



# Onondaga County Legislature

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## **WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE REVIEW OF THE 2026 TENTATIVE BUDGET BUDGET REVIEW DAY 5 – SEPTEMBER 19, 2025 COLLEEN A. GUNNIP, CHAIR**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Mr. May, Ms. Abbott, Mr. Romeo, Mr. Knapp, Mr. Garland, \*Ms. Hernandez  
**ALSO ATTENDING:** Chairman Burtis, Mr. Meaker, Ms. Cody, Ms. Harvey, Mr. Olson, Mr. McCarron, Mr. Bush, Dr. Kelly; also please see attached

Chair Gunnip called the meeting to order at 9:44 a.m.

**OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENT:** Elizabeth Bough Martin, Director

### **2025 INITIATIVES & ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

*In 2025, the Office of the Environment (OE) continued its work coordinating and implementing the County's Deer and Tick Management Plan and Ash Tree Management Plan, as well as overseeing the County's Water Chestnut Management Plan. This year saw the introduction of drone aerial spraying of water chestnuts in the Seneca River. This new initiative yielded excellent results and severely reduced the number of plants and seeds. OE continued to support efforts begun previously to address all nuisance aquatic vegetation in the County's waterbodies, including expanding harvesting operations on Otisco Lake.*

*Addressing water quality issues throughout the County continues to be a priority. OE staff are continuously working with our partners to prevent Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) on all County waterbodies through projects to identify and manage underlying causes such as erosion of sediment and phosphorus loading. 2025 saw OE working with the Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board (CNYRPDB) on the Oneida Lake Watershed Advisory Committee to formulate a Nine Element Plan for the lake, the Skaneateles Lake Association (SLA) on the Winding Way Streambank Stabilization Project, the Otisco Lake Preservation Association (OLPA) on drafting an update to the lake's Watershed Management Plan, and the Jamesville Reservoir Preservation Association (JRPA) on an engineering study to identify conditions leading to HAB formation in the reservoir. Assistance was also provided to residents on the Kettle Lakes in Tully and DeRuyter Lake. Monitoring and compliance on Onondaga Lake continues nearly year-round. OE also continued to work with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) and other agencies on the Tully Mudboil Advisory Group (TAG) to identify methods for containing mudboil activity in the Tully Valley region to prevent sediment from being deposited into Onondaga Creek and carried to Onondaga Lake.*

*OE is developing procedures and programs to implement Year 2 items required for compliance with the General Permit for the Syracuse Urbanized Area Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4), including updating the County's Stormwater Management Plan. Onondaga County continues to partner with towns and villages in the MS4 and OE is working collaboratively with CNYRPDB to map the Syracuse MS4 to achieve compliance with the State's regulatory mapping requirement.*

*In March, OE successfully concluded its pilot tree canopy assessment to gauge current canopy cover and to identify potential opportunities for future tree planting in the Towns of Cicero, Clay, Lysander, and Van Buren. Work continues on the Onondaga County Greenhouse Gas Inventory to inform the next five-year Climate Action Plan (CAP). Completion of the CAP will qualify the County to receive bronze certification in the State's Climate Smart Communities (CSC) program. OE staff regularly assists County departments with grants, environmental permits, and compliance with new environmental regulations.*

## 2025 BUDGET REVIEW

*The 2025 Office of the Environment budget is sufficient and included funds for substantial projects to help support compliance, water quality protection, climate action, and natural resources conservation. These projects are multi-year and are expected to lead to additional projects and programs to maintain and improve the quality of the County's environment.*

## 2026 BUDGET OVERVIEW

*The Office of the Environment's 2026 budget includes standard salary and wage increases consistent with the baseline budget approach. The Executive 2026 Budget continues funding for Onondaga County's Deer and Tick Management Program and Water Chestnut Management Plan, which have traditionally been funded by the County Legislature. There is no expansion proposed in the Executive 2026 Budget for these programs. The Deer and Tick Management Program funding will continue to accommodate the five participating municipalities. After a harvest of water chestnuts of over 1.4 million pounds in 2025, the 2026 budget includes funding for the water chestnut program consistent with previous years. OE staff will continue to provide assistance and administer programs to protect water quality and prevent Harmful Algal Blooms in the County.*

*The Office of the Environment will continue to support the County's environmental compliance, sustainability, climate action activities, and natural resource conservation with no request for additional funding beyond a request for a \$9,540.00 increase to assist OE while undertaking the drafting of the new Local Solid Waste Management Plan (LSWMP). OE seeks to work collaboratively with partners at the Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency (OCRRA) as well as students and researchers in academia to develop a new and innovative LSWMP, and the Office of the Environment respectfully requests the increase to fund intern and student research.*

*Onondaga County will benefit from grant funds awarded from the New York Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) and other New York State agencies.*

## 2026 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

*The Office of the Environment is embarking on the preparation of a new Local Solid Waste Management Plan. Funding for the consultant is secured, however Local Solid Waste Management Plans can be labor-intensive, particularly given the expectation of public engagement. The LSWMP, as proposed, will explore innovative alternatives and new technologies and will likely include focus groups. Preparation of a new LSWMP will be undertaken collaboratively with OCRRA.*

*OE staff will continue to pursue new and innovative approaches to reducing and preventing aquatic invasive species, like water chestnuts; expanding and multiplying current efforts by working with regional and State partners. Working with CNYRPDB and the Central New York Stormwater Coalition OE will map stormwater infrastructure in the Syracuse Urbanized Area MS4, meet regulatory compliance requirements and work to improve the quality of stormwater entering the County's waterbodies.*

*Finally, the Office of the Environment oversees approximately \$1 million of grant-funded programs and will continue to pursue outside funding consistent with the mission of the Office.*

- Aerial herbicide spraying with drones is a better process because plants are targeted with less overshoot
  - Follow up showed drone spraying eliminated 98% of plants; spraying was missed in one spot

