



Hopeful Futures for New York's Children *Advancing Child Welfare*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New York believes in children and families. We have expanded pre-kindergarten and health coverage for kids, and we believe in taking care of our most vulnerable children, including those in foster care. When public funding for a New York City program for youth in foster care was cut last spring, New Yorkers raised over \$500,000 in one night to support the program.ⁱ But placing value on something doesn't always mean that the best outcomes come easily.

While New York has seen decreasing foster care enrollment numbers,ⁱⁱ there is still much to be done to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families in our child welfare system. Children continue to experience abuse and neglect, and, in a recent federal review, the State ranks at or near the bottom for nearly all indicators related to safety and permanencyⁱⁱⁱ for children in the child welfare system.^{iv}

In the face of child fatalities and discouraging outcomes, it is time for New York to look at what is working, and what is not, to support families and achieve the best outcomes for children. We must strengthen what works—investing at the front-end to keep children safely at home, supporting children and families in reaching permanency, and building a strong and supported workforce. We must ensure accountability by collecting data about children and families and the services they receive and make it publicly available. It is time for New York to make children a priority again.

Moving Forward

The following recommendations endeavor to ensure the accountability and effectiveness of publicly funded interventions, support dedicated frontline workers, and create a system that works in the best interests of the children it serves.

The collection and publication of **comprehensive statewide and community-specific data** is essential to understanding child welfare outcomes. To that end, data on the availability and effectiveness of evidence-informed practices, and in particular prevention services, must be collected, made public, and utilized to improve practice. Furthermore, as the State continues to prioritize well-being in child welfare, the sharing of data among State agencies will be essential to ensuring a complete understanding of cross-sector outcomes for children and youth in care.

In order to address child maltreatment early, it is essential that the State invest in **primary prevention and family strengthening services**, and particularly in targeted, community-based services. We recommend that the State restore statutory funding for preventive services with a designated portion for primary prevention. Through primary prevention services, New York can work with and strengthen families before there is any risk of removal to foster care.

When children do become involved in the child welfare system, we must ensure that the system is prepared to serve them. To that end, the State should expand the highly effective **Family Assessment Response (FAR)**, as a means of engaging families and providing support services without “indicating” a case, whenever appropriate. The State should also support counties in

strengthening their **Child Protective Services (CPS) workforce**, including through standardized caseloads and recruitment and retention practices that attract and retain the most qualified candidates. A robust, capable, and responsive workforce throughout the state is essential.

Children of color continue to make up a disproportionate percentage of the total child welfare system.^v While the State and counties have taken steps to address this issue, more can be done to track what is working and share and expand best practices. We urge the State to take a **data-driven approach to disproportionality** to track improvements, publish results and share best practices across counties. Counties that struggle to address disproportionality could learn from the efforts of those who have seen some success.

As the State and the nation look to **well-being initiatives** to prioritize the quality of life for children in foster care, we must ensure stable funding for these programs, so that this important work can be appropriately delivered. We must also seek out opportunities to strengthen well-being, such as the current implementation of the federal Strengthening Families Act,^{vi} which calls upon foster parents to make “reasonable and prudent” parenting decisions for the children in their care. As this policy rolls out in New York, it must be implemented so that foster parents are best able to take advantage of this provision.

It is clear from recent federal assessments^{vii} that we can do more to **achieve permanency** for children and youth in foster care.^{viii} By increasing the State’s investment in post-permanency programs, we can provide families the tools they need to support the children they adopt. Through changes to the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (**KinGAP**), including allowing close family friends such as godparents to be guardians, we can make this program a permanency option for more families. By increasing the **housing subsidy** and adjusting the age requirements so that it reflects the age at which youth leave care, we can help young people more successfully transition from care. And by resourcing programs^{ix} for youth who have aged out of care, we can help ensure stability for youth who were unable to find a permanent placement while in care.

Strengthening the system as a whole will require renewed dedication and **leadership**. We call on the State to return its focus to the children and families in our child welfare system. We look to our Governor who has emphasized the importance of keeping children safe for “hopeful futures.”^x By building a strong and responsive system, we have the opportunity to do just that. The Governor can prioritize child welfare and empower agency leadership by: making crucial investments in the system, particularly upstream, before problems become acute; empowering and strengthening agency capacity for data collection and reporting; instituting State caseload standards; and improving permanency.

Together we can build a hopeful future!

Endnotes

ⁱ Funding for *You Gotta Believe!* was cut in March, 2015. More on the fundraiser: <http://www.people.com/article/you-gotta-believe-broadway-hollywood-stars-event>

ⁱⁱ Kids Count Data Center. *New York: Children in Foster Care*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Permanency measures the number of children in foster care who find a stable, permanent home, through adoption, guardianship or return to their families. Recurrence of maltreatment measures the number of children for whom, after an initial report of maltreatment, a second report is received within 12 months. See: <http://www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=ACF-2014-0002-0001>

^{iv} Children’s Bureau. *CFSR Round 3 Statewide Data Indicators – Workbook*. Amended May 2015. Retrieved from: <https://training.cfsrportal.org/resources/3105#Data Indicators and National Standards>

^v NYS Office of Children & Family Services. 2011. *The OCFS Initiative to Address Disproportionality in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nycourts.gov/ip/casa/training/ocfs-disproportionality.pdf>

^{vi} Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. H.R. 4980. 113th Congress (2014).

^{vii} Children’s Bureau. *CFSR Round 3 Statewide Data Indicators – Workbook*. Amended May 2015. Retrieved from: <https://training.cfsrportal.org/resources/3105#Data Indicators and National Standards>

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} The Foster College Success Initiative is one such example. See: <http://www.childrengivingsociety.org/FYSA>

^x New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (April 1, 2015.) *Governor Cuomo Proclaims April “Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness Month.”* Retrieved from: http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/view_article.asp?ID=1097