family-centered, prevention-driven solutions that improve outcomes and transform how systems support children, families and communities. I am committed to keeping children safe by providing ACS child protective staff with the tools, supervision and training they need to make sound decisions. And I am committed to ensuring ACS helps to provide families and communities with the support they need to succeed.

ACS will soon announce the providers recommended for the eleven Community Partnerships across the City. Community Partnerships are neighborhood coalitions that enhance child and family well-being through strategies responsive to each community's specific wants and needs. By listening to the voices and ideas of community members, the Community Partnerships work to increase coordination among service providers, connect families to resources and fill programming gaps. The new contracts will expand the role of Community Ambassadors -- trusted community residents who build relationships with and connect families to information and resources. I am looking forward to the implementation of these new contracts and the positive impact the Partnerships will continue to have.

ACS currently contracts with 44 provider agencies operating 127 programs for family services, previously referred to as prevention services. Across the system, ACS contracts for 10,277 slots, meaning more than 10,000 families can receive services at any one point in time. In calendar year 2025, 30,940 children in 14,277 families

received child welfare family support and therapeutic and treatment services. ACS and our providers have been intentional about supporting communities, engaging families, and connecting them to resources. Through this work, we have increased community referrals from 12% of all family services cases in January 2023 to 27% of them in March 2026. These include referrals from schools, health care providers, and families themselves.

As part of our efforts to look closely at our budget and possible efficiencies, this budget includes rightsizing the Family Services continuum by closing four programs totaling 360 slots, for a savings of \$2.7 million CTL and \$7.1 million gross. We will be working closely with the four providers, as well as the providers in the same catchment area, to ensure that no family loses services. We will also continue to monitor community needs and make sure families continue to have access to services.

### **Supporting Children and Youth in Foster Care**

In New York City, the number of children in foster care is at a historic low with fewer than 6,300 children in care, down from 13,000 a decade ago and close to 42,000 when ACS was created 30 years ago. Our work at ACS centers on continuing to reduce the number of children in care, both by preventing children from entering in the first place and from intensifying efforts to reunify children more quickly—and I am committed to working with the ACS team and our providers to continue this reduction.

For those children and youth in our care, it is essential that we provide them with the resources and skills they need to become successful and thriving New Yorkers. This budget includes important actions that enable us to do this. In addition, the Executive Budget includes a number of budgetary reductions in the foster care area that

will have no impact on children, youth, families or providers, as the savings are from underspending or surpluses in specific budget codes, which I will explain in more detail.

As you may recall, last fiscal year, ACS's budget included the Youth Safety and Success initiative, which was a \$40 million investment in programs for youth in foster care and the justice system. Specifically, as it relates to foster care, the initiative funded an expansion of the number of youth who could be served by Fair Futures coaches and tutors, the number of youth participating in College Choice, and the creation of a new program, Career Choice.

As a result of this investment, we see more youth getting connected to Fair Futures coaches and there are over 471 youth enrolled in College Choice (up from 430 last year). In addition, we have created and launched Career Choice, a new program that builds off the success of College Choice by connecting young people in foster care to similar financial, social and academic support when they elect to attend a vocational program or job-readiness program instead of college. The program was launched in October and the first ten youth are now enrolled in Career Choice programming. In addition, we are on track for 136 youth to participate in the Department of Youth and Community Development's (DYCD) Advance and Earn program this fiscal year, which is also part of Career Choice.

The Executive Budget better aligns anticipated spending levels for both Fair Futures and Career Choice, with no impact on services, to better match programmatic ramp-up with allocated funding. Specifically, for Fair Futures, we plan for the program to grow in budget and youth served in both FY27 and FY28, while saving about \$2 million CTL in FY26 and FY27 and \$1.1 million in FY28. We still anticipate full ramp-up

to \$42.7 million and 5,400 youth by FY29. Similarly, there is a \$405,000 CTL/\$1.1 million gross reduction to Career Choice in the current fiscal year 2026, due to savings from the initial start up time needed for the program.

All residential and Specialized Family Foster Care (SFFC) providers receive \$3,500 for each youth ages 14-21 in their care for independent living services referred to as Preparing Youth for Adulthood<sup>1</sup>. These services help youth develop life skills through workshops and programs such as financial literacy, resume writing, college applications, grocery shopping, banking and driver's education. The Executive Budget includes an annual reduction of \$1.4 million CTL/\$3.75 million gross due to a surplus in the budget code. There will be no impact on providers or youth—providers will continue to receive \$3,500 for each youth aged 14-21.