\*Ms. Hernandez arrived at the meeting

- Continue to work with regional partners on how to prevent water chestnuts up river
- Climate Action Plan
  - Currently finishing up greenhouse gas inventory
  - Meeting or exceeding greenhouse gas reduction goals and State goals
- Requesting \$9,540.00 for interns from Syracuse University and SUNY ESF
  - Would like to look at the County's solid waste and solid waste policy
  - Interns would do analysis and other office duties
- Will continue to protect and improve the quality of Onondaga County's natural environment

**Questions/Comments from the committee:**

- Is there money left over from the Deer & Tick fund?
  - Do not have exact information now, will forward it later
- Please explain the difference between adopted and modified for Professional Services?
  - Finance
    - Deer & Tick and Water Chestnuts are in the Transfer to Grant line
    - Will be transferred into Project account once budget is adopted
- How does the OE fit into what OCRRA does for Solid Waste Management?
  - This is a coordinated effort with OCRRA
  - Director of OE sits on the OCRRA Board
  - The 1<sup>st</sup> 10 year LSWMP was handled by O'Brien and Gere out of the OE
  - The 2<sup>nd</sup> 10 year plan was handled by OCRRA
    - OCRRA also handled the extensions between each 10 year plan
    - A report is required every 2 years on what is going on and what changes will be made to the plan
  - NYS would like to get all waste out of the waste stream by means of diversion
    - From an Economic Development standpoint, there are things the County can do to remove solid waste
    - Working with OCRRA on the scope of what the LSWMP will look like
  - The request for interns will help figure out what is best for the County in terms of solid waste
- Will it stop diversion from other cities?
  - 2019 Characterization Study deals with known waste and projected waste from Economic Development growth
  - Diversion from other cities is not being talked about because no one wants any waste coming in
    - It is more about what to do with Onondaga County waste
- Commend OE for including students on the CPA
- Does the OE have an aerator for the HAB's at Jamesville?
  - The aerator is part of the Parks budget
  - OE has retained Anchor QEA to generate conceptual designs for revegetation of the tributaries
    - One of the options being discussed is aerators for the beach area by the Parks Department
    - OE is focusing on nutrients and sediment coming into the lake
- How are Interdepartmental revenues received?
  - Finance
    - Parks and other departments bill for services
  - Office of Environment
    - OE provides value added technical assistance to departments
- Shout out to OE for work done with Soil & Water on the Seneca River; doing a nice job
  - Worked together; constituents are very grateful something is being done
  - Extra effort is worth it
- Will the CPA be completed in 2026?
  - Yes, meeting with consultants on Monday to go over greenhouse gas inventory
  - 5 people attended the city's climate action meeting on 9/18/2025
- Is staffing adequate for work that is being done?
  - Can get a lot of great work from interns if time is taken to mentor them
  - Staffing is good right now and will let you know if it is not

**WATER ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION:** Odean Dyer, Commissioner**2025 INITIATIVES & ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

- *The department's first priority in rightsizing the organization is achieving a balance between meeting current maintenance demands and preparing for future growth.*
- *A comprehensive review of division procedures is in progress, with new protocols being developed where gaps exist, all to be built into standardized operating procedure manuals for each division. This review is a collaborative effort to ensure team support.*

**Key Infrastructure Investments:**

- *Construction is underway on the White Pine Pump Station, a critical investment to support anticipated growth in the Oak Orchard Service Area. The project is on track for completion in Q3 2026.*
- *Requests for Proposals issued for feasibility studies at the Brewerton and Meadowbrook-Limestone facilities. These studies allow for capacity reviews at each plant to ensure future maximum capacity that will support residential and commercial growth needs in these areas.*
- *Design work is advancing on odor control projects at both Metro and Meadowbrook-Limestone, which will mitigate odor concerns and strengthen WEP's role as a responsible community partner.*
- *The Metro Clarifier project, addressing aging infrastructure, is progressing as planned and scheduled for completion in Q4 2027.*
- *The Biosolids/Dryer Building is in testing phase and air testing will be followed by mechanical system testing, allowing any operational issues to be resolved with focus to get equipment operational.*

**2025 BUDGET REVIEW**

- *Overall, WEP is forecast to finish 2025 within budget.*
- *Unforeseen delays in getting the sludge dryer fully functional have resulted in cost in the "all other" account to exceed the 2025 budgeted appropriations. With the approval of the County Legislature at September Session we utilized salary and benefit savings a result of departmental vacancies to transfer funds to cover the overage in this account.*
- *All other operating accounts are sufficiently funded to support the Department core functions for 2025.*

**2026 BUDGET OVERVIEW**

*The 2026 budget includes a reduction in funded head count of 25 positions (2) in the Administration of Drainage Districts and (23) in the Consolidated Sewer District. This reduction more accurately aligns with the 2025 and 2026 appropriations in the Regular Employee salary line. This budget also includes an increase of \$1.8 million in the maintenance, utilities and rent account due to an anticipated 15% increase in National Grid rates. Additionally, you will see that the "all other" account contains sufficient funding to cover sludge hauling while the department continues to work on bringing the dryer online. These expense increases are being fully offset by a slight increase in industrial waste surcharges, changing the gallons per unit from 100,000 to 85,000, which creates additional units from our commercial and industrial users and a sewer unit rate increase of \$25.00 over 2025 adopted*

**2026 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

- *Workforce safety remains the highest priority. New training programs are being implemented in partnership with leading industry professionals to update and expand standard operating procedures while providing hands-on instruction to staff.*
- *A facility capacity review is in development, enabling WEP to support the County's initiatives to support housing/residential and commercial growth.*
- *Quality assurance and control efforts remain ongoing for sewer unit assessments and industrial surcharge billing. As development expands the County's rate base, rate structures will accurately reflect the true cost of service delivery.*

