



SPAN

35 Halsey Street, 4th Floor
Newark, NJ 07102

(973) 642-8100

(973) 642-8080 – Fax

E-Mail address: span@spannj.org

Website: www.spannj.org

Comments of the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network of New Jersey on Proposed Budget

Each year, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network of New Jersey (SPAN) provides information, training, technical assistance and support to over 100,000 New Jersey families on the education, health, mental health, early childhood, human services, child welfare, and other services that their children need. Our testimony today is based on that experience.

Early Childhood: SPAN supports the proposed \$25 million in additional funding for pre-school expansion and \$52.3 million for existing preschool programs. However, pre-school expansion should not be done at the expense of increasing needed funding for child care vouchers. An increase of at least \$24 million is needed just to serve the families currently on the child care voucher waiting list, New Jersey Cares for Kids.

Education: SPAN supports the proposed \$300 million increase for K-12 education in direct school aid. We urge the Legislature to reverse the changes to special education funding that make special education funding to districts dependent on the district's wealth. SPAN supports the increase of \$78 million in Extraordinary Special Education Aid, but urge that its use be limited to increasing inclusion of students with disabilities in in-district and inclusive settings.

Health Care: SPAN strongly supports increased funding for charity care, as well as the proposed increase of \$193 million and the additional \$113 million for mental health and developmental disability support. We strongly oppose the proposed Medicaid co-pays, and urge the Legislature to eliminate all premiums and co-pays for families at least up to 200% of the FPL.

Other Supports for Low-Income New Jerseyans: SPAN urges the New Jersey legislature to provide a decent level of income for New Jerseyans who rely on public assistance. Shamefully, New Jersey's cash assistance grants have not increased since 1987. Welfare grants for families must be immediately raised by at least 10%. Further, there must be a cash grant index tied to inflation in the cost of living that will automatically increase grants each year.

Provide sufficient front-line staff to respond to human needs. The current across-the-board hiring freeze is counter-productive and will compound existing shortages in staff needed for essential. Special Child Health Services Case management units and child behavioral health Care Management and Family Support Organizations, need additional funding to provide the support that families struggling with the additional challenges of raising children with special needs face every day.

Continue the investments in prevention, family support and strengthening, and improvements in child welfare/child protection. SPAN supports the Governor's protection of funding for the Department of Children and Families investments in prevention and family support and strengthening, including Family Success Centers and Differential Response, which will save money in the long run by reducing family involvement with the child welfare system. We also support the funding needed to maintain progress in reforming and improving the child protection system.

Address the current inequities in access to services by families with limited English proficiency. The state must commit additional funds to ensure improved language access to all state, county, and local government agency services merely to come into compliance with the U.S. Civil Rights Act and presidential Executive Order.

Disability Issues: SPAN supports legislation to close New Jersey's segregated institutions and reallocate those funds to community-based programs that keep youth and adults with disabilities with their families and friends. We recognize the leadership of Assemblyman Greenwald and Senator Vitale for introducing the legislation that would finally move New Jersey toward compliance with the Supreme Court decision in Olmstead. New research demonstrates without question the fact that home and community living for people with disabilities is less expensive, and provides a higher, more meaningful quality of life. We are also concerned that there appears to be no funding for programs for May 2009 special education graduates.

Tax Increase: SPAN supports the proposed tax increase on the wealthiest 1% of New Jerseyans making more than \$500,000 a year.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SPAN appreciates the efforts of the Governor to protect services and supports needed for New Jersey's children and families, particularly those at greatest risk due to poverty, disability, and special health care need. However, we urge the Legislature to restore critical funds for our most needy children and families even if it means tax increases or reductions in property tax rebates for middle and upper middle income residents. We cannot balance the budget on the backs of those who are least able to bear that burden. Thank you.