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Community News



Preventive Services Makes Sense: It Saves Children, Families, and Money

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BROOKLYN — For some Brooklyn families, the impending budget cuts are going to be devastating to their lives. Like for Anna, a single mother of three children who for the last 18 months depended on Preventative Services to keep her family together. Anna and her children have been utilizing human services provided in Brooklyn and they are at risk of losing it all.

Since 1979, Preventive Services programs have provided a safe alternative to foster care for children who suffer from abuse or severe neglect. These community-based programs help thousands of children remain safely at home by working with families to prevent child abuse and address problems such as substance abuse, homelessness, mental illness and violence.

Shockingly, the city now wants to cut nearly a quarter of these services that help 30,000 families and 14,000 children throughout New York City.

These cuts would be a disaster for vulnerable families like Anna's. Anna is an active client in the Preventive Service programs provided by MercyFirst, a human service agency serving thousands of families.

When she first came to MercyFirst, she was coping with a seven-month-old baby girl born prematurely; a severely depressed older son, who was constantly in and out of hospitals; a 12-year-old son, who was starting to talk about guns and violence in school; and the possibility of losing her home because of rising medical bills that were eating up her funds.

Anna came to MercyFirst desperate for help. In less than two years, she got medical and housing assistance, as well as counseling and parent education classes that she and her children needed. These services to Anna's family cost the city about \$10,000 annually per family. Meanwhile, if her children ended up in foster care, it would've cost \$36,000 annually per child. Eliminating these Preventive Service programs just does not make financial or practical sense.

If the city's proposed cuts are implemented then more than 3,000 families will lose access to services that keep them stable. The city claims the cuts will save about \$12 million. But actually, it will lose close to \$30 million because the State matches city funds by 62 percent. Not to mention, the city stands to lose a lot more if just one-third of the children are denied Preventive Services and end up in foster care, which will then cost about \$70 million.

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During the past decade, New York City has dramatically reduced the number of children in foster care to below 16,000 children—a historic low and is 50 percent fewer than five years ago.

As we contemplate what all these cuts will mean to real lives, I ask that we remember the senseless deaths of children in this city — Lisa Steinberg, Elisa Izquierdo and Nixzmary Brown — whose tragic murders by those they knew brought reform to protect all vulnerable children from facing the same fate. Will it take another terrible tragedy to undo the damage from cuts to these very preventable circumstances? Let's pray not.

Jim Purcell is the chief executive officer of Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, which represents nearly all the voluntary, not-for-profit organizations providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, and special education services in New York state.

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