

Women Leaders' Statement

As women leaders in Erie County we are banding together to voice our concern about the decisions of County Executive Christopher Collins which damage the well-being and health of women and children. In his first term in office, the County Executive has made many policy decisions that hurt poor women and children in Western New York. These include the following:

- * The County Executive attempted to close two neighborhood health care centers that provide services primarily to poor women and children. Then, when the County Legislature extended their funding, the administration ordered the centers to stop scheduling new appointments, thus forcing them to close. The County says that these patients can be served at Sheehan Hospital, Buffalo General and ECMC, but none of these are easily reached by public transportation and none are designed to provide primary care services in the same efficient way.
- * The County Executive, in closing the health care centers, also ended a teen pregnancy program that provided education and counseling to at-risk teenagers. A collaborative process through non-municipal agencies that deliver teen pregnancy prevention services could have assured continuation of these programs, but no such process occurred nor was it welcomed.
- * The administration ended the County's participation in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program. This was a public process in which Catholic Charities successfully bid for and absorbed the program. But in the worst economic times since the Great Depression, the administration chose to narrow outreach to poor families rather than expand it. This shows a lack of concern for Erie County's most vulnerable citizens that we find troubling.
- * The County Attorney has repeatedly stonewalled a federal investigation of the Erie County Holding Center and the jail despite repeated studies showing the lack of mental health services and health care, as well as complaints of sexual harassment.
- * Finally, the County Executive abruptly ended daycare subsidies for more than 1100 of Erie County's poorest children. The parents of these children are now scrambling to make other arrangements for appropriate care. Some parents will stop working and will be forced to return to welfare. The children will miss out on three nutritious meals a day, plus a dependable, caring environment which provides socialization and models good relationship skills. Small business daycare providers, most of them women, are also at risk. Some providers have closed, or have laid off staff members – most of whom are women.

The County Executive has stated publicly that everything non-mandated in the budget is on the chopping block. Yet our children are the future and investment in them makes long-term economic sense. Caring for our children qualifies as a fundamental core value. However, we fear this administration will continue cutting programs that provide basic needs, offer guidance and promote healthy choices such as HEAP, the lead hazard abatement program, or youth violence prevention programs.

As women leaders in Erie County we call upon County Executive Collins to recognize that he is elected to represent the interests of all the citizens in Erie County: city, suburban and rural; rich and poor; people of all colors; adults and *children*; men and *women*. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” We assert that this is completely true in Erie County and we call upon the County Executive to use his skills as a leader to advance the cause of the County as a whole.

Specifically, we call upon County Executive Collins to immediately restore daycare subsidy funding for 90 days, as the democratically elected County Legislature has voted unanimously to do. He has at his disposal a significant County surplus which the County Comptroller has stated can be used for this purpose. During the 90 days we call upon him to work with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand to apply for federal stimulus dollars that can be retroactive to October to fund this program.

Planning for the future, we also call upon our County government to join us in a dialogue to create a fiscally sustainable plan for women’s and children’s services.

Finally, we call upon County Executive Collins to make clear by all his actions that his administration is working to lift up the status of women and children in Erie County and that he is working to open up pathways to progress for the poor. We refuse to allow him to use decision-making that prioritizes short-term benefits but jeopardizes the long-term future of our most vulnerable and valuable citizens. Now is the time to lead on behalf of *all* the people.