



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

Testimony Submitted By:

Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies

Kathleen Brady-Stepien, Associate Executive Director

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Joint Legislative Hearing on Higher Education

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Thank you for giving the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the 2019-20 Executive Budget. My name is Kathleen Brady-Stepien and I am the Associate Executive Director of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA). Our member agencies include over 100 not-for-profit organizations providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, juvenile justice, and special education services in New York State. My testimony today will focus on two very important programs that are included in the Governor's budget: the New York State Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program.

On behalf of our member agencies, their more than 55,000 employees all across New York State, and, mostly on behalf of the tens of thousands of children and families that our agencies serve, we thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony today.

For many years, New York State has provided uncapped state funding for preventive services to keep children and youth at-risk of entering foster care safely at home with their families. This historic shift has helped to prevent unnecessary entry into foster care for many children and youth in our state; we have seen the number of NYS children in foster care decline over the past twenty years. Today, there are approximately 16,000 children and youth in foster care in NYS.

Caseworkers provide critical supports for our preventive services and foster care programs; direct care staff in foster care agencies work with our young people 24/7. To do their job successfully, workers in child welfare programs have to earn the trust of the family and children, understand family trauma and adverse childhood experiences faced, and therapeutically support the family in achieving their goals.

While I think it is safe to say you cannot put a price tag on the extremely challenging and yet very rewarding jobs in this field, unfortunately workers in voluntary not-for-profit child welfare agencies earn far less than what they can make in the public sector. In 2016, our average statewide starting salary for a caseworker/case planner working in a preventive, family foster care, or residential care program began at \$34,753 (for a BA/BS graduate) or \$41,570 (for an LMSW). Since the rest of the state's economy has improved over this same time period, our workers are simply not staying in this field, in jobs that they truly find rewarding, because they are unable to make their own ends meet. In our most recent workforce survey of our member agencies, COFCCA found a 47% turnover among our direct care, front line staff. Caseworkers had a statewide turnover rate of 41%.

Our work is driven by relationships; it is devastating for a family to have to tell their story all over again to a new worker in a preventive services program, or for a child or youth in foster care who experience the loss of yet another adult in their lives when our workers leave for other, better-paying jobs.

It is for these reasons that we came to the Legislature two years ago and asked for your support to create higher education opportunities for our workforce. We desperately needed, and continue to need, an incentive to recruit and retain staff in our field. While our long-term goal is still to advocate for increases that would support larger salaries for child welfare workers, these higher education opportunities will help us to recruit and retain workers in the short-term.

We continue to be extremely grateful to the Legislature for the following two programs created in the 2017-18 budget:

- **The New York State Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program** will provide student loan forgiveness awards for the purpose of attracting workers to be employed in NYS child welfare agencies. Recipients can receive awards up to \$10,000 per year for up to 5 years, not to exceed the total amount of the recipient's student loan debt.
- **The NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program** will grant awards for child welfare workers employed at voluntary not-for-profit child welfare agencies licensed by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). Recipients must agree to live in NYS and work at a voluntary not-for-profit child welfare agency licensed by OCFS for 5 years after graduation, and can use the award to get an associate's, bachelor's or graduate degree.

While no grants or loan forgiveness awards have yet been made, we understand that the Higher Education Service Corporation (HESC) has just filed regulations for the programs, and we believe HESC is going to formally launch both programs in February. Currently there are limited dollars (a

total of \$100,000 invested in each program collectively over the past two years in the state budget) that will support maybe 3 or 4 awards. In order to truly impact our recruitment and retention challenges, additional funding must be included in the final 2019-20 state budget so that more workers can access these programs. COFCCA is requesting an additional \$950,000 for each program.

We respectfully request that \$950,000 be added for both the New York State Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program so that each program can be funded at \$1 million in the 2019-20 budget. If funded at this significant level, we will begin to address critical recruitment and retention challenges facing child welfare agencies across the state and help to increase workforce stability for promoting positive outcomes for children and families.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this testimony today.

COFCCA AGENCY EMPLOYEES BY REDC REGION

REDC Region	Number of Employees
NYC	28,141
Mid-Hudson	7,085
Long Island	3,880
Capital Region	3,325
Central NY	2,926
Western NY	3,787
Finger Lakes	2,952
Southern Tier	2,278
Mohawk Valley	717
North Country	291
Total	55,382

