



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

**Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies  
Testimony Submitted by Kathleen Brady-Stepien  
Joint City Council Hearing  
Committee on General Welfare  
Oversight Hearing on the Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2022,  
Capital Commitment Plan for Fiscal Years 2021-2025 and  
The Fiscal 2021 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report  
March 17, 2021**

Good morning, 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.

Our providers' essential workers have gone out into the field each day to support New York City's children, youth, and families in our prevention services, foster care, and juvenile justice programs. We are deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on our families and communities, which have been some of the hardest-hit throughout the pandemic. A 2020 United Hospital Fund report illustrates the impact and the ongoing need for investment, and especially primary prevention and prevention services to keep communities supported and children safely with their families.

- During the period of March-July 2020:
  - 4,200 children in NYS experienced the loss of a parent/caregiver (57% of the caregiver/parent deaths were in the NYC area in Bronx, Brooklyn, & Queens). Black and Hispanic children were impacted much more significantly as they experienced parental/caregiver loss at twice the rate of Asian or white children.
  - 325,000 children have newly been placed into or near poverty-level conditions as a result of COVID's impact on the economy.<sup>i</sup>

Given the amplified needs our providers see in the midst of the pandemic, we ask for the following:

1. Prevention services: We must ensure that our commitment remains—at minimum—level to prevention services, supports to keep children safely together with their families. A recent survey we conducted jointly with the Citizens Committee for Children



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shows that prevention workers and front line staff reported greater need in a variety of areas for families, including:

- 81% increased need for internet access, including devices
- 80% increased need for food
- 77% increased need associated with children's education and/or daycare
- 77% increased need for household items, including disinfectants and hand sanitizer
- 72% increased need for mental health counseling for adults and/or children

Those cited above only represent the top five needs communicated via the survey; we will be happy to share more information with the Council members on this survey as it shows the experiences of families and essential workers throughout the pandemic.

We are actively engaged in an effort to advocate for full preservation of the open-ended funding stream, providing 62% reimbursement to all counties currently for the costs of their prevention, protection, and other child welfare services, that has been a mainstay of the state budget since 2002 (child welfare financing). The Governor's Executive Budget proposed a 5% cut to this funding stream this year.

New York State will implement the federal Family First Prevention Services Act in September 2021. The overall goals of this legislation are to invest additional investments into prevention services, keeping children safely in their homes, hence reducing the need for residential foster care placements and foster care placements more generally.

- Prevention: **at minimum, we must commit level funding to prevention services, to ensure a full continuum of prevention services for families in New York City, especially as we prepare for federal Family First Act implementation.**
2. **Primary prevention:** We seek to bolster the availability of primary prevention, services and supports available to all families in a given area categorically, without the intervention of the child welfare system. A fantastic example of the availability of primary prevention is the Family Enrichment Centers, or FECs. We applaud ACS for the partnership in building up these FECs, and we are proud of our providers, Children's Village (Bridge Builders), Graham Windham, and Good Shepherd Services for their work alongside families in their communities, to build up supportive places for communities to build together and thrive together. These FECs are a place for families to connect, and to share resources and activities together. Ultimately, they are a measure to reduce families' interaction with the child welfare system by building community supports from within. A recent evaluation study conducted in March 2020 of the 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



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finding jobs/careers.<sup>ii</sup> Providing these essential supports for communities has only become more important given the pandemic.

- Family Enrichment Centers (FECs): **We strongly support the Administration for Children’s Services support of three Family Enrichment Centers and we ask the city Council’s support to expand availability of FECs.**
3. **Supporting Essential Workers:** The child welfare heroes that make up the contract agency program staff have been essential workers that continue to go above and beyond during the pandemic. Prevention program workers went to families in homes and homeless shelters to get them food and supplies. Foster care workers learned new skills on the fly as they provided children’s parents and foster parents with technology to keep in contact with each other, schools, and court. Child care workers continued to come in and be there for youth in foster care group homes and residential sites despite transportation hassles and fears of COVID-19. They did this despite our data that shows contract agencies are not funded well enough to match the salaries the City offers its own staff doing similar work. While bringing back the COLA for city-contracted human services workers will not fully fill the gap, a 3% COLA will help those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to meet the needs of families in crisis.
- Workforce: **We join with the voices of the Human Services Council and ask the City Council to renew the COLA for human services workers in the FY22 budget at a rate of at least 3%.**
4. **Fully restore Indirect Cost Rate Funding:** The City imposed retroactive cuts to Indirect Cost Rate (ICR) funding of 40% in FY20 and has also just communicated a 70% cut for FY21 with less than four months left of the fiscal year. Our providers are on the front lines of the city’s response to COVID-19, and will continue to be a critical component of assisting the city in building back from the pandemic. For providers that have already been taking on extraordinary costs associated with their extra needs throughout the pandemic, including but not limited to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), enhanced cleaning and technology costs, providing increased pay to our front line staff, these reductions represent untenable additional fiscal strain.
- Indirect Cost Rate Funding: **We strongly support the Human Services Council’s call for full restoration of the Indirect Cost Rate, and we ask the city Council to stand with us in full support of the need to fund our programs fully for these costs (\$171 million is needed to fully honor the Indirect Cost Rate (ICR) Funding Initiative for FY20, FY21, and FY22).**
5. **Fair Futures:** As you know, the Fair Futures program offers life coaches and tutors to foster youth from middle school to age 26, in all 26 New York City-contracted foster care agencies. The program gives the youth practical and emotional support through stable relationships with adults who follow the youth throughout their time in and after foster

care. Fair Futures participants have shown increased rates of high school graduation, among other positive findings. Each year, however, the youth and the programs must come to the City and Mayor to ask for the funds to continue the program. Baseline funding for a proactive program that keeps the City from incurring other costs for negative youth outcomes is a matter of practicality.

- Fair Futures: **We ask the Mayor and City Council to make Fair Futures a permanent fixture in the NYC Budget and baseline \$20M for this important program.**
6. **Other Workforce Challenges:** We continue to have challenges in hiring and retaining qualified and credentialed staff in our programs. Later this year, the professional licensure exemption is due to end June 24, 2021, as a result of Chapter 57 of the Laws of 2018, passed through the state budget in 2018. This will mean that our professionals working in the social work, mental health, and psychology professions will need to be appropriately licensed in order to be working in our settings. We offer the following observations in hopes that the Council will support these important service access initiatives:
- **Telehealth and telecare:** we have learned throughout COVID-19 that telehealth and telecare has been an added support for our families, and ask for the Council's support in seeing this continue beyond the pandemic to add to our continuum of supports afforded to families.
  - **Professional licensure exemption extension:** we ask for the Council's support in our efforts at the state level to extend the professional licensure exemption, which would end as of June 2021. We are engaged in an effort at the state level to extend this licensure exemption, especially given the enhanced mental health needs we have seen under COVID-19.
  - **Article 163 mental health professionals/diagnosis:** We ask for the Council's support in extending diagnosis privileges to the Article 163 professionals (Licensed Mental Health Counselors, LMFTs, LCATs, Psychoanalysts). Diagnosis privileges are not currently within scope of practice for these article 163 professionals, and would truly assist in building up our workforce if they could have this included within their scope.
    - COFCCA Supports NYS legislative bill S5301 (Brouk)/A6008 (Bronson) which would address this critical issue.<sup>iii</sup>

Thank you to the Council members for allowing me to testify before you today. I am happy to answer any questions that you have. We truly appreciate your partnership and support for our children, families, and providers.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://uhfnyc.org/publications/publication/covid-19-ripple-effect-impact-covid-19-children-new-york-state/>

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

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/a6008>