

Social Services, Disabilities & Human Rights

BOL Meeting Minutes - Published Draft

Committee Chair: Nancy Barr

800 Michaelian Office Bldg.
148 Martine Avenue, 8th Floor
White Plains, NY 10601
www.westchesterlegislators.com



Tuesday, April 14, 2026

11:00 AM

Committee Room

CALL TO ORDER

Please note: Meetings of the Board of Legislators and its committees are held at the Michaelian Office Building, 148 Martine Avenue, 8th Floor, White Plains, New York, 10601, and livestreamed via the WebEx video conferencing system. Legislators may participate in person or via Webex. Members of the public may attend meetings in person at any of its locations, or view the meeting and its video recording online on the Westchester County Legislature's website: <https://westchestercountyny.legistar.com/>. This website also provides the links to documents to be discussed at a given meeting.

Present: Barr, Imamura, Puja and Williams

Absent: Williams Johnson

MINUTES APPROVAL

I. ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Topic: "Keeping Westchester Informed: A Department of Social Services Update Part II - Foster Care."

Guests: Westchester County Department of Social Services

John R. Befus, First Deputy Commissioner

Lisette Matos, Deputy Commissioner

The meeting opened with Legislator Barr expressing appreciation to the Department of Social Services (DSS) staff for their ongoing dedication and partnership with the Board of Legislators.

John Befus introduced himself, Deputy Commissioner Lisette Matos, and Director Anthony Christie. Befus began with a historical overview and shared demographic data from his presentation. As of March 2026, there are 361 children in Westchester County's foster care system. The department's goal is for two-thirds of these children to safely reunite with their families, while approximately 20 children are adopted each year. Foster care numbers have significantly declined from 264 in 2013 to just 30 in 2025 and kinship placements have increased from 53 in 2013 to 124 in 2025.

Financially, foster care costs range from \$500 to \$1,000 per day, depending on the level of support required. There are currently 52 cases in congregate care. DSS continues to utilize the Children's Cabinet, a collaborative initiative involving Social Services, Mental Health, the District Attorney's Office, and Probation, to provide coordinated services for foster children. They are also working to reinstate a "single point of entry" approach to streamline services and reduce anxiety among children and families.

Deputy Matos noted ongoing data-driven efforts to track how long children remain in care. She reported 48 foster cases in congregate care and 149 kinship cases, emphasizing that placement with family members is the department's first priority whenever possible.

A shift in approach to domestic violence cases was highlighted: historically, the non-aggressive parent was often blamed, but the focus now targets the perpetrator to help keep the child safely with the non-offending parent. Mental health remains a top priority across the county.

Legislator Pierce asked whether children are ever forced to reunite with abusive parents. Deputy Matos confirmed that, although this may occur, parental rights are protected by law and often supervised. DSS advocates for the child's safety while navigating these complex legal boundaries.

Legislator Williams requested demographic breakdowns. Deputy Matos agreed to provide additional statistics to the committee coordinator for distribution.

When asked about the foster care process, Matos explained that Child Protective Services (CPS) may take emergency custody if a child is in immediate danger. After judicial review, decisions about placement such as kinship or foster care are made.

Director Anthony Christie addressed congregate care questions, explaining that transitions can be emotionally intense and that various types of contact and support continue between the child, foster family, and biological family during placement or adoption.

Legislator Puja asked about the rising numbers in congregate care. The increase was attributed to overlapping challenges such as mental health issues, substance use, probation involvement, and juvenile detention cases. Many children enter DSS care after arrest or detention.

Legislator Barr then raised questions about youth aging out of foster care. DSS clarified that youth officially age out at 21, though some may leave earlier. While the department lacks comprehensive data on homelessness among former foster youth, efforts are underway to strengthen transitional programs and mentorship opportunities.

A discussion on trafficking followed. Deputy Matos affirmed that all children are screened for trafficking—both sexual and labor-related—and that interventions are available through partner organizations. Some cases have involved foster youth who were trafficked, prompting increased prevention and harm-reduction efforts.

Legislator Barr concluded by thanking DSS for their informative presentation and suggested scheduling a follow-up meeting to continue this important discussion.

II. OTHER BUSINESS

III. RECEIVE & FILE

ADJOURNMENT

Moved by Puja, seconded by Imamura, the Committee adjourned at 11:55AM

DRAFT