

The New York City Administration for Children's Services
Ronald E. Richter, Commissioner
Testimony to the New York City Council
Committees on General Welfare, Juvenile Justice, Women's Issues, and Finance
May 21, 2013

“New York City Council Fiscal Year 2014 Executive Budget Hearings”

Good morning Chairs Palma, Gonzalez, Ferreras and Recchia, and members of the General Welfare, Juvenile Justice, Women's Issues, and Finance Committees. I am Ronald E. Richter, the Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services and with me today is Susan Nuccio, our Deputy Commissioner for Financial Services. We are pleased to be back before the Council to continue discussing our ongoing work to protect and support New York City's children, young people, and families. Thank you for the opportunity to update you on our Fiscal Year 2014 budget and to share the progress we have made on our Strategic Plan.

As I testified in March, the outlook for our 2014 budget contains some positive news in that we are able to meet our Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) with a combination of revenue and expense reduction actions. We have begun to implement the cost savings initiatives that we discussed in March. For early care and education, the initiatives include standardizing the eligibility determination process for low income families receiving subsidized care, which we project will produce \$5.2 million in savings, and a data analysis project intended to uncover inappropriate child care payments that we expect will save the City approximately \$6 million.

However, the Executive Budget also reflects that sequestration cuts to federal funding will impact the Children's Services budget for the upcoming year. Like other jurisdictions across our country, New York City has been affected by Washington's inability to address the federal budget responsibly. The impact of sequestration on our child welfare budget will be approximately \$1.1 million. In early care and education, sequestration will reduce the Children's Services budget by over twelve million dollars by cutting our portion of the state Child Care Block Grant by approximately \$3 million and our federal Head Start funds by approximately \$9.7 million.

Another federal action will also impact our agency's child care budget for Fiscal Year 2014. After much anticipation, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released the first round of preliminarily selected awardees for Head Start grants. HHS undertook the re-competition for Head Start funding to ensure that "programs are providing the highest quality services to children and families" and we are pleased to report that the New York City Administration for Children's Services was among those that were recommended to receive an award. As many of you know, ACS currently serves as a "Supergrantee" -- a federal funding

recipient that contracts with and oversees a portfolio of strong community-based delegate agencies that provide direct Head Start services. ACS will continue to be New York City's Supergrantee. In addition, HHS recommended awards to 19 other direct grantees, 17 of which were just selected last year as delegate agencies for *EarlyLearn NYC*. The fact that these *EarlyLearn* providers were chosen to directly receive federal funds affirms Children's Services' selections of top quality early care and education providers in the *EarlyLearn* procurement process.

I sincerely congratulate all of our delegate agencies who successfully competed for Head Start funding - they represent the extraordinary range and variety of quality programs in the City's early care and education system. Because the list of providers which have received and accepted the awards has not been finalized, we cannot yet provide the Council with an exact dollar amount of the impact. Currently, the Federal Office of Head Start provides over \$198 million of funding to five New York City organizations, including ACS. In the recently announced preliminary awards, approximately \$198 million will fund 20 organizations, including ACS. The increase in the number of directly-funded Head Start providers, without a corresponding increase in the amount of federal funds, necessarily reduces the funding that ACS will receive and that can be distributed throughout our *EarlyLearn* network. Despite the fact that a number of Head Start providers who had been City-funded will now be federally funded, the children who currently receive quality Head Start services will continue to receive them without interruption. We anticipate that you will have questions about this shift during the hearing.

Strategic Plan Update

One of the key priorities set forth in our strategic plan is to improve the quality of and access to Early Care and Education services. A recent report that found New York State is one of only two child care systems in the country to rank in the top ten for both program standards and oversight, which includes the safety and well-being of children who are being cared for outside of their homes. While this report addresses licensed providers, for our informal caregivers, ACS goes a step beyond what the state requires -- we search pending and past criminal involvement to ensure that no provider has a history of violent crime or crime against a child. For our *EarlyLearn NYC* providers, ACS is able to conduct detailed background checks for criminal records as well as any report of child abuse or maltreatment. We continue to work

closely with OCFS and our sister city agencies to ensure the safety and well-being of the 110,000 children in New York City's system.

Since we testified at the preliminary budget hearing, Children's Services has taken important steps toward implementation of two major child welfare initiatives. In April, we announced the non-profit agencies that we are recommending for awards to provide additional preventive programming for young people and families involved in our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. We are also in the initial stages of implementing our innovative foster care initiative, *ChildSuccessNYC*. As both of these initiatives will significantly transform how we interact with and provide needed services to youth and families, I would like to share with the Council additional details concerning our progress and plans in each area.