**Key Infrastructure Investments:**

- *Design work is underway for major upgrades at the Meadowbrook-Limestone Wastewater Treatment Plant to expand capacity, reduce overflows, and enhance odor control.*
- *Reduce Combined Sewer Overflows with Sewer Separation projects within the City of Syracuse in areas adjoining NYS I-81 Project.*
- *Asset renewal construction projects at Baldwinsville-Seneca Knolls and Metro WWTP will be entering construction in 2026 to replace critical assets that have outlived their useful service life.*

- *Continue investments in deficient pipelines and deteriorated pump stations; including significant pump station construction projects in the City of Syracuse and Town of Manlius.*

The following was presented by Odean Dyer, Commissioner

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Chairman, Legislators, thank you for the opportunity to present our 2026 Executive Budget. My name is Odean Dyer, Commissioner of the Department of Water Environment Protection. Joining me today are three of my deputies, Dave Snyder, Martha Hennigan, and Eric Schuler, who have been instrumental in helping me get up to speed in this role. WEP is a department that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, thanks to the dedication of our frontline staff who keep our treatment plants and pump stations running under every circumstance. Central to this work is our commitment to worker safety, ensuring that the men and women who keep our systems functioning have the training, resources, and protection they deserve. This budget reflects our continued effort to balance fiscal responsibility with the operational and capital investments needed to maintain compliance, protect public health, and prepare for future growth in Onondaga County.*

### **2025 ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

*As I am learning & reviewing functions at WEP, it is a priority to balance the immediate demands of system maintenance with the strategic planning necessary for long-term capacity and resiliency. Recruitment is underway to fill critical vacancies, with an emphasis on promoting existing staff.*

*We also initiated a comprehensive review of policies and procedures. Standardized operating procedure manuals are being developed across divisions to ensure consistency, accountability, and safety.*

*Infrastructure milestones include progress on the White Pine Pump Station, which remains on schedule for completion in the third quarter of 2026, and the advancement of feasibility studies at Brewerton and Meadowbrook-Limestone facilities to define future capacity. Design efforts also continue on odor control projects at Metro and Meadowbrook-Limestone, while the Metro Clarifier rehabilitation project is on track for completion in late 2027.*

### **2025 BUDGET REVIEW**

*This past year, unforeseen delays in bringing the sludge dryer online created unanticipated costs within the 'all other' account. Working with the Legislature, we addressed these overruns by transferring funds from salary and benefit savings realized through vacancies. I want to note that all other operating accounts remain sufficiently funded to support the department's core functions.*

### **2026 BUDGET OVERVIEW**

*The 2026 budget includes a reduction of 25 funded positions, 2 in the Administration of Drainage Districts and 23 in the Consolidated Sewer District. This adjustment better aligns personnel costs with actual appropriations in the Regular Employee salary line.*

*We are also addressing rising utility costs, with an anticipated 15% increase in National Grid rates driving a \$1.8 million increase in maintenance, utilities, and rent. Additionally, while work continues to bring the sludge dryer fully online, sufficient funding has been reserved in the 'all other' account to cover sludge hauling.*

### **STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR 2026**

*Our first priority remains workforce safety. We are expanding training opportunities, engaging industry professionals, and updating operating procedures to ensure our employees are supported and protected.*

*We continue to focus on recruitment and retention, with special attention to bolstering infrastructure support staff and strengthening technical service capacity.*

*The department is advancing a countywide capacity plan alongside a comprehensive Master Plan. These tools will enable WEP to strategically prioritize capital improvements and provide timely, data-driven responses to requests for capacity assurance.*

*Finally, we remain committed to quality assurance in sewer unit assessments and industrial surcharge billing to ensure rate structures accurately reflect the true cost of services delivered.*

**INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS**

*Key infrastructure projects in 2026 include:*

- *Major upgrades at the Meadowbrook-Limestone Wastewater Treatment Plant to expand capacity, reduce overflows, and address odor issues.*
- *Sewer separation projects in the City of Syracuse connected to the NYS I-81 project, which will reduce combined sewer overflows.*
- *Asset renewal projects at Baldwinsville-Seneca Knolls and Metro WWTP, entering construction in 2026 to replace critical infrastructure at the end of its service life.*
- *Continued investment in deficient pipelines and deteriorated pump stations, with major pump station projects planned in Syracuse and the Town of Manlius.*

**CONCLUSION**

*The 2026 Executive Budget reflects a balance between fiscal discipline and the pressing need to renew and expand critical infrastructure. It supports our workforce, advances planning efforts, and ensures the continued protection of public health and the environment.*

*Onondaga County is growing, and WEP must be prepared not only to meet today's needs but also to anticipate tomorrow's demands. We no longer have the luxury of choosing one over the other. We must meet the moment by doing both. That is the mission we are committed to, and that is the work we are advancing through this budget.*

*On behalf of WEP, I thank the Legislature for your partnership and support, and I look forward to working together to achieve these goals.*

**Questions/Comments from the committee:**

- Is the sludge hauling number what is anticipated for the whole year?
  - Yes
- Personnel mentions 25 unfunded positions
- Roster shows net increase of 1
  - Finance
    - Last couple of years has had a large salary savings in WEP budget
    - Roster shows 40 funded, unfilled positions
      - There is not enough money in the 2025 or 2026 budget to cover these salaries
      - Identified and unfunded positions to better align with salary line
- How many true vacant positions can be funded in the 2026 budget?
  - Finance
    - Low 20's but will follow up with exact number based on last payroll
  - County Executive's Office, Physical Services
    - Thank you to Chair Gunnip for urging WEP to build staff with the most critical everyday positions first
    - WEP has done a good job culling through
- If the dollars were not there, how were the positions considered funded?
  - Finance
    - Going back to countywide salary savings in 2026 through attrition and turnover
    - On the roster, funded positions used salary savings
    - The large salary savings seemed disingenuous so tried to right-size for 2026 to be better aligned
- What is the \$474K increase in the 101?
  - Finance
    - Normal salary and wage increases based on CSEA and any other unions
- Is there a way to quantify and realize savings with the sewer separations that will happen with the 81 project?
  - Savings will be realized because WEP is not doing the capital improvements
    - WEP has input with the design, but the project is being done tandem with I81 work
  - Maintenance cost will be less because old infrastructure is being taken out and new infrastructure put in

