



Leadership, voice and vision for child welfare in New York State

# **Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies**

Testimony Presented by:

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Before the: Assembly Children and Families Committee

Hearing on: The State of primary prevention services in New York State

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Good morning, Chair Hevesi and members of the Assembly here today. My name is Michelle Newman, and I am the Associate Executive Director, Upstate at the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, or COFCCA. COFCCA is comprised of over 100 member organizations, ranging in size from small community-based programs to the nation's largest multi-services agencies — all of which share the mission of serving children and families. COFCCA works with its members and government to ensure quality services for children and their families.

It is well documented that racial disparities exist within the child welfare system. Children of color are not only overrepresented within the system in New York and nationally, but are also at greater risk of substantiation of reports of child abuse or neglect and out-of-home-placement, and spend more time in foster care.<sup>1</sup> COFCCA supports various initiatives related to reducing disproportionate representation of families of color in the state's child welfare system through:

- Real and meaningful change to the systemic factors such as poverty that can lead to child welfare involvement in the first place;
- Taking all steps possible against biased decision-making for those families that do come in contact with the child welfare system;
- Investing in the foster care workforce to reduce lengths of stay and improve outcomes; and
- Investing in services/supports that ensure future success and stability of those transitioning out of care.

COFCCA will be back in front of you soon to talk more about these initiatives, and we stress the importance of ensuring access to the full continuum of child welfare care and services. However, I appreciate the opportunity to focus COFCCA's recommendations today, on actions New York State can take to prioritize critical community services that meet families' basic need to lessen vulnerability of entry into or escalation within the child welfare system.

The majority of families have encounters with the child welfare system primarily due to poverty and the lack of resources that make it difficult for caregivers to provide food, clothing, housing, medical care, and appropriate child care for their children. This is where community-based agencies and prevention program providers can be most useful. A significant number of COFCCA members provide primary and general prevention services across all regions of the State. These programs are meant to serve families by addressing parents' identified needs and assisting them in getting the resources to keep their families safe, healthy, and together.

Who can best determine what families need? Families. Unfortunately, we have set up a situation where in order to get help, parents may have to admit that they are struggling to meet their children's needs. This is a risky proposition for parents who are turning to someone who is both a helper and monitor – a school support staffer who is also a mandated reporter, for example.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/racial\\_disproportionality.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/racial_disproportionality.pdf).  
[https://www.nicwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/NICWA\\_11\\_2021-Disproportionality-Fact-Sheet.pdf](https://www.nicwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/NICWA_11_2021-Disproportionality-Fact-Sheet.pdf).  
[https://www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/NCJFCJ-Disproportionality-TAB-2015\\_0.pdf](https://www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/NCJFCJ-Disproportionality-TAB-2015_0.pdf)

Primary prevention programming is available to all individuals living in a given community without, and to avoid, child welfare system involvement. These services are a lifeline for families who can access needed support and assistance before mandated reporters file complaints with the State Central Registry (SCR). When a child shows up at school in January without a coat or the police are called to an apartment for 6-year-olds who are left home alone, we can better serve these family through primary prevention instead of directing these families to restrictive child welfare interventions, such as foster care placements.

New York City's Family Enrichment Center (FEC) concept represents an exciting model in primary prevention. FECs are tailored to community needs and are available for parents to stop by, connect with neighbors, find and be referred to resources, and support each other. An evaluation study conducted in March 2020 of FECs has found that families report the FEC assisting them with housing, educational assistance (for themselves or for their child/children), financial management, and assistance with finding jobs/careers.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, they are a measure to reduce families' interaction with the child welfare system by building community supports from within. These community-built, community-serving models are only available in six locations right now in NYC. We were so pleased to see then-NYC Mayor de Blasio announce a significant expansion of FECs, and to see the expansion under the Adams administration continue. We are proud of our providers, Children's Village (Bridge Builders), Graham Windham, Good Shepherd Services, Forestdale, Inc, and Little Flower Children's and Family Services for their work alongside families in their communities, to build up supportive places for communities to build together and thrive together.

Primary prevention programs and services will vary, depending upon the needs of the community and of individual families. Community-based providers are afforded opportunities to build trusting and supportive relationships with families and reduce fear of out of home placements of children, whether in a center-based model like an FEC or in-home visiting programs. Relating to the latter, we thank the legislature for advancing additional funding for home visiting programs – which can be especially crucial for isolated individuals and families in rural areas – as part of the Child and Families Reinvestment Act.

The Office of Children and Family Services has recently received federal approval for its prevention plan under the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, which will allow for a broader group of families to access prevention services and supports. We strongly support that approach, and we also continue to recommend the following additions to ensure and expand access to these critical services:

- COFCCA recommends that the state increase reimbursement to counties for prevention programs.