Evidence-Based Preventive Services for Teens and Families

A key priority set forth in our Strategic Plan is to expand services for teens to more effectively meet their needs. We are achieving this by diversifying our portfolio of services to provide young people and their families involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems with intensive, home-based, therapeutic services. By the end of this summer, ACS, with our provider partners, will offer an array of services that are evidence-based, evidence-informed, and/or based on promising practices that will dramatically expand the availability of services tailored to what has been shown to work for families with teens. The models, all of which offer home-based services to families and promote high quality practice through oversight by clinical experts, have demonstrated positive outcomes for teens and their families, such as improved behavior and reduced foster care re-entry rates, or reduced re-arrest rates. These services help families resolve the issues that they struggle with, and provide parents with skills and strategies to manage problematic teen behavior.

In total, ACS is awarding almost 1,300 preventive slots that will serve approximately 3,600 young people and their families each year. We anticipate that providing services at home could reduce the number of teenagers entering foster care by 20%. This is based upon our demonstration project in Manhattan, and the University Heights and Highbridge sections of the Bronx during 2012, where we experienced a 20% reduction in teen entries into foster care. We also expect that the Aftercare Services that will begin to be offered this summer to youth

transitioning out of non-secure juvenile justice facilities will continue the rehabilitative efforts being made through the City's Close to Home initiative. As you know, the first phase of Close to Home – accepting youth in Non-Secure Placement -- has been underway for the past nine months. Through tremendous support from and collaboration with our partners at the State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), as well as our City partners in other agencies and the steadfast support of Juvenile Justice Chair Sara Gonzalez, Close to Home has already served over 400 young people.

Last year, we also released an Expression of Interest solicitation that offered General Preventive and Family Treatment/Rehabilitation providers the opportunity to convert their existing contract to an evidence-based or promising practice model. Twenty of our Preventive agencies submitted proposals and were approved to convert their programs. The models to which agencies are converting are appropriate for families with children from birth through 18 years of age, and all have been shown to achieve positive child welfare outcomes, such as improved parenting skills and the reduction of trauma in children.

With the new slots and the contract conversions, we will have 12 different preventive models across New York City by the end of the summer. In total, once all of the programs are implemented, more than one-third of our preventive and aftercare programming will be evidence-based, evidence-informed or promising practice models. In anticipation of offering a diverse array of new preventive service options, ACS has designed a process to support our front line child protective staff in determining which preventive model is most appropriate for which family. The goal is to ensure that each child protective staff member has the resources, training, and tools needed to make full use of the new, robust continuum of service models to best meet the needs of the children and families that come to our attention. We are excited to partner with our providers to implement these new models to more sensitively and appropriately meet the needs of our City's children, young people and families.

As we move toward increasing the availability of evidence-based practice models throughout the system, we are especially appreciative of our on-going conversations with Chair Palma, who shares our deep commitment to making sure that families receive the assistance they need. There is not a more committed or sensitive advocate for our City's families than Chair Palma. She is a demanding force in our work who has held our agency accountable, and yet she

has always done so in a manner that has cultivated our relationship as opposed to dividing it, and any advice she gives is always in the service of achieving better outcomes for children and families. For this, I will always respect and admire her leadership.

Foster Parent Appreciation Month, Housing Academy and Child SuccessNYC

Over the past 20 years, New York City's foster care census has declined significantly, from a high of over 50,000 children in care in 1993 to a low of fewer than 12,800 in care today. Concurrent with the decrease in foster care placements, the number of families who engage in preventive service programs has been increasing and we are serving over 25,000 families in 2013.

While we continue to reduce the foster care census, we remain committed to ensuring that all of our foster kids have safe, supportive and loving homes. To that end, and in honor of Foster Parent Appreciation Month, at the end of this month ACS is introducing a city-wide campaign to recruit additional, quality foster parents. The campaign, called "Be the Reason", features ads like the ones you see here. One of the biggest barriers we face is that many prospective parents, who may be interested in fostering a child or young person, may not realize that they "qualify" to be a foster parent. We know there are many widespread misconceptions such as the belief that a foster parent needs to own rather than rent an apartment, needs to be partnered, or be of a certain age or have had prior parenting experience. Our "Be the Reason" Campaign will aim to target some of these specific groups – including older New Yorkers, single adults, lesbians and gay men – in an effort to open their eyes to the wonderful possibilities of becoming a foster parent. As I speak to New Yorkers about fostering and adoption, I like to remind them that our young people bring so much more to them than they could ever imagine they bring the young person. Each of our kids is unique and powerful. All you have to do is spend a little time getting to know these young people. Many of you have already done this, and we hope to have many more join this effort.

The campaign will diversify the locations where we place advertisements, including on an increased number of subway lines and media outlets. We are also making certain that our recruitment efforts reflect the great variety of young people who need homes, so the ads will feature teenagers, disabled young people, sibling groups and LGBTQ youth. For example, to

address the need for LGBTQ and affirming foster parents, one of the ads featured will be “Be the Reason...It Gets Better.” We hope that these positive messages will inspire New York City residents, who would not have otherwise thought of becoming foster parents, to open up their homes and hearts to our children in foster care. We invite the Council to help us share this information and guide interested individuals to our website, where they can learn more.

