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Submitted Testimony

New York State Budget Hearings, November 29, 2007

Thank you to the Budget Department for inviting us to testify today on the needs of residents of New York State. I am Carole Oshinsky, Co-president of the New York Zero-to-Three Network (NYZTT), a network of professionals that promotes the optimal development of young children, their families, their communities, and the systems that serve them in New York State,

First, on behalf of NYZTT, I want to praise the Governor and the state for taking steps to improve the well-being of our children, especially the most vulnerable among them, thru recent mental health funding for children under age five, and the formation of a Children's Cabinet with a distinguished Advisory Board. These are **important first steps** in ensuring comprehensive services for our young children.

In January 2007, NYZTT published a fact sheet on New York City's infants and toddlers: *To Build a Strong Society, Invest in Young Children.*" (Go to [www.nyzerotothree.org/media/NYCfact\\_full.pdf](http://www.nyzerotothree.org/media/NYCfact_full.pdf) for the full text.)

In it, we pointed out that childhood from birth to age 3 is a critical time, marked by rapid development in emotions, intellect, and socialization, as well as physical growth and the formation of normal brain functioning. The experiences of infants and toddlers in early childhood strongly influence their future success or failure in school and life.

Is New York State putting this scientific knowledge into action for all of our infants and toddlers? The New York Zero-to-Three Network is currently preparing a “check-up,” for release in January 2008, to see if New York City and State is nurturing its’ youngest citizens. The amazing changes that infants and toddlers go through from birth to age 3 happen outside the public forum in the privacy of the family. Economists have shown that dollars spent to better the lives of infants, toddlers and their families are proving to be great investments. New York State can reap these benefits.

Major strides have been made in New York State in providing a better environment for families to raise healthy children, be strong financially and emotionally, and promote positive early learning for their children.

However, many problems persist. For example, nearly half (41%) of New York State’s infants and toddlers live in families whose income is less than twice the poverty line (\$41,300 for a family of four in 2007), and nearly one-quarter (23%) are poor. Blacks and Latino young children are disproportionately poor and low-income.

Overall statistics don’t tell the story of contrast from one community to the next, the large pockets of children with higher risks for problems in early childhood, adolescence, and in their adult lives. These risks include large

differences in birth outcomes; low immunization rates; lack of consistent medical care; poor nutrition; undiagnosed pregnancy-related depression in mothers; incomplete developmental surveillance; large disparities in early intervention assessment and service receipt; lack of mental health services for young children; high poverty rates; limited utilization of WIC, SCHIP, MEDICAID, and housing supports; inadequate availability of regulated and quality child care; little support for child development or early learning; and the majority of infants and toddlers with working parents cared for in informal arrangements.

All of these issues are interconnected. Early childhood is a time of great promise and a time of great stress for young families. We need to develop a comprehensive system of services that empowers them and gives them full access to the resources they need during the early years and beyond. We can find solutions by creating a comprehensive system of early care that focuses on the family, not the bureaucracy. Such a cross-system, comprehensive plan and budget for the specific needs of children and families from pregnancy to age 3 would integrate services delivered by major city and state agencies with the goal of making them accessible to working families. Parents ultimately want what is best for their children, the public and private sector need to help them obtain it. New York State needs to do more to meet the needs of its youngest children and families.

New York State can take a national leadership role by focusing on developing a statewide plan and budget for the specific needs of children and families from pregnancy to age 3 that looks at services delivered by all state agencies. Items that need to be included are listed below.

For Healthy Children, New York State should:

- Make medical insurance available to all children in New York.
- Provide families with a medical home not only medical coverage.
- Encourage breastfeeding by making all hospitals “baby-friendly, extending paid maternity leave, and pushing WIC to provide breastfeeding help within the first week of life.
- Start making improvements to meet the Healthy People 2010 goals for reducing anemia and obesity.
- Make home visiting universal for all families who need or want it from pregnancy through the toddler years.
- Improve assessment and referral of developmental problems.
- Mandate coverage of mental health services for babies, toddlers, and their caregivers.
- Train more mental health workers capable of treating very young children.
- Provide mental health consultation in the settings children are found.

For Strong Families, New York State should:

- Make maternal depression a priority—get it recognized and treated.
- Make working parents part of the system and recognize that they need more help.
- Make 12 weeks of paid maternity and paternity leave the norm.
- Invest in innovative anti-poverty programs that raise income, educate parents, and provide training for better employment.

For Positive Early Learning, New York State should:

- Reach out to the large informal child care work force of grandparents, babysitters, and neighbors to aid in training and improving quality.
- Expand the availability of proven infant and toddler programs that use research-based practices to enhance early learning and child development and promote later school success.
- Extend library hours to seven days a week and charge libraries to promote family literacy.
- Make New York State Child Care Standards the standard in all its cities, and eventually meet the more stringent federal ones for Early Health Start.
- Raise standards for training and supervision of infant and toddler child care professionals, incorporating a multidisciplinary, collaborative perspective, and increase training funds.
- Create a quality care rating system for parents to evaluate child care programs.
- Make quality child care affordable by increasing subsidies available to families with infants and toddlers.

Thank you very much. I would be happy to respond to any questions or provide additional information.