



2016 POLICY FORUM

Forum Highlights

Schuyler Center's December 13th policy forum, *Transforming Child Welfare and Children's Lives: Proven Strategies that Strengthen Families*, was a tremendous success. The sold-out crowd included advocates, providers, policymakers, foster care alumni, new friends and old. Speakers included **Sheila J. Poole**, Acting Commissioner of NYS Office of Children and Family Services; **Linda S. Spears**, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families; **Molly McGrath Tierney**, Director of the Baltimore City Department of Social Services; **Anni Keane** and **Rosie Williams**, alumnae of the foster care system and advocates for *You Gotta Believe*; and **Jeanette Vega**, a parent previously involved with the child welfare system and now a parent leader for *Rise*. The speakers were inspiring in their passion, and in the practical suggestions they offered.



Why This Year's Focus on Child Welfare?

Prompting this event was the release of preliminary [data](#) associated with a periodic [federal review](#) of New York's child welfare system showing, among other indicators, that children in New York's system are more likely to experience multiple occurrences of maltreatment than children in the 47 other states measured. The recent resignation of New York City Administration for Children's Services' Commissioner Gladys Carrion in the wake of two high profile child fatalities brought an added note of urgency to the discussion.

Event Highlights

Kate Breslin, Schuyler Center's President & CEO, opened the event by noting that investments in our children often come late, at great cost to families – and to the State. Alluding to the uncertainty in Washington with the election of Donald Trump, who has not articulated positions on child welfare, Breslin noted that, "Today, more than ever, the states may be called upon to assume even more responsibility for supporting families and children who live at or near poverty, or struggle with mental or physical health issues, or substance abuse. Particularly vulnerable will be immigrant families given the President-elect's promise to scale up deportations in his first 100 days in office."





One of the high points of the event was hearing youth advocate and foster care alum **Rosie Williams**, speak about how, after 18 years shuffled from one foster care placement to another, she was finally adopted at age 21, and the positive impact this has had on all aspects of her life. **Anni Keane**, fellow advocate and foster care alum added, “All kids want is family. All they want is someone to love them.”

Perhaps the most powerful message to emerge from the forum came from Williams and Keane who, together with parent leader **Jeannette Vega**, made the case that child welfare systems can truly help children and families only if they allow youth, parents and others personally affected by the system to have a voice and some power in shaping that system. Keane summed up this sentiment stating, “In everything we do in child welfare, we need to hear from youth, parents, foster parents, adoptive parents. . . . Our voices are already there, you just need to listen.”



New York’s **Commissioner Poole** highlighted the importance of evidence-based interventions like maternal, infant and early childhood home visiting, a voluntary intervention in which nurses or trained professionals visit families with young children in their homes and provide education, supports, and connections to resources. [Home visiting](#) has been proven to strengthen families and reduce rates of maltreatment. Baltimore **Director Tierney**, who led a reform effort that reduced by 70% the number of Baltimore children in foster care, also spoke of the importance of connecting families with supports well before there is an allegation of maltreatment, and urged that family strengthening should be the focus of child welfare work, not removing children to foster care.

Massachusetts’ **Commissioner Spears** pointed to the importance of having the support of a governor and legislature that understand, support and invest in child welfare. Since Spears was appointed, Massachusetts has made substantial investments in child welfare, allowing for the hiring of more than 800 new workers.

Looking Ahead

While the discussion at the event was far-ranging, consensus emerged around the importance of several policies.

1. Primary prevention. Devote more resources to primary prevention, that is, programs that support and strengthen families long before children suffer maltreatment.
2. Workforce investment. Provide adequate training, support and remuneration to the child welfare workforce is essential to strengthen child welfare services.



3. Partnerships with schools. Increase collaboration between schools and child welfare to support children, particularly those facing difficulties at home.
4. Kin and kinship supports. Provide robust support to kin that care for relative children when the parents cannot.

[Learn](#) about the Schuyler Center's child welfare priorities, all of which align with those identified at our policy forum.

- See Kate Breslin's post-forum [interview](#) on *Capital Tonight*.
- Read Jeanette Vega's [story](#), and find more parent stories in [Rise Magazine](#).
- See Molly McGrath Tierney's [TedX talk](#).