

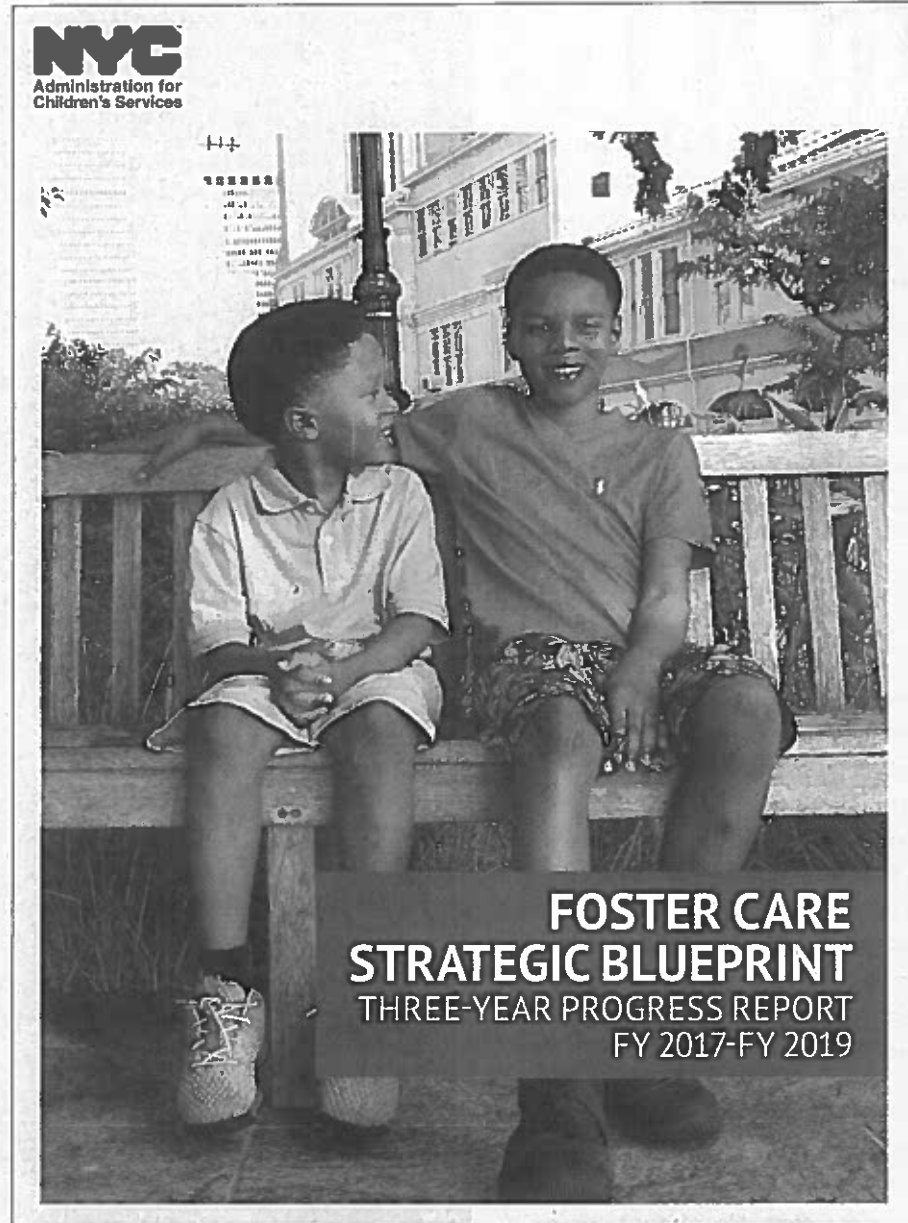
CHILD WELFARE THEN AND NOW

By Julie Farber

Congratulations to *Fostering Families Today* on its 20 years of reporting and for continuing to provide an important platform for all those involved in the foster care community! As deputy commissioner at the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), I have the privilege of overseeing New York City's foster care system. During the course of my 25-year career, in addition to working in government, I've had the opportunity to work as an advocate for change, a monitor of/adviser to child welfare systems across the country, and a direct service provider working under contract with government. My experience as a child welfare professional working from these different vantage points has shaped my perspective on what it takes to improve systems and outcomes for children and families.

