



Written Testimony Submitted to the New York State  
Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council (CPRAC)

*May 13, 2024*

## **Background**

YouthNPower: Transforming Care is an intergenerational collective that includes young people who are aged 19 through 27 with lived expertise in the child welfare system and those who are from over-surveilled communities. Working with researchers, policy advocates and organizers, we are exploring, documenting and expressing the power, needs, and desires of young people transitioning out of foster care as young adults in New York City. YouthNPower is a collaboration of the Children’s Defense Fund-New York, the Public Science Project at the CUNY Graduate Center, and New Yorkers for Children.

We appreciate this opportunity to supplement the oral testimony provided by our collective member Christine Joseph at the April 29, 2024 public meeting. This written testimony includes contributions from YouthNPower members Christine Joseph, Amal Kharoufi, T’Coy Adams, Chanel Smith and Julia Davis.

We suggest that the CPRAC include more people with lived experience in the activities and decision-making, going beyond opportunities for public comment and testimony.

More information about the YouthNPower: Transforming Care collective is available at: [www.YouthNPower.org](http://www.YouthNPower.org).

## **Members of YouthNPower’s Experiences and Analysis of the “Administrative Burdens” facing New Yorkers when Applying for, Receiving and Using Public Benefits, and Opportunities for CPRAC Consideration.**

### *1) The Process of Applying for Benefits is Overwhelming and Unfair.*

Completing applications for public benefits is impossible without help, and many of our members described invasive, negative, disrespectful and harassing experiences with caseworkers preparing public assistance applications. Staff blame applicants for

missing documents already produced and presented and give contradictory and confusing instructions. Furthermore, there is no customer service or accountability. In our collective experience as young adults entering these public benefits systems, we see lengthy delays, limited help, and numerous examples of how “administrative burden” is experienced as not so much a burden *on the administration* but rather a *burden carried by beneficiaries*, for example: taking time away from work or school to return to offices for appointments multiple times and having benefits administrators lose application and renewal documents. This is especially challenging for young adults, and those emerging from foster care who too often have no one to help them with the complicated application process. Our members describe a public benefits system that is hostile and lacks empathy for young people and what they are experiencing as they try to adjust and transition to independence.

## 2) *Beneficiaries are Targeted for Fraud and Lose Benefits without Accountability or Compensation*

Our members also reported having benefits taken from them due to fraud, and without help or timely support to replace missing assistance. This contributes to experiences of precarity, undermining the sense of stability and support that the benefits are intended to provide. Our team describes not feeling that they can rely on benefits they are entitled to due to concerns that they could lose them because of an untrustworthy vendor. This issue was recently covered in a New York Times article: *How Scammers Are Stealing Food Stamps From Struggling Americans: Thieves are using skimmers to drain millions in food stamps and other public benefits from the neediest Americans.*<sup>1</sup>

## 3) *Managing Benefits is Stressful.*

Members who have applied for Public Assistance (Cash Assistance or Temporary Assistance) or food assistance (SNAP/EBT), report that the benefits are insufficient—especially for those who are not pregnant or parenting. Some find the monthly benefit is so small that they must “save” it month to month in order to collect enough in cash value to purchase food and other essential goods in bulk. Otherwise, the value of the benefit doesn’t have enough purchase power if used by itself.

Relying on benefits is also stressful because recertification is frequent, and adjustments or errors at the agency administering the benefits can result in a delay or gaps in

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Fu, *How Scammers Are Stealing Food Stamps From Struggling Americans: Thieves are using skimmers to drain millions in food stamps and other public benefits from the neediest Americans.* The New York Times, May 4, 2024: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/04/business/food-stamps-skimming-scam.html>.

support. Anticipating that, “saving” benefits for a “rainy day,” beneficiaries feel like they need to set aside some of their benefit to manage a period when the support is disrupted or discontinued. There is a sense that even if you successfully get benefits, you won’t be able to keep them for as long as you will need them.

For our members who have received Supplemental Security Income (SSI), the process is very difficult and the risk of losing benefits is always present if the recipient works. Notices frequently reduce benefits because of small monthly increases in income, and there are constant adjustments in the benefit amount which only heighten the feeling of risk and uncertainty.

Everyone who has applied for and received benefits report worrying about the threat of “benefits cliffs,” or losing support because of even minimal increases in their income . This is particularly challenging for emerging adults, who are entitled to and need the support of benefits, but who are balancing early career and educational opportunities. The effect is to dampen interest in certain kinds of employment, as young people balance concerns about making more money with losing essential support.

#### *4) Emerging Adults Should Have Peer Navigators for Public Benefits*

In light of the conditions young adults face when navigating public benefits, we recommend considering how peer navigators could support young people applying for public benefits.

The current administration of public benefits has no emerging adulthood framework that takes into account the developmental needs of young adults. Instead it effectively treats all applicants and beneficiaries the same and fails to support young adults – especially those with other system experiences like foster care. One pathway through the “administrative burden” described in this testimony and well-documented across the public assistance system is training and paying young adults who have successfully navigated these unforgiving systems themselves to coach and support other young people as they attempt to do the same.

#### *5) The CPRAC Should Embrace Guaranteed Income / Unconditional Cash Transfers as a Pathway to Reducing Child Poverty*

As the Council explores ways to reduce child poverty in New York, we encourage the group to consider the role of unconditional cash support as a supplement to restrictive public benefits programs. One of the projects YouthNPower has been leading is a direct cash transfer pilot for 100 youth who have recently aged-out of foster care in New

York City, providing each with \$1000 per month for 1 year. Our work is built on considerable research within the U.S. and internationally, documenting the effectiveness of guaranteed income and other unconditional cash support to promote well-being, housing stability, employment and economic mobility. We hope that the CPRAC integrates these kinds of policies, which can be implemented by the agencies that are part of the Council, into their recommendations and strategies for New York State.