LIFT
AT A GLANCE

SINCE
1994

SERVING
NASSAU & SUFFOLK COUNTIES

LONG ISLAND FAMILIES TOGETHER (LIFT) IS A PARENT/CAREGIVER-GOVERNED, YOUTH-GUIDED 501(C)3 NON-PROFIT, FOUNDED IN 1994 TO AMPLIFY FAMILY VOICES WITHIN THE CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEMS OF NASSAU AND SUFFOLK COUNTIES. WE PARTNER WITH POLICYMAKERS AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS TO STRENGTHEN SERVICES, SHAPE POLICY, AND SHARE VITAL RESOURCES WITH FAMILIES—HELPING THEM NAVIGATE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEMS WITH CLARITY AND CONFIDENCE

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LONG ISLAND FAMILIES TOGETHER

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NEWSLETTER

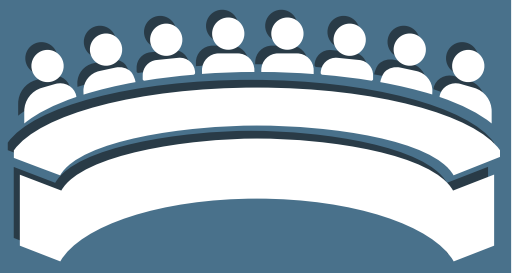
ANNUAL LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST



FAMILY EMPOWERMENT DAY



FAMILY SUPPORT COALITION



LIFT
Long Island Families Together

Long Island Families Together, Inc., as a parent and youth governed organization, will provide a strong voice to ensure that children and youth with emotional, behavioral and mental health challenges and their families have access to needed information, supports and services.

Staff

Program Director	Eileen Kadletz
Bookkeeper	Cecelia Giarraputo
IT Consultant	Michael O'Reilly

Executive Board

President	Caryl Deiches
Vice President	Joann Neal
Secretary	Laurie O'Reilly
Secretary	Sondra Rakitovan
Treasurer	Jason Neal



HEATHER TAFURO
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Heather Tafuro brings over 30 years of experience in family and youth-serving systems. Her journey into family support began while advocating for her son on the autism spectrum, inspiring a career dedicated to supporting children, youth, and families. Heather has worked as a supervisor in foster care and adoption. She also brings lived experience as both a foster and adoptive parent. She served as Regional Parent Advisor with Families Together New York State in partnership with the Office of Mental Health. Previously she worked at Family and Children's Association and developed their Family Peer Support Team within the HCBS Waiver Program. Heather now leads LIFT with a commitment to empowering families and strengthening community support systems.

Serving Families for over 25 years

Scan for more information

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lift@lift4kids.org

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2026 POLICY AGENDA

These policies reflects the needs and experiences of children, youth, and families navigating systems of care across Suffolk and Nassau Counties. Grounded in their voices, LIFT is committed to advancing family-driven solutions that reduce barriers to care, strengthen collaboration between families and systems, and ensure equitable access to high-quality services across Long Island.

MEDICAID CARVE OUT

Carve mental health and substance use disorder services out of the state's Medicaid managed care program and reinvest at least $400M toward community-based services.

A8055 (SIMON)
S8309 (BROUK)

SOLUTIONS NOT SUSPENSIONS

Reduce reliance on suspensions, restorative practices to replace punitive disciplinary measures and foster inclusive learning environments that address the root cause of school and student conflicts.

A118 (SOLAGES)
S134 (JACKSON)

INVESTING IN CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ACCESS AND CAPACITY

Increases Medicaid reimbursement rates for certain behavioral health services provided to youth; directs that funds in the healthcare stability fund can be used for the funding of children's behavioral health outpatient rate increases.