General Prevention (sometimes referred to as secondary or tertiary) services are also designed to keep children safely in their homes, protected from abuse and neglect. Services are tailored to individual family need, and may include home-based services and supports when there is a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/about/2020/FECEvaluationReport.pdf>

need for housing, food, clothing, mental health and medical services. Under the Family First Prevention Services Act, counties are required to develop, expand, and create community-based prevention programs for easy access to all families.

Since 2002, the state has supported an open-ended child welfare funding stream which provides an incentive to counties to invest in prevention services, by reimbursing county funds spent on preventive services. And it's working! Investment into prevention services has contributed to a 46% decline<sup>3</sup> in the number of children and youth entering the foster care system statewide. However, for several years, the state budget has reduced the state share for prevention services to 62%, even though there is a statutory requirement of 65%. The continued cost shift from the state to the local governments, first implemented under the Cuomo Administration, puts a strain on the counties' ability to invest in community-based programs for families.

Prevention services are incredibly valuable to families in crisis. We thank the legislature, and the Chair in particular, for championing efforts to accomplish the restoration of state funding in budget conversations and in the legislation to increase the state share to the original level provided under The Child Welfare Reform Act of 1979 of 75%.

Nationally, efforts are being made to reduce the number of out of home placements of children at risk for abuse and neglect. Prevention programs are proven to work and reduce the foster care census, and are the least costly child welfare interventions.

- COFCCA recommends that prevention workers and health home care managers be included in the Human Services COLA.

Our workforce is the backbone of the child welfare system. As essential workers throughout the pandemic, these workers continued to show up every day and supported children, families, and communities. Unfortunately, however, pandemic related state and federal funding which has been provided for workers in sectors overseen by other state agencies (Office of Mental Health and the Office of People with Developmental Disabilities), was not provided for the Office of Children and Family Services' (OCFS) child welfare programs. Further, prevention programs were not included in the human services COLA provided in the Enacted State Budget.

Staffing shortages, vacancies, and turnover are linked to negative outcomes for families receiving prevention services. An investment in the prevention workforce is also an investment in families, and results in fewer out of home placements of children, and reduced lengths of stay for children in foster care.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/sppd/docs/FFPSA-Prevention-Plan-2022Feb23.pdf>

- COFCCA supports significantly expanding the impact of the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Programs with additional funding.

These programs provide an incentive to current and prospective employees to work in the critical field of child welfare, and support the education and training needed to provide quality care.

Our child welfare staff tell us that in addition to salary increases, they need more support in achieving their higher education goals. We consistently hear from our child welfare workers that although they find the work very challenging, they enjoy what they do and want to continue to grow with our agencies. Many staff in our programs desire to become supervisors or even aspire to be in a senior leadership position such as a program director or a CEO someday; however, they need advanced education degrees to pursue those positions.

We also often hear that they begin to look for other jobs when they cannot afford to pay their student loan monthly repayments (given the growing student debt crisis in our country, staff have student loan payments ranging from several hundred dollars per month to payments even in excess of \$1000 per month). While there has been some short-term relief provided by the federal government related to student loan debt recently, we seek a long-term option for supporting the child welfare workforce in their educational goals so we can begin to build a true career pathway for our state's child welfare professionals.

Our child welfare workforce is comprised of professionally trained and deeply committed individuals, often women of color. COFCCA has recently designed and offered leadership development opportunities to promote diversified leadership in child welfare agencies' staff. We believe that increased state investment into our child welfare workforce will greatly assist in our staff recruitment and retention, especially supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at our agencies, and will also create and diversify the next generation of child welfare leaders in the field.

- COFCCA recommends that the NYC's Advocates Agreement should be viewed as a functional model that has served as a successful pathway for NYC families to access prevention programs and should be recognized in the State's next steps.

The Advocates Agreement permits families to voluntarily walk into agencies to receive prevention services before there is a need for official child protection/child welfare involvement.

- COFCCA strongly supports the State's vision of "No Track" families.

The overarching State child welfare interventions include monitoring and surveillance that are unwelcomed and often avoided by families. While prevention funding is typically thought about in terms of being limited to those families who have been identified through Child Protective Services, we must include a method of entry for families to access child welfare services that does not require exposure to rigid and unnecessary tracking when families voluntarily seek services.

In closing, as our state continues to look for opportunities to advance racial justice and equity, it is extremely important for the state to invest in all levels of prevention. COFCCA strongly supports state investment aimed at providing resources equitably, in expanding access to interventions that support families' needs, strengthen neighborhoods and communities, to prevent entry into or escalation within the child welfare system.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.