



KATHY HOCHUL
Governor

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2025-2026 Executive Budget Proposal
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Maria Lisi-Murray, Acting Executive Director**

Good afternoon, Chairs Fahy, Brouk, Krueger, Santabarbara, Simon, and Pretlow, as well as to your distinguished colleagues of the Senate and Assembly.

My name is Maria Lisi-Murray, and I am the Acting Executive Director of the New York State Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget proposal. I also want to extend my sincere thanks to Governor Hochul for her continued commitment to funding the only agency in the country mandated to both protect vulnerable populations and ensure the workforce has the tools to prevent future abuse.

When the Justice Center was established over a decade ago, the state ushered in the strongest protections in the nation against abuse, neglect, and mistreatment. With each passing year, our agency continues its vital mission of protecting vulnerable populations receiving services from six state agencies. Of the agency's nearly five-hundred member workforce, over 40% of our employees have direct experience with populations receiving services.

Over the last year, the Justice Center substantiated nearly 4,000 cases, holding subjects responsible for egregious conduct. We prevented over 300 violent criminals from re-entering the workforce. And over the last decade, we have barred over 1,000 of the worst offenders from working with vulnerable populations.

In March, I was elevated to Acting Executive Director. With that change, I can draw from my previous experience to improve our operations. This includes my nearly 7 years on the City of Binghamton police force including my time as a patrol officer and investigator on the special investigations unit; more than 2 decades as a litigator, in both the private and public sectors, including 3 years in the Attorney General's Office and the more than 5 years as the Chief Risk Officer with the Department of Motor Vehicles; and most recently, my time in a similar role here at the Justice Center.

During the last year under my leadership, the agency focused on three main growth areas: improving the quality and efficiency of service, strengthening current and forging new community partnerships, and expanding our abuse-prevention efforts.

To meet our first goal, we have developed ways to close cases faster and get quality staff back to work quicker through process improvements. While our primary duty is to serve and protect individuals under our jurisdiction, we understand the tremendous burdens placed on the State's direct care workforce. That is why we have prioritized evidence introduced early in an investigation that exonerates one or more staff members implicated in a Justice Center case.

We have also placed increased attention on our ability to find a facility responsible for an act of abuse or neglect, rather than an individual. Known as a "Category 4" finding, this oversight function allows the Justice Center to address systemic issues at a provider, holding them accountable for inadequate care that could be putting individuals at risk.

To satisfy our second goal, engaging with new and existing stakeholders, the Justice Center reached beyond its typical audiences to connect with first responders, a group that frequently interacts with vulnerable populations in the field. As a former City of Binghamton police officer, I know that law enforcement and first responders play an important part in promoting the safety of vulnerable people. However, these interactions present unique challenges for emergency response professionals and require specialized training to improve outcomes.

Leveraging more than a decade of expertise working with individuals with special needs, the Justice Center developed and launched an expanded portfolio of courses to train attendees on respectful communications, forensic interviewing skills, and investigative best practices. In 2024, we presented to over 200 participants, including members of the New York State Park Police Recruit Academy, the Bronx District Attorney's Office, and several city and county police and sheriff departments.

Agency staff also continued several initiatives to support our longstanding stakeholders. We participated in nearly 70 outreach events, advised hundreds of individuals and families throughout the course of investigations, held roundtable discussions with our sister agencies, and shared the Justice Center's story.

And to address our third goal, expanding our abuse-prevention efforts, more than a decade of data has afforded us the opportunity to educate our workforce and close critical gaps in care. For example, in response to our data showing an increase in choking incidents at residential facilities, we created a toolkit that outlines best practices for adhering to food safety care plans. My time heading the agency's quality control efforts underscores the need for a holistic approach to proactively use the information we collect in our investigations to prevent future abuse and neglect.

On the regulatory front, the agency engaged in two rulemakings: one to foster inclusivity by adopting gender-neutral terminology in our regulations and the second to codify the use of remote meeting platforms for our Surrogate Decision-Making Committee hearings, which supports the nearly 800 hearings conducted last year. These hearings make critical and speedy medical decisions for individuals who lack the ability to make these decisions themselves.

To the dedicated staff at the Justice Center, this work is very personal. And let me tell you why. Approximately 40% of our nearly 500 employees have a family member receiving services from programs under our jurisdiction. That means our staff have stake in the game – they want justice for victims of abuse or neglect just like the families we serve.

At face value, we can summarize our work in just a few words – investigation, education, and action.

But to the more than 1 million New Yorkers under our watchful eye, this agency means so much more.

To the parent of a child with Down Syndrome, the Justice Center provides peace of mind that your child will be protected even after you're gone.

To a service recipient enrolled in a substance-use program, our agency is a welcomed safety net and a fierce advocate for justice.

And to the providers under our jurisdiction, we are a vital resource that offers education and training to create safer programs.

That is why we will continue our important work and are grateful to the Governor for once again investing in the protections of our State's most vulnerable populations.

Thank you for your time – I'm happy to answer any questions.