- Will there be measureable savings due to the capacity of water being reduced?
  - It will help, but savings will be negligible
- Why is Provision for Capital \$0?
- What was Provision for Capital typically used for?
  - Finance
    - Historically that goes into Capital Improvement to offset some of the bonding
    - Been looking at old authorizations countywide to see if they can be repurposed
    - Have been able to close completed projects and appropriate unused funds to new projects
- Is WEP planning on staying within budget for 2025?
  - Finance
    - Will be using fund balance or a portion of the \$11M that was budgeted
    - Do not expect the use of additional fund balance

### **REQUEST: Finance to provide the pieces of what is driving the 2026 rate increase**

- Commend WEP for the millions of gallons of water successfully treated every day
- Commend OCWA for the millions of gallons of clean, healthy water every day
- Commend OCRRA for getting rid of everything

Chair Gunnip recessed the meeting at 10:21 a.m. The meeting reconvened at 10:36 a.m.

### **CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES: Amy Cunningham, Commissioner**

#### *2025 INITIATIVES & ACCOMPLISHMENTS*

- *Onondaga County DCFS School Based Initiatives funding continues to support ALL school districts within the County by providing approximately \$17 million in program funding for mental health services that include ACCESS Liaisons, Promise Zone Specialists, and Family Support Specialists. These services within schools assist students and their families with challenges they may be experiencing.*
- *DCFS and E911 have continued to work closely with community partners to implement the 911/988 Persons in Crisis (PIC) program to divert Police responses from 911 calls to Mobile Crisis teams. In conjunction with our partners in Law Enforcement, the City of Syracuse, Contact Community Services, St. Joseph’s Hospital and Liberty Resources, Onondaga County is working to ensure that PIC calls made to 911/988 are responded to with trained mental health professionals and individuals with lived experience. In 2025, DCFS and E911 have moved beyond the pilot phase of this program and into full implementation that includes 24/7 crisis response and coordination of diversion services for PIC.*
- *The Child Welfare Division continues to work closely with all school districts across the County to strengthen partnerships and provide training on the Child Welfare system.*
- *The Child Welfare Division is in the process of creating a Home and School Collaborative (HSC) to work exclusively with Syracuse City School District (SCSD). The HSC will establish a collaboration among families, SCSD, and Child Welfare. This unit will investigate all reports of abuse or neglect that are called in by SCSD. This approach will increase child safety and well-being as well as improve school attendance and performance.*
- *In collaboration with the Department of Social Services – Economic Security (DSS-ES) and their Childhood Poverty Reduction initiatives, DCFS is supporting the Attendance Project that is delivered by ACCESS. This project was launched in April 2025 and kicked off in four SCSD schools – Seymour, Delaware, Frazer, and Bellevue and worked with a total of 136 families and students. The initial two ACCESS Attendance Liaisons saw a 75% increase in attendance for program participants in the last two months of the 2024-2025 school year. For the 2025-2026 school year, there will be a total of 7 ACCESS Attendance Liaisons who will be onboarding a total of twelve SCSD school buildings to continue to focus on and support consistent school attendance.*
- *While at Hillbrook, fifteen youth have obtained regents diplomas over the past four years.*
- *The Syracuse/Onondaga County Youth Bureau continues to expand Youth Sports services with increased funding to community partners to support non-traditional sports programming and team sports programming.*
- *DCFS continues to expand contract monitoring and data collection and analysis in order to make informed decisions and improve outcomes for children and families. The contract administration team works closely with*

*DCFS personnel and service providers to support the development and implementation of the Results Based Accountability framework.*

- *DCFS has collaborated with the Onondaga County Sheriff's Office to build and implement the Central New York Threat Assessment, Management, and Strategy (CNY TAMS) team. This team meets regularly to assess school and community threats and brings together stakeholders to strategize and manage threat assessment cases on an ongoing basis.*
- *DCFS facilitated a Countywide Suicide Prevention training for all school districts in March 2025. Approximately 300 school personnel attending the in-person training at the Oncenter with many more attending virtually within their school buildings.*

### 2025 BUDGET REVIEW

*As a department, DCFS is projected to be within budget for 2025, with the exception of overtime salaries due to required staffing ratios and Foster Care program expenses related to a 6% OCFS rate increase.*

### 2026 BUDGET OVERVIEW

*The 2026 budget includes standard salary and wage increases consistent with the baseline budgeting approach. Also included in the base are increased costs in supplies, contractual services, all other, maintenance utilities & rents and professional services due to inflation and contract escalators. Mandated Programs are also increased in the 2026 budget as result of increased Foster Care costs that are driven by OCFS rate increases. Additional increases to the 2026 budget include the move of the Family Court unit from Law Department to Children and Family Services. An allocation for contracted legal services is also included in the 2026 budget.*

