

# NYC Council Testimony : Preliminary Budget Hearing, Committee on Education

**March 24, 2026**

**Introduction and Thanks:** My name is Catherine Trapani, and I am the Assistant Vice President for Public Policy for Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY). We are the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. (VOA). I would like to thank Chair Dinowitz and members of the Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony for this hearing.

**About Us:** VOA-GNY is an anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in Greater New York through housing, health and wealth building services. We are one of the region's largest human service providers, impacting more than 12,000 adults and children annually through 70+ programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester. We are also an active nonprofit developer of supportive and affordable housing, with a robust portfolio permanent supportive housing, affordable and senior housing properties—with more in the pipeline.

**Background:** Students in temporary housing face enormous obstacles to educational success when compared to their housed peers. Things as straightforward as knowing what your commute to school will look like, identifying an available bus route for young children, knowing what supplies and uniforms may be required and being able to afford those things all become challenging when you don't know where you will be staying. Students can face hours long commutes to and from school, have limited time or even physical space in which to do homework, limited access to technology and more, all because of their housing status. At Volunteers of America-Greater New York, we make every effort to level the playing field for students in shelters across the City by providing supplies and quality services to students in temporary housing and advocating for policies to better support them.

**Operation Backpack®:** For over 20 years, VOA-GNY has led this signature back to school drive providing every student in our shelters and many more citywide with a backpack stuffed with all the school supplies every child in shelter needs to succeed in school. The DOE has long been a partner to VOA-GNY in this effort but, in 2024, due to unexpected

funding cuts following the loss of COVID era emergency dollars, our program was in jeopardy. We were able to fundraise privately to continue our efforts to equip students with much needed supplies, but it wasn't until the Council stepped in in Fiscal Year 2025 to provide us with \$250,000 in financial support that we were able to fully meet the need of every student living in a New York City shelter this past school year.

Thanks to the Council's heroic efforts to restore our funding, we provided backpacks and supplies to every child in shelter who needed one, including within DHS Family with Children shelters, DHS Emergency Shelters for New Arrivals, and HRA Domestic Violence shelters. These high-quality backpacks stuffed with age-appropriate supplies equip students in temporary housing with the tools they need to succeed in school. We were even able to send an additional 1,000 backpacks to PATH, the intake center for homeless families, to ensure any child entering shelter during the school year would be equipped with what they needed.

**This year, VOA-GNY is requesting that the Council renew \$250,000 in Speaker's Initiative funding for Operation Backpack® to enable VOA-GNY to continue to meet 100% of the need in NYC shelters for another year.**

Historically Operation Backpack® has primarily been supported through cash and in-kind donations from private donors with additional support from the NYC Department of Education. The Council's robust support allowed us to meet 100% of the need in NYC shelters, even in the face of record high shelter census and rising costs. Our bulk purchasing allows us to buy deeply discounted supplies, costing approximately \$36 per child on average to put together a package with a retail value of \$120. Privately raised funds also supported the costs of staff and summer interns, marketing, insurance, and transportation. We are seeking the renewed support of the City Council to offset the rising costs of this program and allow us to continue to meet 100% of the demonstrated need as we prepare for the 2026-2027 school year.

Operation Backpack® is not just a giveaway. It is a targeted approach that ensures that students living in shelters are matched with resources before the first day of school to avoid stigma and start off the school year on equal footing with their housed peers. Our team partners with the NYC Department of Homeless Services, to identify where students are staying in shelters across the city, what grade they are in, what backpacks and school supplies they will need, and based on that information, we match each child in shelter with the necessary supplies and deliver them across New York City so each child could start the school year fully prepared.

**Early Learning Centers:**

VOA-GNY operates the Bronx Early Learning Center (BELC) is a vibrant, 22-classroom preschool special education program for students aged 2.9-5 years old, many of whom are on the autism spectrum. The strength of this academic model is to recognize and address children's developmental challenges as early as possible, as it sets the foundation for their entire academic success- and the rest of their lives.

Students are placed in classrooms at BELC based on their developmental needs where our team of dedicated New York State-certified and licensed teachers, teaching assistants, therapists and related providers work closely with each student and family to provide tailored educational and therapeutic services that will help build a strong foundation for their school years.

VOA-GNY is heartened that the Mayor's FY27 Budget includes baselined funding for last year's investment of \$70 million for preschool special education services and multidisciplinary evaluations. This funding is critical to ensuring that preschoolers with special needs can access the support they have a right to receive.

We respectfully ask that the administration please continue to include our Bronx Early Learning Center in salary increases for NYC Childcare providers and NYCDOE-contracted Head Start Programs to retain and attract qualified childcare staff.

**Closing:**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. Should you have any questions, I can be reached at [ctrapani@voa-gny.org](mailto:ctrapani@voa-gny.org).

Respectfully submitted by Catherine Trapani, Assistant Vice President of Public Policy,  
Volunteers of America-Greater New York