



Joint Human Services Hearing February 6, 2018

Families Together in New York State is a family-run organization that represents families of children with social, emotional, behavioral and cross-systems challenges. Our goal is to ensure that *ALL* children and youth have the support they need in order to succeed. We represent thousands of families from across the state whose children have been involved in many systems including mental health, substance abuse, special education, juvenile justice, and foster care. Our board and staff are made up primarily of family members and youth who have been involved in these systems.

The Families Together 2018 Policy Priorities are created by families of children and youth with social, emotional, behavioral and cross-systems challenges.

In a growing body of research, evidence is clear that exposure to childhood traumas, known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), can lead to poor health and socio-economic outcomes later in life. The prevalence of childhood trauma is greatest among children growing up in environments that lack the resources to meet their daily needs. To the furthest extent possible, we must fund community-based primary prevention approaches that promote the development of resiliency, encourage economic security, address social determinants, and facilitate social connectedness and general health and emotional wellness among young children and their families.

For children who have experienced abuse and neglect, one of the most important resources the state can provide for them is a safe and supportive environment to live, to heal, and to grow. For youth who have been removed from their families and are entering the foster care system, the most effective way of providing that environment is through family-based care. Indeed, research shows that quality foster parenting, especially with a relative, can help children heal from trauma, reduce further traumatization, keep siblings together, improve management of children's chronic physical and mental health conditions, increase stability and ensure that children achieve permanency through reunification with birth families, placement with relatives, or through adoption, all of which can lead to more successful transitions into adulthood.

However, New York State's shortage of foster and kinship families is at a crisis level in some counties. As a result, some upstate NY counties place, on average, 25% of foster children in congregate care, as compared to an average of 14% nationally. New York State has, for many years, struggled to produce positive outcomes for children in foster care evidenced, in part, by its difficulty in placing and maintaining children in appropriate family-based settings throughout their time in care. And, these difficulties are likely to increase due to the State's significant cuts to the Foster Care Block Grant last year. At the same time, the opioid epidemic has begun to drive up need for foster care in some parts of the state.

Thankfully, the state is taking a crucial step toward addressing childhood trauma, social determinants, and environmental factors with the First 1000 Days Initiative, recognizing that the child's first three years are the most crucial years of their development and producing policy solutions that reflect that. While proposals offered thus far by this initiative will no doubt have positive impacts, one area of focus that we believe is critical to this approach is strengthening family-based foster care, including relative-foster care known as Kinship. Foster youth who aren't placed in family care settings are at greater risk of developing physical, emotional and behavioral problems that may lead to school failure, teen pregnancy, homelessness, unemployment and incarceration. Moreover, those in family based care are more likely to

find a permanent home. We believe that realigning the State's resources to focus on family-based care is what is best for young people, families, and the public at large. Families, advocates and service providers across New York recognize that there is an urgent need to identify ways the State can better support children who enter foster care and agree that strengthening supports for family-based care is the best place to start.

THE FAMILY PEER SUPPORT AND YOUTH PEER SUPPORT WORKFORCE:

Expand and integrate Family Peer Support Services (FPSS) and Youth Peer Support Services (YPSS) into all children's services, including the child welfare system.

- Family Peer Support Services and Youth Peer Support Service programs are effective because they are family-driven, youth-guided, cross-systems, and community-based services that utilize the lived experience of families and youth to support other children and their families.
- Research has shown that children's services that integrate Family and Youth Peer Support professionals into their programs are more engaging, increase overall satisfaction, and ultimately create better outcomes for children and families.
- New York State created a network of over 200 separate family support programs and approximately 400 professional trained and credentialed family peer advocates.
- State funding should be made available to support, expand, integrate and maintain these programs, and the agencies that utilize them, as children's behavioral health services transition into Medicaid Managed Care and the State launches Health Homes.

The First 1000 Days on Medicaid Workgroup has submitted a proposal to the Executive Budget to pilot and evaluate Family Peer Navigators in multiple settings for at-risk families with young children. We support this proposal, and want it to build upon the existing infrastructure.

SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF RAISE THE AGE

- **We support the Executive Budget proposal for \$100 million for Raise the Age expenses and \$50 million additional capital,**
- However, **we are deeply concerned** that the lack of specificity regarding the distribution of these resources and the **cuts to New York City's Close to Home program** and preventive services funding stream, will impede New York City and other counties from effectively implementing Raise the Age.
- **A critical component** of the City's successful implementation of Close to Home and its ability to reduce the populations in both detention and placement has been the **City's ability to tap into the State's preventive services funding stream**, which reimburses counties at a rate of 62%.
- We urge the state to:
 - Rescind the proposal to cap the state share of child welfare services (protective, preventive, independent living and adoption administration) for New York City;
 - Rescind the proposal to eliminate all state funding for Close to Home; and
 - Ensure all counties, including NYC, have resources needed to implement Raise the Age.

SUPPORTING QUALITY CAREGIVERS

Strengthen family-based foster care, including relative-foster care known as Kinship, and ensure that children are placed in the best placement for that child, in those cases when foster care is necessary.

- We must **strengthen family-based care** by offering counties incentives to recruit and retain quality foster parents, encourage more formal kinship care (relative-based foster care) and provide young people and their foster/kinship families more support, including access to therapeutic interventions, dedicated support workers, family peer support, youth peer mentors, and developmentally appropriate respite services.
- To **increase the use of relative foster care whenever appropriate**, we should implement a kin-first approach. This could include a kin-first firewall for placements, required documentation of the search for kin, as well as expedited licensing and specialized kin training. We recommend that the State work with counties to improve the use of relative foster care and ensure that families understand their options when assuming care of a child.
- We urge the state to **preserve funding and restore cuts made to the Foster Care Block Grant in last year's budget**. At a time when communities across the state continue to be ravaged by an addiction crisis and a shortage of foster and kinship families, it is unconscionable that the child welfare system has sustained cuts to funding through the Foster Care Block Grant.
- The State should **shift financing for the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program from the Foster Care Block Grant by making it akin to adoption subsidies**. The placement of funding for the KinGAP within the FCBG places an additional strain on counties' foster care resources, while a shift could incentivize the use of relative placements and free up counties to spend more on foster care recruitment, retainment and caregiver support.
- Additionally, **the state should make significant investments in primary prevention** and restore the state share of preventive/protective funding to 65%, as is written in statute and **rescind the proposal to cap the state share of child welfare services** (protective, preventive, independent living and adoption administration) for New York City.

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

To better support youth in foster Care or transitioning out of foster care, the state should:

- **Strengthen the housing subsidy for foster families and youth** by raising the monthly subsidy allowance to \$600 per month, increase the upper age limit eligibility from 21 to 24 so that youth who age out of foster care at 21 can avail themselves of the subsidy program for up to 3 years; and allow flexibility so that youth may have roommates.
- **Fully fund the Foster Youth College Success Initiative** to support youth in foster care in pursuing higher education. The State must fulfill its responsibility to the youth entrusted to its care and ensure they are prepared to lead independent and fulfilling lives by funding FYCSI at \$6 million to support youth pursuing higher education who either are or have been in foster care.
- **Fund Youth Peer Support Services for young people in foster care** so they can receive guidance and support from young adults with similar lived experience in the child welfare system.