The Executive Budget also includes a \$233,000 CTL/\$1.1 million gross reduction for adoption recruitment contracts, which ACS no longer maintains and has not since 2015. Adoption and foster parent recruitment is now managed by our foster care providers and their current contracts include recruitment funding. Thus, there is no interruption in services and we do not anticipate any impact on providers or families.

The Executive Budget includes \$97.5 million in CTL funding to address the Title IV-E budget gap that ACS has been carrying due to the way the federal government reimburses for foster care. Specifically, while federal Title IV-E funding for foster care is a federal entitlement, it is only an entitlement for those children and youth who are federally eligible. While there are a number of eligibility requirements, family income is the one that causes most children to be ineligible for federal reimbursement. To be

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<sup>1</sup> Enhanced Family Foster Care (EFFC) receives this funding as part of their rate and this is no change and no impact for providers or youth.

eligible, the current income of the child's family must be such that they would have been eligible for AFDC (the predecessor to TANF) in 1996. This has never been adjusted to inflation (nor the current public assistance program.) There was a period of time where this gap was filled by the federal government through a IV-E waiver, but that ended in 2018 and this additional funding fills and baselines the gap ACS has been carrying.

The Executive Budget also includes \$1.6 million for immigration legal services and fees for children and youth in foster care. Since at least 2006, ACS has been working with legal service providers to assist youth in care with obtaining Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). ACS is extremely grateful to these providers who have helped countless youth in care get Green Cards, all pro bono. Given the increasing demands for immigration legal assistance, ACS will now be able to provide the attorneys handling these matters with \$2,000 per child. In addition, the Trump administration recently created new fees and increased existing fees for various immigration relief applications, and this additional funding will provide reimbursement for these fees.

### **Strengthening Supports for Justice-Involved Youth**

ACS continues to focus on meeting the needs of the increased number of youth across our juvenile justice continuum. As of May 13, 2026, there were 362 youth in secure detention, 66 youth in non-secure detention and 128 youth in Close to Home. The Executive Budget includes funding to support operations, maintenance and capacity needs at our facilities.

The budget includes \$6.3 million baselined for juvenile justice facility needs associated with the creation of the exercise pavilion at Horizon, including the additional

funding needed for maintenance, repairs and operations of the existing space. This funding will also be used for additional supplies needed for the population of youth in detention, such as uniforms, toiletries, bedding and food services. Finally, a portion of this initiative is the additional funding needed to support the conversion of a 6-bed non-secure placement facility to a 9-bed non-secure placement facility to help with the increased Close to Home census.

The Executive Budget also includes additional capital needs for our juvenile justice programs including funding for the Horizon annex, HVACs at Horizon and Crossroads, and other repairs and IT equipment at Horizon and Crossroads.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I believe this Executive Budget reflects an important investment in children, youth, families, and communities across New York City, and it represents an opportunity to continue building systems that are not only effective, but also compassionate, responsive, and grounded in partnership.

As I begin this role, I do so with humility, urgency, and hope. I know the responsibility that comes with leading this agency, and I know the profound impact our decisions have on the lives of children and families.

I also know this work cannot be done by any one agency or system alone. It requires partnership across government, with providers, with advocates, with communities, with our partners in the judiciary, and most importantly, with young people and families whose lived experiences must continue to inform and shape our work.

At the same time, we are navigating a period of significant change and uncertainty nationally. Federal policy shifts and broader pressures on social service

systems continue to impact child welfare and youth-serving systems across the country. But even as systems adapt, transform, and respond to those pressures, our responsibility must remain clear: children, youth, and families must remain at the center of every decision we make.

This moment calls not only for responsiveness, but for intentional transformation rooted in equity, community partnership, accountability, and the belief that every child and family deserves dignity, support, stability, and possibility.

I believe deeply in the power of connection and intentional action. I believe children, youth, and families deserve systems that see their humanity, honor their strengths, and create real pathways to healing, stability, opportunity, and belonging.

And I believe our collective responsibility is not simply to respond to crisis, but to help create the conditions where children, families, and communities can truly thrive. That is the work ahead of us. And I look forward to doing that work in partnership with all of you.

Thank you, and I welcome your questions.