

KABOOM!'s Submitted Testimony on Behalf of Lysa Ratliff, CEO
to the New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on
Agriculture & Markets/Parks & Recreation
Monday, January 27, 2025

I would like to thank Senate Finance Chair Liz Krueger, Assembly Ways and Means Chair Gary Pretlow, Senate Finance Ranking Member Tom O'Mara, Assembly Ways and Means Ranking Member Edward Ra, Senator Jose Serrano, Chair of the Senate Committee on Cultural Affairs, Tourism, Parks & Recreation, and Assemblymember Ron Kim, Chair of the Assembly Committee on Tourism, Parks, Arts and Sports Development for this opportunity to share my thoughts on Governor Hochul's "Unplug and Play" proposal outlined during her State of the State Address and Fiscal Year 2025-26 Executive Budget Proposal.

KABOOM! is a national nonprofit that builds playgrounds in historically disinvested communities around the country. Over the course of our 28-year history, we've built over 150 playspaces in Buffalo, Rochester, and New York City, as well as small towns and rural communities in Upstate. We know from firsthand experience the critical role of play in a child's healthy physical, mental, social, and emotional development. That is why we support the Governor's initiative to invest \$200 million to build, renovate, and improve playgrounds, swimming pools, and other recreation facilities across the state.

While there have been a number of studies which have demonstrated play's efficacy in helping children develop good habits that prevent obesity, improve cardio-pulmonary health, increase strength and coordination, and reduce the likelihood of other diet-related diseases, its effect on protecting mental health is less well-known. The Governor's proposed investment in recreation infrastructure—for the purpose of reducing kids' use of social media and online games—places New York State at the forefront of our nation's efforts to combat the negative impacts of excessive online activity by our youth. And while the role of outdoor play in improving mental health may not be well known, it comes highly recommended from several authoritative sources including former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy whose 2021 public health advisory, Protecting Youth Mental Health, specifically recommended that communities invest in playgrounds as a preventive measure to ensure better mental health outcomes in children. In 2022, Dr. Murthy and KABOOM! hosted an event with former Second Gentleman Emhoff and Baltimore City leaders to highlight the key role play has in maintaining students' positive mental health outlook.

In 2022, following the shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, KABOOM! with the help of the Archewell Foundation went into that community to help build a new playground. It was because of a request from the school's faculty and families for a new, inviting, and engaging playground that would help restore a sense of normalcy in the lives of the children that we decided to undertake this work. What began as a single project blossomed into a multi-year partnership where we built a dozen new playspaces and created a whole new network of outdoor recreation opportunities for the entire city. Throughout every step the residents of Uvalde were active participants. Community members were engaged in a co-design process

with our staff and worked alongside us to build the playgrounds for their and future generations of children.

Ensuring community engagement throughout the design process is critical to creating the sense of community ownership that helps foster the sense of belonging children need to feel on their playground. That is why our community co-design process specifically includes them. I have learned more about children's perspectives on play from listening to them at our "Kids Design Days" and "Design Jams" than you can possibly imagine. Like any other piece of civic infrastructure, playspaces must be designed to reflect the host community's needs, environment, and neighborhood conditions if they are going to be effective tools for promoting better mental health.

Building playgrounds that foster belonging must also be built to be inclusive of the wide range of children's abilities. Children with disabilities have the same desire for outdoor play as any other child. Children who see their peers playing in a space they cannot access feel a compounded sense of isolation and loneliness that may exacerbate the unhealthy online behaviors that this proposal is meant to address. We strongly encourage the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to ensure that the playgrounds this initiative supports are built to ensure the broadest range of child accessibility.

Access to outdoor recreation is taking on an added dimension in our ever-worsening climate crisis. For too many kids, playgrounds are simply becoming too hot to play on. Metal and plastic equipment, dark colored surfaces, and inadequate shade not only make the playgrounds which possess these features too hot but also makes them act as heat sinks for their surrounding neighborhoods, raising the area temperature anywhere from 8-10 degrees Fahrenheit. In direct sunlight, an aluminum slide can reach a temperature of 165 degrees even when the air temperature is only 85 degrees. The traditional playgrounds many of us remember from our own childhoods are inadequate for meeting the needs of the present generation and in fact may pose a danger to them and the surrounding neighborhood because of climate change. Shade, light and reflective colors, the use of natural materials, and permeable surfaces are needed to ensure that playgrounds can be used during the summer.

Through our recent work with the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation's Built to Play initiative, KABOOM! built 71 playspaces, roughly half of which were in Western New York. In evaluating this work, leading global design and research firm Gehl found that, not only did the playspaces increase kids' physical activity, but also built social connections in each community by creating gathering places where families could interact, make new friends, and take collective pride in their community. At a time when there are so many forces, including technology and social media, which try to divide us, community playspaces bring people together across their differences and unify them in putting kids first.

KABOOM!, and other nonprofits like us, stand ready to partner with local municipalities and other service providers to help guide them through the challenges I highlighted above. Through

collaboration with experts like us, we can maximize the utility of playgrounds to improve the mental health outcomes of the children living in the targeted communities. We are already doing this in the City of Rochester through our 25 in 5 Initiative to End Playspace Inequity. There, we are partnering with the local government and a dynamic community provider, Healthi Kids, to renovate playgrounds throughout the city so that more kids can access them. We use an equity-based prioritization system to identify historically underserved neighborhoods where playspaces may need to be renovated or built to address historic racial and economic disparities. Rochester is only one of several partners from across the United States who have signed on to this effort. Others include Oakland, California; San Francisco, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Ft. Worth, Texas. Thank you for your time, attention, and support for this exciting new initiative from Governor Hochul and we would be happy to answer any questions you may have.