### 2026 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

- *Fully implement the Home and School Collaborative within Child Welfare to support families with Child Welfare involvement in Syracuse City School District.*
  - *Embed the Family Court Legal Unit into DCFS's Child Welfare Division in order to continue to improve collaboration and coordination among Child Welfare staff and the Attorneys who represent DCFS in Family Court.*
  - *Fully implement the 911/988 PIC Crisis Services through the provision of 24/7 coverage of a PIC Crisis Counselor and PIC Coordinator at 911.*
  - *Continued and ongoing engagement with school districts throughout the County to implement School Based Mental Health Services in all districts*
  - *Provide ongoing training and coordination with schools to build out the school threat assessment system*
  - *Continue to recruit and retain staff who are committed to serving children and families so that all are successful in the home, school, and community*
  - *Continue to facilitate planning for construction of an educational wing at Hillbrook Juvenile Detention Center in collaboration with Onondaga County Facilities Management*
  - *Continue collaborations with other Human Services Departments within the County to develop strategies to better serve children and families*
- DCFS encompasses Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, Mental Health, School-Based Initiatives, and Youth Development Services
  - DCFS continues to work collaboratively with County departments and community based organizations to provide programs and services that support the success of children, youth, adults and families in the home, school and community
  - Projected to have a surplus in 101
  - Overtime continues to be over budget due to mandated staff-to-resident ratios at Hillbrook and Child Welfare afterhours and night service support
  - The number of children in foster care has leveled out but costs continue to increase due to State rate increases
  - The increases from the Family Court unit relocation to DCFS is offset by decreases in the Law Department
  - Contractual Services increase is mostly reimbursable by the State for mental health and substance use services
    - There will be no additional local costs and will also see an increase in the revenue line
  - Professional Services increase is a result of contractual legal representation while recruiting County Attorney's
    - Having Attorney's ensures Child Welfare cases move through the court process appropriately
  - Juvenile Justice costs have been trending down over the past several years
  - 2026 budget includes \$1.5M to Early Childhood Alliance; \$2M for School-Based mental health services

- Supports children in every school district across the County

**Questions/Comments from the committee:**

- How many County Attorney's will be needed?
  - Currently have 3 County Attorney's and 3 contracted Attorney's
  - Will need 7 funded County Attorneys and 12 Support Staff
  - Contracted Attorney's will be phased out as County Attorney's are brought on
- It was mentioned that overtime will exceed the 2025 budget
- It appears the 2026 overtime line decreased
- Will DCFS be able to live within the 2026 lines?
  - Should be ok if the 101's for all 3 Hillbrook shifts are fully staffed
    - Run into overtime situations with call-ins or being understaffed
  - Child Welfare afterhours is always overtime
- How many vacant funded positions are there right now?
  - 12-15 DHA's (Detention Home Aides)
- How many were filled in 2025?
  - Hillbrook has a lot of applicants but still have trouble retaining staff
- Are HELP titles being used?
  - There is no Civil Service test for DHA's
- Are any local dollars being put towards Home and School collaboration?
  - No
- Will there be some sort of report or evaluation available to see if the program should continue with local dollars?
  - Yes
- Is it a 1 year or 3 year program?
  - 1 year through the end of 2026
- Why are some towns and villages not on the list of those that DCFS can contract with?
  - The list is historical based on municipalities that accepted youth development funding through State OCFS
  - In 2019 the State stopped funding municipalities directly and began funneling through the County
  - Each year DCFS reaches out to those municipalities to see if they want the funding
- What is the overall picture as far as staffing is concerned?
  - Child Welfare has 6 vacancies
    - Doing well at bringing Case Workers on board
    - The problem with Child Welfare is that it takes about 2 years to be fully trained, confident, and successful
    - 70% of staff have been with DCFS fewer than 4 years
- What is the management structure and physical location of the Attorney's?
- Who will be managing them?
  - There will be an Attorney overseeing all legal aspects and work with the Child Welfare Division
  - One Attorney stayed in the County Attorney's office to handle mandated Juvenile Justice cases
  - The remaining Attorney's for Child Welfare cases are housed in Child Welfare on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor
    - Deputy Commissioner will oversee Child Welfare
    - Division Administrator to work on administration in the Law Department
    - Chief Deputy Attorney (currently vacant) will oversee Administration
    - Chief Human Services Attorney
- Will an Attorney within the Human Services structure manage all of this?
  - Yes
- What is the problem with staffing at Hillbrook?
  - The qualifications and salary are lower

- Exploring the possibility of raising the qualifications for retention purposes
- Please provide more detail about what is happening in Mental Health and Foster Care?
  - Mental health and substance use services are fully reimbursed by the State
  - Foster care is partially reimbursable with different funding sources
    - OCFS sets the daily rates (money goes directly to foster families and residential programs to support children)
    - Rates increase once or sometimes twice per year by OCFS
- Is staffing adequate in both Mental Health and Foster Care?
  - Numbers are adequate; the issue is extensive training
- Overtime in 2024 was 3.8, and dropped to 1.3 in 2026
- What is the plan to meet the need in 2026?
  - Finance
    - The department has been successful at bringing people on
    - As training periods go away, there will be more 101 employees that will not need to utilize overtime
    - Still paying overtime costs because newer staff are not able to work independently in the field
- Are DCFS caseloads normal?
  - The number of reports coming in annually is stable or slightly fewer
  - Foster care services and cases are high; working hard to get them down so children and families have needed resources
- Encourage DCFS to look at whatever model is needed to support the staff and bring it to the Legislature
- There may be a model that can help solve the training problem
- A comment was previously made that staffing numbers are sufficient, and that training is the issue
- Which employees were being referred to?
  - Case Workers
- When Case Workers are fully trained, will DCFS be able to keep pace with the numbers provided
  - Yes, if 90-95% of staff are fully trained and in the field
- Is mental health covered with the Health Department (HD) or DCFS?
  - All mental health is handled within DCFS
  - Collaborate regularly with the HD because some substance use services are in the HD
- Local dollars spent is \$1.3M (section 4, page 60)
- How can the County keep pace with the increased need in mental health services within the community?
  - \$35M is mostly State and Federal funding
  - In terms of mental health services and programming, DCFS is reimbursed from the State and Federal government
  - The State is growing mental health services, which will benefit the County
- Is the reason local funds are not increasing because the funds coming from State are sufficient?
  - Yes
  - Finance
    - It does not include the local dollars that are usually in the Transfer to Grant line
    - The County Executive has a commitment for School-Based mental health with all local dollars
      - The additional local dollars will not be seen in the program line
- Does the 6 funded vacant positions include School-Based?
  - Yes, there are 6 in total
- Are there districts not participating in School-Based?
  - All districts have taken advantage of one or all services within the model