A8600 (SIMON)
S8427 (BROUK)

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AGENDA

2026 LIFT LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST

9:00 AM - 11:30 AM

WELCOME + OPENING REMARKS

Heather Tafuro
Executive Director
Long Island Families Together

AWARDS

Denise Delio
Family Peer Specialist
SCO Family of Services

Diana Bekhit
Youth
Well Life

PANEL 1: WHEN VOICES LEAD

Family and Youth Voices Advancing Long Island's Future

Isaiah Santiago	Jeritza Acevedo	Laurie O'Reilly	Kevin Taylor
FTNYS	**SCO**	**FSL**	**Father**

PANEL 2: BEYOND THE HEADLINES

Honest Conversations. Meaningful Solutions. Stronger Communities.

Senator	Senator	Assemblymember	Assemblymember
Monica Martinez	**Dean Murray**	**Kwani O'Pharrow**	**Michael Fitzpatrick**

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Solutions Not Suspensions

Assemblymember Michaelle Solages
District 22

CLOSING REMARKS

Heather Tafuro
Executive Director
Long Island Families Together

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LIVED EXPERIENCE PANEL

2026 LIFT LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST

MODERATOR



Pat Hillenbrand

Pat Hillenbrand is an adoptive and foster parent whose personal experience navigating parenting challenges inspired her to become a Family Peer Advocate. From 2009 to 2025, she worked as an FPA, supporting families while learning alongside mental health professionals and other parents. Pat also taught Active Parenting and NAMI Basics and became a NAMI Teacher Trainer, helping families build skills, navigate challenges, and identify opportunities for growth.

-PANELISTS-



Isaiah Santiago

Isaiah Santiago is a 21-year-old youth advocate from Rochester, New York, focused on youth gun violence, mental health stigma, and creating opportunities for young people. He founded We Got This, connecting youth to mentorship, arts, and music, and developed a mental health literacy curriculum for the Rochester City School District before joining Families Together New York State as Youth Leadership Manager. At 19, Isaiah became Rochester's youngest elected official when he was elected to the Rochester City School District Board of Education. His leadership has earned the New York State Commendation Award, Monroe County Youth of the Year Award, and New York State Attorney General's Triple C Award.



Jeritza Acevedo

Jeritza Acevedo is a passionate advocate and public speaker whose lived experiences with homelessness, domestic violence, and mental health challenges have shaped her commitment to empowering others. Grounded in her faith, she draws strength from her relationship with God and works to help others recognize their value, navigate challenges, and advocate for themselves. Through sharing her story with authenticity and purpose, Jeritza inspires hope, resilience, and the belief that healing and positive change are possible.



Laurie O'Reilly

Laurie O'Reilly is a Family Peer Advocate with Family Service League's Parent to Parent Program, where she has supported parents, caregivers, and families for 25 years as they navigate children's mental health and complex public systems. She is committed to strengthening the voice and role of parents and caregivers, recognizing them as essential partners in their children's mental health, stability, and overall wellness. Through her work, she empowers families to build confidence, understand their role, navigate systems, and advocate using the knowledge and strength gained from their lived experience.



Kevin Taylor

Kevin Taylor brings 20 years of experience in the physical therapy profession and a personal perspective shaped by his family's experience with family support services. He and his wife, Kerrianne, have been together for over 30 years and are the proud parents of two sons, Gavin and Landon. Together, they have participated in Family Support services through Nassau Child and Family Guidance in Roslyn. Kevin is honored to share his family's experiences and contribute to the ongoing conversation around the importance of family support, advocacy, and services that strengthen children and families.

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LEGISLATOR PANEL

2026 LIFT LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST

MODERATOR



Amari Johnson

Amari Johnson is a Long Island native and 26-year-old scholar, community advocate, and civic leader who graduated Cum Laude from Morehouse College with a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. He has served in public service, including as District Scheduling Coordinator to former New York City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams, and currently serves as Director of Operations & Engagement for newly elected New York City Councilmember Ty Hankerson, representing Southeast Queens District 28. Passionate about service, the arts, faith, and community engagement, Amari founded Love Covering Ministries and has worked with organizations including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dwana Smallwood Performing Arts Center, Harlem Theatre of the Arts, and Carnegie Hall.

