



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

## 2023 Budget Requests

*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.*

### Investing in the Child Welfare Workforce

The state must prioritize the workforce that provides critical behavioral and mental health services to meet family and community need and lessen vulnerability of entry into or escalation within the child welfare system. COFCCA supports the following actions New York State can take to invest in the child welfare workforce supporting families across the state:

#### Invest in Foster Care Workforce Salaries

Today in NYS, approximately 15,600 children and youth are in the state's foster care system, approximately 80% of whom are in the care of the nonprofit voluntary foster care agencies. Quality in our workforce is directly tied to the quality of care and overall experience for young people in foster care, as they 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.

**Our foster care workforce is in desperate need of an infusion of funding to raise salaries—amounting to a \$17 million annual investment for three years as proposed in S.3101 (Brisport) /A.3411 (Darling).** This infusion of funding would raise salaries to be equitable with public sector salaries to make a job in the non-profit child welfare sector more competitive, allowing programs to attract diverse, highly educated and trained candidates, and to reap enormous benefits for the children and youth served.

#### Provide Meaningful Career Pathways in Child Welfare

Our child welfare staff tell us that in addition to salary increases, they need more support in achieving their higher education goals. We consistently hear from our child welfare workers that although they find the work very challenging, they enjoy what they do and want to continue to grow with our agencies. Many staff in our programs desire to become supervisors or even aspire to be in a senior leadership position such as a program director or a CEO someday; however, they need advanced education degrees to pursue those positions. We also often hear that they begin to look for other jobs when they cannot afford to pay their student loan monthly repayments. We seek a long-term option for supporting the child welfare workforce in their educational goals so we can begin to build a true career pathway for our state's child welfare professionals.

**COFCCA supports significantly expanding the impact of the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Programs by increasing the funding for these programs to \$1 million each.** 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.

### Expand and Improve the Human Services COLA

**COFCCA strongly supports increases to the Human Services COLA, consistent with the Consumer Price Index- this year at 8.5%.**

Resources that come through the state budget process must be spread equitably across human services programs. This year, resources were diminished for caring for children and youth in foster care, as well as for the hard-working staff in these programs. According to OCFS, this was due to statutory language in last year's budget implementing the human services COLA, that limited the ability for the state to set foster care rates as they have for decades.

We must also address the human services workforce that has historically been left out of the COLA. **COFCCA recommends that the Human Services COLA include prevention workers and health home care managers.** Child welfare caseworkers are leaving the field altogether for other better paying sectors such as education and mental health, or they are moving to the private sector. Like in foster care, staffing shortages, vacancies, and turnover are linked to negative outcomes in prevention. An investment in the prevention workforce is also an investment in families, and results in fewer out of home placements of children, and reduced lengths of stay for children in foster care.

## **Enhancing Community Supports**

### Increase Prevention Funding

The implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), as an opportunity for the state to make strides toward transforming its child welfare system into one that is intentionally anti-racist, and committed to centering families' self-determination, by strengthening community-based prevention services that meet the needs of New York's diverse communities.

A significant number of COFCCA members provide prevention services across the state. The services are tailored to individual family need, and may include connecting families to supports when there is a need for housing, food, clothing, mental health and medical services, and assisting them in getting the resources needed to keep their families safe, healthy, and together.

Since 2002, the state has invested in an open-ended child welfare funding stream which provides an incentive to counties to invest in prevention services, by reimbursing county funds spent on prevention. And it works! Investment into prevention services has contributed to a 58% decline in the number of children and youth entering the foster care system statewide from 2002 to 2021. For several years, the state has reduced the reimbursement level for prevention services down to 62%, from the statutory requirement of 65%. The continued cost shift from the state to the local governments, puts a strain on the counties' ability to invest in community-based programs for families and limits the ability for agencies to hire and retain staff to meet the demand for services. **COFCCA urges the state to increase reimbursement to counties for uncapped prevention to 75% as proposed in A.2807 (Hevesi).**

## **Ensuring Justice for Child Victims**

### Establish a Child Victims Act Settlement Fund

**COFCCA supports legislation to Create a Child Victims Act Settlement Fund as proposed in A.1279 (Lunsford)** to assist with judgements or settlements issued against school districts and Voluntary Foster Care Agencies in cases where there is no insurance coverage, and where payment would negatively impact the existing population or services and the agency's mission. A Child Victims Act Settlement Fund is an essential path to getting access to justice for victims who would otherwise be unable to realize financial awards due to lack of agency resources while also preserving providers' continued ability to meet the demands of New York's children and families in need.