- Continue to have conversations with districts on how to increase services
- Are there any programs DCFS would eliminate if they were not mandated by the State?
  - No
- Are there still retention issues with Case Workers?
- Is it dealing with the competitive salary as well?
  - Has stabilized compared to last year; not losing as many
  - Continue to have the 2 year training lag
- It was mentioned that 70% of employees have been on staff for less than 4 years
- Is that mostly due to retirement and an aging department?
  - Yes
- Are families taking advantage of the Child Tax Credit?
  - County Executive's Office, Human Services
    - PEACE Inc. helps people take advantage of Child Tax Credit
    - This would be a question for DSS-ES

## **SOCIAL SERVICES – ECONOMIC SECURITY:** Sarah Merrick, Commissioner

### *2025 INITIATIVES & ACCOMPLISHMENTS*

- *As of August 29, 2025, served over 100,000 unique County residents with one or more programs and assisted over 52,000 visitors, a daily average of 312, that have come to the Civic Center.*
- *Applications and caseloads remain consistent with last year's numbers. No dramatic increases or decreases.*
- *AI Initiatives: On February 18, 2025, DSS-ES began using EVA Rights and Responsibilities, now called EVA Interview.*  
*From 2/28/25 – 8/18/25, EVA Interview has handled 8,074 calls and saved 819 hours and 56 minutes of staff time. We started using EVA phone on April 28th. From 4/28/25 – 8/18/25, EVA answered 84,773 calls and handed 24,915 (29%) of them without having to transfer to a staff person. EVA handles all the types of calls. EVA saved 419 hours and 8 minutes of staff time.*
- *Effective June 1, 2025, Onondaga County started a child care assistance waiting list due to insufficient funds to keep up with the growth factor. At the same time, OCFS authorized a waiver allowing the County to keep 95% of cases open at recertification. A waiting list is still in place.*
- *It has been one year since adding case workers to our homeless/housing unit through the support of the Family-Centered Services OTDA grant. As the County's single point of entry for the unhoused, case workers have provided crisis management assistance and support to find permanent housing for the unhoused. They have worked with 416 families during this time period. Last year at this time 98 families were living in hotels. Currently, there are 62 families.*
- *All four Childhood Poverty Reduction programs are fully operational.*
  - *2Gen Onondaga Poverty Reduction Pilot and Expansion is currently serving 170 families simultaneously, with the goal of 194 families. Since its inception, 68 clients have been employed at some point while working with 2Gen (that is 47% of the total number of clients) and 30 of those clients had consecutive employment for more than 6 months, over 800 goals around child development, financial empowerment, mental health, housing, education, and social capital have been achieved. A Financial Counselor has helped over 15 participants with credit building, saving, and buying a car. 2Gen partners with the NE Community Center – Supportive Employment Program and has assisted participants with submitting 31 job applications and creating 9 new resumes.*
  - *CNY CHANCE program has worked with area landlords to identify 124 new apartments. 21 homeless families have been permanently housed in the first full month of operations. They continue to recruit new property owners and managers and enter apartment information into Padmission database. Currently, the*

*database has 895 units and will be flagged when they become vacant. The tenant navigator program is working with housed families to ensure stability.*

- *The Attendance Project launched April 29, 2025, focusing on school absenteeism for Seymour, Delaware, Frazer and Belleuve and worked with a total of 136 families and students. The initial two Attendance Liaisons saw an increase of attendance around 75% in the last 2 months of the school year. This 2025-2026 school year, there will be a total of seven Attendance Liaisons that will be onboarding a total of 12 SCSD school buildings to continue focusing and supporting consistent school attendance.*
- *Diaper Distribution for Temporary Assistance Families launched in March 2025 and has enrolled 460 families with a total of 561 children. The project has developed a web of delivery methods so most of these families are getting free diapers delivered to their homes.*
- *All of this has been accomplishment with an average staffing vacancy rate of 10% to 15%.*

## 2025 BUDGET REVIEW

*The department is projected to be within budget for 2025 aside from mandated services. Temporary Assistance programs are seeing increases in caseloads. NYS Child Care Assistance expanded eligibility continues to increase Daycare costs.*

## 2026 BUDGET OVERVIEW

*The 2026 budget includes standard salary, and wage increases consistent with the baseline budgeting approach. This budget does include the move of Welfare Attorneys from the Law Department to Economic Security. All other personnel changes in the department are budget neutral. Additional funding is included in the Professional Services account to continue and expand the use of AI Technology.*

- ***Safety Net and Family Assistance*** – *Overall caseloads have increased. Anticipate an increase in emergency housing as rents continue to become unaffordable for those without resources.*
- ***Daycare*** – *The 2026 budget includes our NYS allocation, our required maintenance of effort and an additional \$750,000 of local support to the Daycare program. The waitlist implemented June 1, 2025 will remain in place until caseloads reach a level where expenditures and revenues balance.*