-PANELISTS-



Monica Martinez

NYS Senate, District 22

Monica R. Martinez has dedicated her life to protecting the vulnerable and helping her neighbors, beginning her career as a high school teacher and later serving as Assistant Principal of Brentwood's East Middle School. After serving five years in the Suffolk County Legislature, Martinez was elected to the New York State Senate in 2018, making history as the first woman and woman of color to represent the Third Senatorial District and the first Salvadoran woman elected in New York State. Now in her third term, Senator Martinez serves as Chair of the Senate Committee on Local Government and continues to focus on protecting Long Island's working families, improving local communities, and enhancing the welfare of all New Yorkers.



Kwani O'Pharrow

NYS Assembly, District 11

Kwani B. O'Pharrow has a long-standing record of public service, serving in the U.S. Navy and retiring from the NYPD as a Detective after 25 years, with extensive experience in community policing, intelligence, gang investigations, and protecting dignitaries including Presidents Obama and Trump. He co-founded Cops N' Kids Long Island, Inc., supports youth through boxing and mentorship, and currently leads community relations efforts in Brentwood while training future law enforcement officers. Kwani is committed to strengthening Assembly District 11 through public safety, education, support for families, veterans and seniors, mental health services, and environmental protection.



Michael Fitzpatrick

NYS Assembly, District 8

Michael J. Fitzpatrick was elected to the New York State Assembly in 2002, representing the 8th Assembly District, after serving 15 years on the Smithtown Town Board, and previously spent more than 20 years in the financial services industry. He serves as the Ranking Minority Member of the Housing Committee and is also a member of the Ways and Means, Higher Education, Banks, and Agriculture committees. Active in his community, Assemblyman Fitzpatrick has served with numerous civic and charitable organizations, including as past president and honorary trustee of the Cleary School for the Deaf, and resides in St. James with his wife, Lorena, and their two children.



Dean Murray

NYS Senate, *District 3*

Dean Murray has a background in broadcast journalism and entrepreneurship, moving to Long Island in 1994 and later founding D & S Advertising, Inc., which helped connect Long Islanders with jobs, homes, and community resources. He first served in the New York State Assembly in 2010 and again from 2015 to 2018 before returning to Albany in 2022 as State Senator for the 3rd District, where he advocates for safe and affordable communities, education funding, parental rights, and a clean environment. A strong supporter of law enforcement and crime victims, Dean remains active in the East Patchogue community and lives there with his dog, Pete.l communities, and enhancing the welfare of all New Yorkers.

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MICHAELLE C. SOLAGES
NYS ASSEMBLY
District 22

Michaelle C. Solages is a fifth-term New York State Assemblymember and lifelong resident of Elmont, representing communities across the Town of Hempstead and surrounding areas. Elected in 2012, she became the first person of Haitian descent to serve in the New York State Legislature and currently chairs the Assembly Committee on Local Governments and the New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus. Throughout her tenure, she has championed working families, small businesses, and homeowners through policies focused on property tax relief, government accountability, childcare and early education, maternal health, consumer protection, and Long Island's water and environment. She also serves as a Co-Chair of the National Conference of State Legislatures' Standing Committees, contributing to policy discussions at the national level. Michaelle resides in Elmont with her family and dog.

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SOLUTIONS *NOT* SUSPENSIONS

IT PROMOTES ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENSION.

The bill encourages restorative approaches, including counseling, peer mediation, and parent conferences, to address student behavior while keeping students engaged in learning.

IT ADDRESSES CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND UNDERLYING NEEDS.

Student behavior may be connected to mental health challenges, food insecurity, or other unmet needs. The bill supports responding to these underlying factors rather than relying solely on punitive discipline.

IT PROMOTES GREATER EQUITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE.

The bill seeks to address disparities affecting Black and Latino students and students with disabilities, who experience disproportionate disciplinary consequences.

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2026 LIFT LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST

Lauren Alexandre

Association For Mental Health And Wellness

Association for Mental Health and Wellness

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