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Chair, Board of Directors, United Way of Buffalo & Erie County

Remarks For New York State Division of Budget, Buffalo Hearing
November 17, 2007

Mary K. Comtois, Vice President, on behalf of
Good morning. My name is Trudy Mollenberg. ~~I am the~~ Chair of the Board of Directors of United Way of Buffalo & Erie County. United Way's mission is to bring people, institutions and resources together to address our community's most critical human service needs. Today, I would like to speak to you about three of our critical focus areas – economic self-sufficiency, early childhood, and access to information and referral.

Economic Self Sufficiency

Poverty is the single most significant issue facing Erie County and our citizens. Poverty negatively impacts every facet of life – from early childhood and appropriate child development, to youth and educational attainment, to adults and employment, to our senior population's ability to remain healthy and independent. According to 2006 census estimates, 130,000 people in Erie County – 14.5 percent – live below the poverty level.

Within the City of Buffalo nearly 30 percent of residents live in poverty, **making the second largest city in New York State the second poorest city in the nation.**

Through a collaboration known as Creating Assets, Savings and Hope, or **CASH**, nearly 12,000 hard working, low-income families had their income taxes prepared and filed for free last year, accessing \$14 million in refunds and credits. \$14 million reinvested into our local economy while helping our poorest citizens out of poverty. However, it is estimated that statewide, 25% of EITC eligible families aren't claiming the credit or the \$825 million in unclaimed refunds they are entitled to.

In addition to EITC, we ask that you fund asset building strategies including:

- \$250,000 to increase the number of EITC-eligible filers receiving refunds;
- Regulation of Refund Anticipation Loans (RALs), which target low-income populations and often carry triple-digit annualized interest rates penalizing those with the least ability to pay; and
- Enactment of programs such as Individual Development Accounts and Child Savings Accounts, to reinforce the importance of savings and assist in asset building.

Early Childhood Success By 6

Poverty is the single most significant predictor of school failure for young children and nearly a quarter of our children in Erie County live in poverty. High-quality child care and early learning experiences can go a long way in

helping children overcome the challenges associated with poverty. High quality care has been proven to reap tremendous rewards, not only in terms of school success, but also in terms of decreased social costs related to lower rates of crime, fewer teenage pregnancies, and higher earning levels later in life. Research shows the financial return on investment for high quality early learning programs is between 7 and 17 dollars for every dollar invested.

But, policy and practice is slow to catch up with research. 95% of public investment in education occurs after age 5, when the critical early learning years have passed. The State must be the leader in growing investments for young children by:

- Supporting efforts to expand child care availability and quality, particularly for low income families;
- Providing stable and continued funding for truly universal Pre-Kindergarten programs, including flexibility to direct funds where they are most needed;
- Supporting home visitation programs providing parents – the primary caregivers for young children – with coaching and support; and
- Developing and implementing a State-wide quality rating system, imbedded into the OCFS, to increase the quality of care and enable parents to make informed choices about their child's early learning environment.

Access to Information and Referral

Ensuring universal access to health and human services is the bedrock of a strong community. We in Western New York are proud to have joined the Finger Lakes, Hudson Valley and New York City regions in implementing 2-1-1, an easy-to-remember number connecting those who need information with trained operators who know human services.

We urge you to continue the \$11 million of third-year funding for 2-1-1 statewide. Western New York's portion of that state-wide allocation will help us to:

- Receive over 100,000 calls;
- Enhance nonprofit and government service delivery by analyzing those calls and call data to assess community needs and refine the service system;
- Increase efficiency by decreasing misdirected calls;
- Reduce non-emergency calls that burden the 9-1-1 system; and
- Provide valuable disaster planning and relief efforts for future emergencies.

Thank you