## 2026 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

- *AI Initiatives including Expand EVA Phone, Interview and Companion throughout all aspects of the department to provide excellent client service and time savings for employees so they can focus on the complex duties of their jobs, such as determining eligibility and recertifying eligibility.*
- *Continue to recruit and hire to fill all vacancies to meet projected programming expectations.*
- *Prepare and implement more administrative requirements per new regulations. For example, monitor work requirements for those receiving SNAP and Medicaid.*
- *Continue year two to implement the Child Poverty Reduction Action Plan programs. These include 2Gen Onondaga Poverty Reduction initiative, part of the County Executive's PIE agenda, a comprehensive program to break the cycle of poverty in Onondaga County; CNY CHANCE - Landlord engagement, recruitment, and concierge service; Attendance project focused on school absenteeism (lead by DCFS) and Diaper distribution for Temporary Assistance Families.*
- *Build within TA Employment, a Financial Empowerment program, to assist TA clients with budgeting, debt management and financial planning. Financial planning is recognized as an activity by OTDA enabling TA clients to meet requirements to maintain their benefits.*
- *Focus on developing the supervisory skills of fifty-five (55) supervisors of direct line staff.*
- All programs in DSS-ES are Federally mandated programs
  - Public Assistance, SNAP, HEAP, Child Care Assistance, Child Support, Medicaid
  - Some are Federally funded and some are State funded
  - All programs are heavily regulated by Federal and State oversight
- Public Assistance (PA)
  - Currently within budget but will look at PA lines very closely
  - Primary reason for PA is to pay rent

- Continue to have record level homelessness
- Mandated to house anyone who is homeless into either a shelter or hotel if shelter is at capacity
- Budget will have increases because it is costing a lot more money to shelter singles and families
- Child Care Assistance
  - At an all-time low during COVID with 1,500 cases
  - June 2025 was a record level of 3,100 cases
    - Expenditures began to exceed State allocation
    - Created a waiting list
    - As caseloads decrease, trying to calibrate when applications will be accepted again
  - Concerned this budget year may exceed budget allocation
- Average 40-50 vacancies since COVID
  - Have tried many recruiting strategies
  - Run overtime and 103 at high levels
  - With savings in 101 line, believe DSS-ES will be within budget for 2025
  - 2026 budget is flat on 101, 102, 103 (net decrease of 11 positions)
- Contractual decreased due to bringing in Financial Empowerment to work with 5,000 TA clients
- Emergency Assistance to Adults
  - Individuals on Social Security Disability (SSDI) receive a monthly benefit, but can have difficulty with finances
  - The program prevents eviction of SSDI clients
    - The County is able to pay unpaid back rent for people and stabilize their housing situations
- Medical Payments is Medicaid
- Daycare
  - Budget is getting caught up with Federal daycare funding cycles
  - The County has always been able to meet the demands with roll over funds
  - After COVID, the State made changes to eligibility, parent share, payments to child care providers for absences
    - Roll over funds have now disappeared leaving only the flat allocation from the State
  - Currently at \$47M
  - County Executive added an extra \$750K on top of the mandated \$1M which will allow the County to keep current cases that exceed 300% of the Federal poverty limit
    - Currently the waiver allows the use of Federal & State money to keep open cases up to that limit
    - The State expanded eligibility limit from up-to 300% to up-to 350% of Federal poverty limit
    - Without the extra local money, people between the limits would lose child care assistance
  - The County is taking a leadership role in preserving current child care assistance
- Professional Services
  - County will be making a large investment in AI-powered EVA through TipCo Automated Systems
  - Began piloting EVA in 2025 with SNAP program
    - EVA has answered over 110,000 SNAP calls in less than 4 months of use
      - The system has answered 32,000 of 110,000 calls without transferring to a DSS employee
      - Has saved almost 1,900 hours of staff time
    - In the process of developing EVA to be used throughout all DSS program areas
    - EVA will be the 1<sup>st</sup> point of contact and will automatically transfer to a person if not able to answer a question
  - EVA delivers better customer service and provides work relief for staffers
- Work continues with child poverty reduction efforts
  - Expanded 2Gen Onondaga County
    - Simultaneously serving 194 families
    - 30 of original 60 clients have been employed full time
    - Working with 2Gen families is working and moving them out of poverty
- Working with CNY Centralized Housing Assistance and Network for Community Engagement (CNY CHANCE)
  - In 1 month, re-housed 21 homeless families into hotels
  - At a record low with 57 families in hotels
- School district attendance project helps get kids in school
- Diaper Distribution project
  - Working with over 460 families
  - Distributed over 500K diapers since program began in the spring
  - On track to distribute at least 1M diapers per year

**Questions/Comments from the committee:**

- DSS took on the employment part a couple of years ago
- Are there any changes or anything new now that DSS is managing it?
  - Going very well
  - OTDA wants their trainers to learn from County Onondaga County DSS-ES
  - 2024 had a record 450+ individuals move from TA to SSID benefits
- Is there any change with the daycare absentee issue?
  - The 3 prongs in changes to childcare have been:
    - Raising eligibility
    - Decreasing parent share to 1%
    - Having to pay 90 days' worth of absences per child per provider
- Do other County Commissioner's reach out for change in Legislation to the State on the absences?
  - Commissioner's throughout the State talk to people on the administrative side
  - Would be great if Legislature's could work the Legislative side
  - Continue to keep data that shows when the main cost escalator happened
- How many are currently on the waiting list?
  - 99
- Congratulations on article about poverty rates
- How much is needed to open up the application for new incoming daycare?
  - Would need a minimum of \$50M per year; not sure if funding will be coming from the State
- Does EVA stop hold times?
  - EVA answers 30% of calls
  - There are glitches but by the end of the year hold times should decrease due to decrease in volume of calls
  - DSS monitors wait times and would like to get them down to a few minutes
- Will the time limits for section 8 housing, along with federal cuts lead to an increase in homelessness resulting in housing more people in hotels?
  - 2026 will bring changes to federal programs, including monitoring work requirements for SNAP and Medicaid
  - The State has shared that there is at least another 5K households eligible for TA
    - These households are not currently on the caseload because there is a work requirement
  - DSS is the last stop for people; homeless singles and families will be eligible for at least temporary housing
- Is EVA set up to provide information that a case worker would provide over the phone?
  - Yes, but it is evolving
  - Have to prove to the State that client confidentiality and State's computer network is not compromised
  - EVA has 3 components
    - Phones - Answers incoming calls
      - EVA provides similar information that can be found on the DSS website
      - Striving for approval from the State to provide personalized updates to client accounts
    - Interview
      - All programs require an application or recertification application
      - Currently piloting EVA to call TA applicants to gather information to send to an eligibility worker
        - If effective, would like to use the Interview component throughout the department
    - Companion
      - Stores all policies, procedures, regulations, training manuals etc. for staff to access
        - EVA can site regulations and explain why it needs to be done
      - Will allow a consistent application throughout the department
- What kind of feedback is being received from the client?

