



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

**Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies
Testimony Submitted by Kathleen Brady-Stepien, President and CEO
Committee on General Welfare Oversight Hearing:
The Child Welfare System During COVID-19
June 14, 2021
via Videoconference**

Good day, Chairperson Levin, I am Kathleen Brady-Stepien and I am the President and CEO of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA). Our member agencies include over fifty not-for-profit organizations providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, and juvenile justice services in New York City and over 100 agencies providing the same services Statewide. On behalf of our member agencies, their thousands of employees, and mostly on behalf of the tens of thousands of children and families that our agencies serve, we thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

The word is overused, but only “unprecedented” accurately describes the actions of the nonprofit child welfare agencies when COVID-19 shut down the city. Suddenly what agencies needed to do for clients and staff expanded drastically – finding, along with the rest of the world, personal protective equipment; shifting the workforce to remote work; and identifying new ways to meet the new and increased needs of families. Our agencies’ staff were essential workers, certainly essential to those families who received food and diaper deliveries, assistance with technology for remote learning, and virtual therapy with clinical staff due to the hard work of our nonprofit child welfare heroes.

Now as we move towards a post-pandemic phase, our agencies are assessing what has been learned, what was helpful, and what innovations are worthwhile to continue. Some of the lessons learned and needs identified during the pandemic should be of interest to the General Welfare Committee and City Council.

Workforce Issues

Ask: City contracts and budget allowance allocations could be restructured and tailored to support the myriad of line item budget modifications that emerged during the pandemic.

On July 1, 2020, Prevention programs were in the midst of closing out previous contracts and staffing up programs for new evidence-based contracts. Agencies struggled with recruiting, hiring, and sustaining a viable workforce of Prevention casework staff who were willing and able to engage families, conduct safety checks, and support a child welfare-involved population. In the Foster Care programs, casework staff were tasked with foster home visits, family engagement, assessing whether families could safely meet in-person, and providing technical support for family visits that had to be done remotely. In Residential programs, agencies had to arrange COVID-19 screening of on-site direct care staff, juggle coverage and pay overtime when direct care staff could not come to work because of illness or contact with an ill person, assist staff in getting overnight transportation when the subways closed, quarantine and care for youth who contracted COVID-19, and much more. A large percentage of child welfare staff are people of color and members of the population that was the hardest-hit by COVID-19 infections and fatalities. As essential workers, agency staff struggled with finding child care and

with obtaining and sustaining remote access to educational activities for their children, children in foster care, and the children under case management in prevention programs. It was a heavy lift for providers to assist clients with remote learning; to gain access to or to provide needed medical and mental health services; and to shift budget resources to acquire PPE, emergency food, and electronic devices for all remote activities. While ACS has been flexible with budget modifications to fund some purchases, we have learned a lot about how contract funding was not designed to support a remote workforce or work with families who were the least equipped to access services to various city services (DOE, HRA, HPD, and community-based services) from a virtual platform.

Going forward, the ability for people to meet virtually is something many have found beneficial in some, but not all, circumstances; for some activities, meeting virtually has allowed people to be more productive (e.g., eliminating travel time). We encourage the City, State, Family Court, and all stakeholders to identify those meetings, hearings, and other situations where technology could be used to replace some meetings that can be inconvenient or time-consuming for participants to attend, along with using technology to add more communication between those meetings and visits that should be face-to-face. Of course, once a case has been made for adopting more virtual meetings and contacts as appropriate, agencies will need funding and flexibility within contracts to supply and use different technology as appropriate for the staff and families involved.

Ask: The Council needs to ensure contract agencies receive increased funding to pay their workforce on par with City employees, beginning with the Human Services Council's request to restore the 3% COLA.

As mentioned above, child welfare provider agencies struggled to recruit and retain Prevention caseworkers while implementing the new contracts. Residential and Family Foster Care agencies also face regular and pandemic-heightened recruitment and retention needs. What makes recruitment and retention more difficult is the City's refusal to budget regular and meaningful Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs) for child welfare provider agencies in particular, and human services agencies as a whole. The starting salary for an entry-level ACS Child Protective Specialist with a bachelor's degree is \$49,279 to start, with an increase to \$53,519 after six months. In contrast, the average starting salary for a NYC Prevention program entry-level caseworker working in one of our nonprofit agencies with a bachelor's degree is \$43,681, with no promise of a raise after six months – or perhaps even after a year, depending on what the City budget provides the contract agencies. Related to the next section, line workers in human service contract agencies are predominantly female, and predominantly Black and Latino. The City should ensure its contractors have the resources to provide pay that is equitable with the City's own workforce.

Racial Equity/Social Justice Supports

Ask: City Contracts need budget allowances and allocations that support the racial equity and social justice mandates outlined by the Mayor's Office and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

NYC and ACS have imposed contractual mandates to address racial inequities and racial disparities in child welfare. We appreciate this direction and support of work that is ongoing in our provider agencies. The pandemic exposed the racial and social justice inequities that we have long suspected, and nonprofits carried the frontline burden of meeting the needs of the City's children and families. The intensive needs and gaps in resources of poor families, especially throughout the pandemic, have significantly stretched the budgets of child

welfare agencies. The Mayor’s Racial Justice Commission requires all agencies with city contracts to engage in activities that are designed to “dismantle structural racism for all New Yorkers.” Such requirements call for additional staff training on undoing structural racism, conducting racial equity scrubs of agency policies and practices, and hiring diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders to guide agency equity plans. We ask for the city’s support in providing agencies with the resources needed to be in compliance with these government requirements.

I am happy to answer any questions the Council members may have.

I thank you for allowing me to submit testimony.

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Contact Information:

Kathleen Brady-Stepien, President and CEO  
Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies  
254 West 31st Street, Fifth Floor, New York, NY 10001  
Phone: (212) 929-2626  
kbradystepien@cofcca.org