

COFCCA'S 2022 ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN: STRENGTHENING SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

New York State's child welfare system has undergone incredible change due to the devastating impact COVID-19 has had on our children and families in New York State, and state implementation of the federal Family First Act. New York has a unique opportunity to improve supports for children, families, and communities as the state builds back stronger from the pandemic.

DEVELOPING MEANINGFUL CAREER PATHWAYS FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SUPPORTING WORKFORCE

Our child welfare workforce is the backbone of the child welfare system. As essential workers throughout the pandemic, the child welfare workers delivered supplies, supported families with the transition to remote schooling, provided timely information to families as COVID-19 evolved, and supported children and youth in foster care, foster parents, caregivers, and families. Throughout the pandemic, child welfare workers risked exposure to care for children, youth, and their families.

Quality in our workforce is directly tied to the quality of care and overall experience of children and families in the child welfare system. Young people in foster care come to develop and rely on relationships with their child care workers and their caseworkers. High worker turnover negatively impacts children and youth in foster care, and it impacts outcomes. Studies in the field show that each time a worker leaves, it may add up to six additional months to a youth's time in foster care.

This workforce is comprised of professionally trained and deeply committed individuals. Over the last several years this workforce has seen a recruitment and retention crisis exacerbated during the pandemic and its accompanying labor market challenges. If the state does not address this crisis, the quality and quantity of highly therapeutic programs and services we are able to offer to children and families will suffer, at a time when they are needed the most.

The current workforce crisis has been driven by multiple years of flat rates for foster care, the deferral of the human services COLA and inadequate state investment to keep up with increased costs such as inflation, insurance, and mandated services. As a result, this sector has been running on very tight margins, and impacting our ability to offer competitive salaries and benefits.

Recent federal funding has been provided to NYS to address this very issue for workers in sectors overseen by other state agencies, but not for the Office of Children and Family Services' (OCFS) child welfare programs. The non-profit child welfare sector is in desperate need of an infusion of funding to raise salaries for the current workforce to promote future career pathways for this workforce.

COFCCA recommends a significant state investment to raise salaries for workers in foster care programs, \$17 million each year for three years.

COFCCA strongly supports the 5.4% Human Services COLA in the Executive Budget (HMH Part DD). We recommend the state include an annual increases in the state-set foster

care rate, the Maximum State Aid Rates (MSAR) as well as providing parity with any workforce increases provided during the budget for the foster care workforce.

Providing career pathways

To help address recruitment and retention challenges, the state created two new higher education opportunity programs. These programs provide an incentive to current and prospective employees to work in the critical field of child welfare, and support the education and training needed to provide quality care.

COFCCA recommends that the enacted budget expand the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program, increasing funding to \$1 million each for a total investment of \$2 million.

COFCCA recommends workforce pipeline enhancements, professional and educational development, and recruitment and retention incentive opportunities be provided across the human services workforce.

Increasing availability of mental health services.

For decades, the dramatic shortage of licensed mental health practitioners has been artificially filled by an exemption to the scope of practice for certain practitioners licensed under Article 163 of the Education Law. As this exemption is phased out beginning in 2022, we must rethink the long-term solution, including standardizing the Master level educational, clinical training and licensing standards for licensed mental health counselors, licensed marriage and family therapists and licensed psychoanalysts and modernizing the scope of practice to allow them to diagnose.

COFCCA supports A6008-B by Assemblyman Bronson and S5301-A by Senator Brouk which would standardize the requirements for licensure as a mental health practitioner and modernize the scope of practice to include diagnosis.

Increasing financial support for foster parents

In 2021, New York State implemented the federal Family First Prevention Services Act. The state has successfully begun to transition more children and youth to placements in community-based family foster homes and kinship resources. Foster parents are the incredible volunteers that support children and youth in foster care in our communities across New York. We must support our foster parents, given the ever-increasing costs associated with providing quality care for children and youth. Fortunately, the state recently settled a decade-plus long lawsuit addressing this issue. We applaud the state for the commitment to increasing foster parents' support, and strongly encourage the state to implement swiftly the foster care subsidy increases for foster parents.

COFCCA supports increased financial support for foster parents included in the Executive Budget (ELFA Part O). We recommend the enacted budget include state investment in the Foster Care Block Grant to ensure full and successful implementation.

ENHANCING COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

Since 2002, NYS has provided uncapped state child welfare funding for prevention, child protective, adoption, after care and independent living services, and a Foster Care Block Grant which caps State reimbursement to districts for foster care services. This structure, which greatly incentivizes prevention, has been widely successful in lowering the number of children in foster care. Twenty-five years ago, our state had over 60,000 children in foster care. Today, there are approximately 16,500 children and youth in New York State's foster care system.

The state has made an unparalleled commitment to preventive services through the provision of open-ended reimbursement to counties. However, for several years, the state budget has reduced the state share for prevention services to 62%, below the statutory requirement of 65%, leaving counties to increase their expenditures to simply maintain a flat level of program funding.

The pandemic has caused immediate physical and mental health challenges for children and families. New York must increase state investment in essential community-based prevention services for families in recognition of the pandemic's impact on communities across NY.

We must enhance prevention services, keeping children safely at home with their families by restoring 65% reimbursement to counties for child welfare services including prevention.

In addition to reauthorizing the successful child welfare financing structure, which is due to sunset again on June 30, 2022, now is the time to increase reimbursement to counties for un-capped prevention to the statutorily required 65%. Prevention services have been especially critical throughout the pandemic, when more families needed support with food, housing, intimate partner violence, mental health crises, and substance use disorder services.

COFCCA supports the extension of the child welfare financing structure in the Executive Budget (ELFA Part N). We strongly recommend that the enacted budget includes child welfare financing reimbursement for counties at 65%, as statutorily required.

The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) is the principal representative for nearly all the not-for-profit organizations providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, and juvenile justice services in New York State. COFCCA is comprised of over 100 member organizations, ranging in size from small community based programs to the nation's largest multi-services agencies — all of which share the mission of serving children and families. COFCCA works with its members and government to ensure quality services for children and their families.