- There was one caller that EVA could not understand
  - The client was frustrated due to the loop system, but EVA was able to get them to a human being
- TipCo is working on a process for callers to provide feedback
- Constituents who cannot apply for SNAP or HEAP in person are happy with the new system
- Does EVA translate language?
  - Yes; Spanish, French, and Arabic
    - In the process of bringing on other languages as well
  - EVA will automatically switch to the language the caller is speaking
  - If the Interview component can be perfected, the system can call at any time; days, evenings or weekends
- Is the Child Tax Credit being taken advantage of?
  - Yes, DSS advertises when tax season opens and mails flyers to clients with free tax assistance
  - Financial Empowerment staff work with TA clients to make sure they are submitting tax information properly
  - Past experience shows caseloads decrease in the months tax refunds are received
- What percentage of families are applying?
  - Can look into it, but the percentage would be very high for people on TA
- Are 5 year olds eligible for daycare?
  - Yes, ages 0-13 are eligible
- The CIP includes renovations for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> floors, will this complete the department's renovations?
  - Yes, may need to circle around again
  - The department has not been renovated in decades
- Does the public go to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> floor?
  - No, 3 and 5 are staff floors and will remain that way
  - Try to keep client activity to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor
- Are the employees feeling better about the new security system?
  - Yes, it is very good
- Thank you for the responsiveness to questions whenever they are asked
- Years ago the County invested a substantial amount in kiosks; are they still being used?
  - Unfortunately, the State decided they were a security risk and shut them down
  - State has a new app called NYS Mobile Document Upload, but it is not user friendly
  - Trying to use EVA for client traffic flow
    - Working with the State upfront; do not want to develop something and have it shut down again
- Is DSS working with Economic Development to address and build an environment to help with challenges?
  - The beauty of the CHANCE program is building new relationships with landlords
  - When families are placed in apartments, the CHANCE program helps them learn how to deal with the landlord
- Challenges exist for not only the cost but also not having access to housing due to lack of available transportation
  - DSS collects a lot of data; and could provide data if asked
  - Discussions about how to use aggregate data to help make decisions about programming is a great idea
- Does DSS have Financial Empowerment partnerships to increase capacity and build efficiencies?
  - Yes, currently developing programs that focus on the needs of the very poor
  - Tried to use traditional Financial Empowerment programs, but it is not tweaked enough for the population
- Are late rent payments to landlords still an issue?
  - Have 30 days to pay
  - Every so often there are glitches, but checks go out every Thursday

The meeting was adjourned at 11:41 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Tammy Barber*

TAMMY BARBER, Deputy Clerk  
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: BUDGET REVIEW - DAY 5

DATE: SEPTEMBER 19, 2025

NAME (Please Print)	DEPARTMENT/AGENCY
<i>OTIS Dyer</i>	<i>WEP</i>
<i>Marta Hennigan</i>	<i>WEP</i>
<i>David Syon</i>	<i>WEP</i>
<i>Eric Smeek</i>	<i>WEP</i>
<i>Jennifer Paganelli</i>	<i>Fin Ops</i>
<i>Angelina</i>	<i>Personnel</i>
<i>Donna D BRUSARE</i>	<i>Personnel</i>
<i>Evin Welch Fair</i>	<i>Law</i>
<i>Beth Mortas</i>	<i>Personnel</i>
<i>Amanda Emmons</i>	<i>Personnel</i>
<i>Sirena Sharpe</i>	<i>Fin ops</i>
<i>Megan (Dorel)</i>	<del><i>Fin Ops</i></del> <i>DCAF</i>
<i>Kelly Iaramojannis</i>	<i>OCFS</i>
<i>ERIN Pessini</i>	<i>DCFS</i>
<i>Jessica Allen</i>	<i>Finops</i>
<i>Kim</i>	<i>DSS-ES</i>
<i>Janet Robinson</i>	<i>DSS-ES</i>
<i>Nick Murphy</i>	<i>DSS-ES</i>
<i>Monica Brown</i>	<i>DSS-ES</i>
<i>Ann Downes</i>	<i>DSS-ES</i>
<i>Sarah Easterly</i>	<i>DSS-ES</i>
<i>Cory Lewis</i>	<i>DSS-ES</i>

## ATTENDANCE

**COMMITTEE: BUDGET REVIEW - DAY 5**

**DATE: SEPTEMBER 19, 2025**

NAME (Please Print)	DEPARTMENT/AGENCY
Jason Dean	Finance
Pan Krucz	CF
Adrienne Johnson	CE
Kyle Cook	Training
Kristi Smiley	Finance
Smah Merrick	DSS-ES
Amy Cunningham	DCFS
Whitney Shepard	DCFS
Darcie Lesniak	Leg.
Jim Beebe	Leg.
Ethan LaMontagne	Leg.
John DiSantis	Leg.
Ryan Ockenden	Law Dept.
Elizabeth Bough-Martin	Office of Env.
Blanca Farney	DCFS
Jenn Pando	DCFS
Omar Osbourne	DCFS
Quel Canoe	Candidate