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CAO of WNY testimony before the Joint Senate and Assembly Committees on Social Services and Finance on September 17, 2024:

Good morning, Chairwoman Persaud, Chairwoman Davila, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairman McDonald, esteemed members of the Senate and Assembly, and fellow attendees.

My name is Dr. Marie A. Cannon, and I serve as the President and CEO of the Community Action Organization of Western New York (CAO of WNY). I am grateful for the opportunity to provide written testimony today on behalf of CAO of WNY regarding the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) program and its significance in advancing the self-sufficiency of the economically disadvantaged in our region.

CAO of WNY has been at the forefront for almost 60 years working to uplift individuals and families across Western New York, empowering them to overcome poverty, achieve economic independence, and improve their quality of life. Our organization serves as a lifeline, providing a range of critical services, many of which are supported by CSBG funds. These services include adult and family programs, housing support, workforce development, youth and senior services, community engagement and empowerment, drug research and treatment, and more.

I would like to highlight several key areas where the CSBG program has been instrumental in our work and where continued and expanded support would allow us to continue to respond directly to the pressing needs of our most vulnerable residents and deepen our impact.

At the heart of our mission is the goal to uplift and empower individuals and families facing financial hardship. Through the CSBG, we provide rental assistance and utility support, ensuring that no one has to choose between keeping a roof over their heads or turning on the heat on a 15-degree day in Buffalo, New York. These services are especially critical as the cost of living continues to rise, leaving many in our community at risk of housing instability.

In addition, we offer support through our emergency assistance program, which offers critical assistance to low-income individuals and families facing energy and rental insecurity, helping them maintain safe and stable housing. These services, made possible through CSBG funding, are essential to fostering self-sufficiency in our communities. Our housing assistance programs provide a pathway for low-income families to achieve long-term stability and security. We work closely with families to navigate the complex landscape of affordable housing, guiding them to sustainable living situations.

Food security is another cornerstone of our work. With CSBG funding, we distribute fresh, healthy food options to families through various initiatives, including our CAO Mobile Market produce truck. By partnering with local farms and non-profit organizations, we promote sustainable food access in food deserts throughout the county.

We also focus on the unique needs of our seniors, offering programming designed to support healthy aging and community connection. From congregate dining to social engagement opportunities, our senior programs provide a lifeline to many of our elderly residents who deserve dignity and care in their golden years.

We believe that workforce development is a cornerstone of economic empowerment. Our employment services include job readiness training, skills development, and placement support, helping individuals in the community prepare for, find, and retain meaningful and gainful employment. With CSBG funds, we have been able to enhance these programs and ensure that participants receive the necessary skills to succeed in an increasingly competitive job market. Our focus on economic mobility is central to breaking the cycle of poverty, and with additional funding, we can expand our reach and help more individuals secure stable, well-paying jobs.

In addition to these critical services, we are proud to offer wellness programming aimed at addressing the holistic health of our community. By integrating mental and physical wellness initiatives, we support individuals on their journey to long-term stability. These programs help participants build sustainable habits for healthier lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical importance of flexibility and adaptability in how services are delivered. This included the expansion of digital and remote services to ensure continuity of care and support. For example, through the CARES Act, CAO was able to mobilize emergency services and extend CSBG funded outreach to those affected by the pandemic.

As we look ahead, the lessons learned from the pandemic demonstrate that hybrid models of service delivery, combining in-person and virtual support, are essential to meeting the diverse needs of our communities. Whether providing meals to isolated seniors, supporting job seekers through virtual employment training, or offering remote counseling, CAO has proven that flexibility is key to empowering our most vulnerable populations.

We recommend that the CSBG plan prioritizes this flexibility, allowing agencies like ours to adapt to unforeseen challenges while ensuring that our communities have access to the services they need, wherever they may be.

Lastly, strengthening community engagement and collaboration is paramount. We know that the best solutions arise from collaboration and engaging community partners and stakeholders. CAO of WNY is deeply rooted in the communities we serve, working closely with residents to understand their needs and create responsive programs—which is the purpose of CSBG funds. We strongly encourage the State to continue prioritizing community voice in the CSBG planning

process and ensure that local agencies and community-based organizations remain active partners in delivering services.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with the State and working together to expand opportunities for economic empowerment and self-sufficiency throughout Western New York. With sustained and enhanced CSBG funding, we can ensure that our communities have the resources they need to not only survive but thrive.

Sincerely,
Marie A. Cannon, DSW, MSW