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

Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies

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Mental Hygiene
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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.

As we engage in a dialogue about the investments needed in our state budget this year, I urge careful consideration of the needs of the thousands of children and families our programs serve through the child welfare system.

COFCCA Budget Request Summary

The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) Supports:

- **Investments in the Child Welfare Workforce**
  - Expanding and improving the Governor's Human Services Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) proposal (HMH, Part FF):
    - Increasing the Human Services COLA, consistent with the Consumer Price Index- this year at 3.2%, and
    - Ensuring that it is equitably invested across the human services workforce, to include programs previously not included such as prevention programs and health home care management (S7793/Persaud and A8437/Hevesi)
  - Creating and enhancing meaningful career pathways in child welfare through:
    - The Governor's Executive Budget proposal to establish a $4 million loan forgiveness program for Mental Health Clinicians Serving Children (ATL- OMH)
    - Increasing funding for the Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Programs
  - Establishing a Human Services Employee Wage Board as proposed in S4675/Ramos
- **Ensuring access to Care for Children**
  - Holding Health Homes Serving Children harmless from restructuring proposal
  - Providing significant investments in HCBS, CFTSS, and community-based clinic services

COFCCA Budget Request Detail

While we were encouraged to see the Governor this year in her State of the State address highlight the significant mental and behavioral health needs of children and youth, the 2024-25 Executive Budget proposal falls short of providing the immediate supports needed in the child welfare system; a critical piece of the behavioral health spectrum. We need the state investments to ensure access to and enhance interventions that support families' needs, strengthen neighborhoods and communities, and prevent entry into or escalation within the child welfare system.

Invest in the Child Welfare Workforce

COFCCA's 2022 Child Welfare Workforce Report consists of data from 58 child welfare agencies across New York State. This workforce is comprised of professionally trained and deeply committed individuals, often largely comprised of women of color. These staff support children, youth, and their families in prevention services designed to prevent entry into foster care, as well as children and youth in foster care across New York State.

Key findings from the report include:

- A significant reduction in the number of master's level social workers at our member agencies from 2 years ago, indicating that they have been increasingly difficult to find and hire
    - This reduction shows an urgent need for creating a pipeline for this workforce.
- A significant increase in workforce turnover across all positions:
    - Most concerningly, average turnover in 2022 was about **57%** among residential child care workers and close to **50%** among family foster care caseworkers.
    - Overall caseworker average turnover across all child welfare programs was about **42%** - nearly twice as high as in 2020 (when turnover was at 24%).

These troubling turnover rates show the continued need for investing in the child welfare workforce. Every time a worker turns over, it adds time in foster care unnecessarily for a child and impacts outcomes for families as families continually need to tell their story and to come to trust a new worker. A stable and well-trained workforce is crucial for ensuring quality services, positive outcomes for our children and families, and reduced lengths of stay in foster care.

As in prior years that COFCCA has conducted this survey of its members, child welfare salaries are also not sufficient compared to those for similar jobs in other sectors, particularly within government. When taken together, caseworkers across Child Welfare programs make 37% less than their public employee counterparts[1]. Additionally, many residential direct care workers only make about $5,000 above minimum wage in NYC[2], Westchester, and Long Island, and only slightly more in the rest of the state.

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[1] When compared to an equivalent state position (PEF Grade 18). https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/state-agencies/payroll/pdf/PEF-salary-schedule-April1-2022.pdf

[2] https://www.ny.gov/new-york-states-minimum-wage/new-york-states-minimum-wage

- **COFCCA supports the establishment of a Human Services Employee Wage Board as proposed in S4675/Ramos, to review to investigate the pay disparities and develop recommendations for equitable wages in the human services sector.**

The non-profit child welfare sector is in desperate need of an infusion of funding to raise salaries for the current workforce to provide parity in investment with other state licensed programs, to align salaries being provided for workers in other settings with similar credentials and experience, stabilize turnover, and to promote future career pathways.