We are excited about the trends toward fewer removals and a greater use of preventive services. Still, there is work to do. ACS is endeavoring to better prepare youth who are transitioning out of care and into stable adulthood. Of course, our first goal is to have a young person find a permanent resource, either informally or through adoption or guardianship, which can ease their transition into adulthood. Notwithstanding those efforts, practical skills are also needed for our young people. In March, we launched the Housing Academy Collaborative (HAC) which provides core training for young people age sixteen to twenty-one, to better prepare them to assume the responsibility of living independently. The Housing Academy has two primary goals: to better prepare young adults to maintain long-term possession of NYCHA and supportive housing when they transition from foster care, and to provide one-on-one technical assistance in key areas of education, employment and medical/mental health. In developing the curriculum for the Housing Academy, ACS has collaborated with NYCHA and HPD to address some of the challenges faced by foster youth transitioning to live independently in the community. The combined goals of our three agencies are to ensure that youth are ready for independence with the right supports, including critical life skills such as how to complete applications for housing, education, key techniques to improve interview skills, how to locate jobs through online resources, how to negotiate with creditors and explore landlord and tenant rights. On April 30th, we celebrated the first graduation of 22 foster care youth from our program. Since then, over 90 young people have expressed interested in the Academy. Our second Housing Academy Collaboration began on May 6 and is serving 31 young people. Our next session will begin in early June.

We are working to improve stability, enhance well-being, and expedite permanency for children who are in foster care through *ChildSuccessNYC*, an initiative that links evidence-based model components to establish a New York City model of care. For some time, we have been hearing from our provider agencies, advocates, and the Family Court that caseloads are high,

staff turnover is frequent, foster parents need better support and birth parents need to be engaged. A standardized model of foster care will help our agencies achieve better outcomes for children and young people in our care.

ChildSuccessNYC is based on evidenced-based or evidence-informed program components that will provide significant support to birth parents immediately after children are removed to address the reasons that their children came into care, and will provide intensive aftercare to support a much shorter time to reunification. ACS is working with five diverse foster care providers – representing approximately 20% of the youth in general foster care – throughout New York City to test the model this calendar year. Based on what we learn during this year, we intend to bring the best features of *ChildSuccessNYC* to the entire general foster care system starting in Fiscal Year 2014.

ChildSuccessNYC includes elements of several models that are currently being used throughout the foster care system including KEEP, a foster parent support model that seeks to limit placement disruptions and increase permanency rates; Parenting through Change (PTC), a behavior change model geared toward helping birth parents address the reasons that their children were brought into care; Youth Development Skills Coaching, which offers individualized youth development services to teens; and Family Finding Model, which seeks permanency resources for foster youth. In addition, *ChildSuccessNYC* limits the number of cases that each agency case planner works on and limits the number of case planning staff that each agency supervisor oversees. It limits the number of foster children in each household, with certain exceptions, such as keeping siblings together. Finally, *ChildSuccessNYC* institutes a number of administrative requirements with the goal of standardizing services across the city. We are hopeful that combining these evidence-based and evidence-informed approaches to foster care will support faster reunification of families when it is safe and will continue the City's trend of fewer young people entering foster care each year.

Supporting ACS and Provider Agency Staff

One of the goals of *ChildSuccessNYC* is to address high staff turnover in the field of agency case planning. Foster care agencies, unlike our own child protective staff at ACS, experience an unacceptably high turnover rate. Staff turnover is high because the work of

ensuring the stability, safety and permanency for children and families is intensely demanding, and we are continuing to work on identifying the right people for the job, and how to sufficiently remunerate those who do the job adequately. Another way that ACS is addressing this challenge, as set forth in our strategic plan, is by prioritizing a culture of support for our staff and our provider agencies' staff. To that end, ACS' Workforce Innovation Department and our Workforce Advisory Board, with the support of Casey Family Programs, have worked to create and implement a new system of screening and hiring child welfare professionals at our provider agencies. Studies have shown that staff who possess specific competencies – such as adaptability, stress tolerance, productivity and cultural competence – are better prepared for and more satisfied in child welfare work, leading to greater workforce stability, more highly skilled staff and therefore, better child and family outcomes. We are currently initiating the evaluation stage of this effort and are excited to move forward and expand this work. Children's Services must support its exceptional network of provider agencies in order to be successful. Our providers' staff, like our own staff, is critical to our ultimate goal – helping and nurturing our children, young people and families. In order to get that right, we need to ensure that our staff are supported. We are committed to deepening our work in this area.

Conclusion

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to update you on our work and plans. We are committed to achieving measureable results that will benefit the children, young people, and families that rely upon ACS for child welfare, juvenile justice, and early care and education services. Our work would not be possible without our collaboration with the Council, and in particular Chairs Recchia, Palma, Gonzalez and Ferreras. Thank you for your time today, and I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.