Investing in Prevention Services

Prevention services help support families and keep children safely at home. In New York City, in particular, ACS prevention services have safely reduced the city's utilization of foster care. There were nearly 50,000 New York City children in foster care 25 years ago, and 17,000 just a decade ago. Today, there are approximately 8,000 children in foster care. However, across the country, we still have a long way to go. For instance, there is huge variation among states and localities in terms of their investments in prevention services. Passage of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, which will hopefully bring more resources for prevention services, is a step in the right direction.



Research

Vulnerable children and families deserve interventions that have been shown to produce good outcomes. We have learned a lot during the past 20 years and there are a number of evidence-based, evidence-informed and promising child welfare interventions in

prevention and foster care. Nationally, this is an area where there is wide variation across states and localities. In New York City, we are implementing a range of evidence-informed models across our prevention and foster care portfolios and these models are producing documented results.

In New York City, a family that completes a prevention program is five times less likely to be involved in the child welfare system in the following six months than one who does not complete the program (and more than 80 percent complete the services).

In addition, a recent evaluation by Chapin Hall found that ACS reduced length of stay in foster care by 9 percent with the implementation of lowered caseloads and evidence-based interventions under a federal Title IV-E waiver. Successfully implementing evidence-based models requires significant investments and attention to implementation science, such as policies, procedures, leadership, resources, coaching, training, evaluation, feedback loops and more.

Equity and Parent and Youth Voice

Child welfare systems must be committed to examining and addressing inequity and disparities related to race and ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. A key equity strategy in New York City is the engagement of the voices of youth and parents. Youth and parent voice must be fully integrated at both the individual case level and at the system level, informing policy and practice. Parent and youth advocates with lived experience are uniquely positioned to support youth and families involved in the child welfare system and to provide essential perspectives on system gaps and challenges.

In New York City, ACS Commissioner David Hansell has established a Youth Advisory Council and a Parent Advisory Council, as well as created a new parent engagement specialist job at the agency, which is held by an individual with lived experience of the child welfare system and is informing prac-

tice across the child welfare system. Ensuring that parent and youth voice is deeply ingrained in every aspect of our practice is essential for providing equitable and responsive services for children and families.

Foster Parents Working with Parents

In New York City, our "Home Away from Home" initiative has resulted in significantly increased kinship placement, foster home recruitment and foster parent support. The fact is that most children in foster care are reunified with their families. As such, the role of a foster parent goes well beyond providing care to a child, to include facilitating positive communication between children and their parents, providing support to the parents, and playing an active role in helping to achieve the goal of reunification whenever that is possible and appropriate. This is of course a very significant responsibility and foster parent recruitment, training and support need to reflect this reality.

Setting Measurable Goals

Child welfare is a field that tends to be driven by crisis, but a system driven by and focused only on addressing the crisis of the day can't be successful. In New York City, we created a Foster Care Strategic Blueprint that outlines our key objectives, strategies and relevant performance measures. We relentlessly measure outcomes and produce regular reports to the public on our progress. Our most recent report showed major improvements in several key areas, including increases in kinship care and foster home recruitment and decreased length of stay in foster care. While of course, like any child welfare system, we have and must respond to a crisis when it occurs, our Foster Care Blueprint

keeps us focused on and holds us accountable for the systemic improvements we are driving toward.

Alignment of Fiscal Models with Programmatic Goals

While the new Family First legislation moves us in the right direction, it remains true that our current federal child welfare financing structures do not match our goals of prevention and permanency. Federal prevention funding is dwarfed by foster care funding, and the structure of foster care funding — which pays a daily and never-ending rate for "heads in beds" — rewards keeping children in foster care. As noted, in New York City, we've made major investments in prevention. We are also implementing strategies designed to incentivize and reward our highest performing contracted foster care providers, in order to better align our fiscal models with our goals of safety, permanency and well-being for children and families in the foster care system.

Moving Forward

We've made some progress over the past 20 years, but that progress is uneven across the U.S. and there is much more work to do. Improving child welfare systems and outcomes requires leadership and big ideas, the necessary funding and the ability to execute. The most critical and the most challenging part of child welfare system reform is translating the legislation, policies and big ideas into day-to-day practice on the ground that truly improves outcomes for children and families. We must all rise to that challenge now, because children and families can't wait. •

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