- **Fund the Human Services Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) at the CPI recommended rate of 3.2% and include human services programs that have previously been left out of this investment, prevention services and health home care programs serving children.**

We appreciate Governor Hochul's proposal for a 1.5% human services COLA, but it is inadequate given the workforce need and we strongly support increasing the investment to a full 3.2% in the final budget. We must also address the human services workforce that has been left out.

- **We urge that the COLA include all human services programs including community-based prevention services programs and Health Homes Serving Children Care Management Programs, as is proposed in S.7793/Persaud and A.8437/Hevesi.**

We also note that in Aid to Localities, there has been new language inserted in the Executive Budget proposal that addresses the human services cost of living adjustment (COLA) in relation to the state-set rate for foster care called the Maximum State Aid Rate (MSAR). We read the language to say that the executive proposes to continue the COLA throughout the full rate year (for instance, that the 4% COLA that was enacted in last year's budget would be in place from 4/1/23 through the end of the providers' rate year on 6/30/24). However, we are unsure if the Executive is also addressing a request from the sector for the COLAs to build on one another.

In the past, the COLA has been subtracted out of the rate calculation before adding the new COLA (for instance, the 5.4% COLA of two years ago subtracted out to add a 4% COLA—a loss of opportunity to build up rates that have not kept up pace with inflation. We are seeking more information on the Executive's proposal.

- **COFCCA would like to work together with the legislature to ensure that the foster care rates continue this growth year over year as we understand that is the intent of the Human Services COLA—to add, not to subtract, from providers' continued ability to meet inflationary cost pressures impacting rising heat, energy, fuel, and food costs, and to continue to grow staff members' rates of pay.**

Quality in the workforce supporting children and youth in foster care is directly tied to the quality of care and overall experience children and families have. 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.

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 (given the growing student debt crisis in our country, staff have student loan payments ranging from several hundred dollars per month to payments even in excess of $1000 per month). While we appreciate ongoing efforts at the federal level to address this issue, we seek a long- term option for supporting New York State's 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 strongly supports the Executive Budget proposal to establish a $4 million Loan Forgiveness Program for Mental Health Clinicians Serving Children.** This program would specifically support licensed mental health clinicians serving children and families in Office of Mental Health and Office of Children and Family Services licensed settings.

- **COFFCA requests a significant expansion of 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 would 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.

Ensuring Access to Care for Children

Health Homes Serving Children consist of a variety of service providers across systems including child-welfare, behavioral health, health care (ie. hospitals), and Mental Health (ie. psychiatric centers and county-based providers). The population served primarily consists of children and adolescents with mental health conditions; in addition to children with developmental disabilities, medical complexities, and social care needs. Health Homes Serving Children are the sole pathway to accessing the array of Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) that help some of the most high-needs children stay in their communities. Their inclusion in an Executive Budget proposal to achieve $125 million cost savings in restructuring for health homes, could impact over 30,000 children and adolescents, primarily young people needing support with mental health treatment, if this goes through as proposed.

- **Health Homes Serving Children must be held harmless from any funding cuts or restructuring that will mean a de facto rate reduction and services being eliminated for children and families.**

We know that there is a shortage in the availability of services to support child and youth mental health, which creates wait lists for treatment. The Healthy Minds Healthy Kids Campaign (HMHK), a collaboration between 19 of New York's leading children's and behavioral health advocacy groups, commissioned a study that found what our providers have said for years: the rates in children's outpatient services are inadequate to cover costs, let alone support a sustainable system for the future.

- **COFCCA supports a $195 million investment in children's behavioral health services to support Medicaid rate increases for Home and Community Based Services (HCBS), Children and Family Treatment and Support Services (CFTSS), and Article 31 Clinics to bring the rates closer to the actual cost of providing care.**

In closing, we must ensure that the final state budget includes investments in our child welfare workforce- quality in the workforce supporting children and youth in care is directly tied to the quality of care and overall experience children and families have. Additionally, we must ensure access to the critical community, behavioral, and mental health services that help keep children and families together.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.