



**The New York City Council**

**Committees on Finance, General Welfare, Juvenile Justice and Women's Issues**

**Preliminary Budget Hearing**

**Monday, March 24, 2014**

**Testimony by**

**Gladys Carrión, Commissioner**

**New York City Administration for Children's Services**

Good morning Chairs Ferreras, Levin, Cumbo, and Cabrera, and members of the Finance, General Welfare, Women's Issues, and Juvenile Justice Committees. I am Gladys Carrión, Commissioner of New York City's Administration for Children's Services. With me today is Susan Nuccio, Deputy Commissioner of Financial Services. I appreciate having this opportunity to brief you on the preliminary budget and to update you on Children's Services' ongoing work and how it will support the agency's mission to protect and support New York's vulnerable children and families.

### **Overview**

I would like to start by sharing with you some details regarding our budget. Children's Services budget for Fiscal Year 2015 provides for operating expenses of \$2.9 billion, of which approximately \$874 million is city tax levy. Unlike in previous years, we are thankful that we have not had to make any cuts to our agency budget in this cycle.

During my eight-year tenure as the Commissioner of the Office of Children and Family Services, New York State moved toward implementation of an agenda focused on child well-being. A growing body of research indicates that ensuring safety and achieving permanency are necessary to well-being, but they are not sufficient and we should not stop there. Safety is paramount and permanency is an important outcome, but as we move toward a record-low foster care census and a steadily decreasing residential juvenile justice population, it is critical that we understand and influence what happens to the young people who come through our system. Do they learn and succeed in school, do they graduate from high school, do they possess the skills to go on to higher education or obtain a job that pays a livable wage, and do they have the social and emotional skills to develop healthy relationships? We can do better. So, as we continue to ensure safety, we will also focus on the well-being of the children and families who are involved in our systems. The foundation of this framework is a knowledgeable workforce, a greater focus on understanding the impact of trauma on our children and families and more effective engagement with our community partners and provider agencies. In each of our program areas – child welfare, juvenile justice and early care and education, we are already taking steps toward this direction. I look forward to expanding our approach from a safety and risk focus, to one that includes a child well-being frame that works to strengthen the family's ability to nurture and as well as protect their children.

## **Child Welfare and Reform Efforts**

Each year, ACS investigates approximately 55,000 allegations of abuse or neglect. In 40% of these cases, we find some credible evidence of abuse or neglect. Wherever possible, ACS provides preventive services to keep families safely together. Last year, ACS provided preventive services to over 22,000 families. To protect and improve the lives of New York City's most vulnerable children, young people and families, we must constantly evaluate and use the science and research of what works and the tools available to continuously improve our work.

Unfortunately, my appointment to ACS coincided with the tragic deaths of several young children. After reviewing those cases in depth, Mayor de Blasio, Deputy Mayor Barrios-Paoli, and I announced recommendations related to child welfare case practice and citywide partnerships to ensure the safety of New York City's most vulnerable children. Among other reforms, we are:

- Reviewing and bolstering ACS' Approach to the Highest Risk Child Welfare Cases. To this end, we are assessing our Family Services Units (FSU), which serve and support high-risk families in cases where the Family Court has ordered that ACS supervise the home;
- Improving collaboration with other city and state agencies. This agency is focused on the safety, permanency and well-being of children; however, the welfare of children and young people is the responsibility of the entire City. Toward that end, I recommended to the Mayor that he establish a Children's Cabinet. Under the leadership of Deputy Mayor Richard Buery, the New York City's Children's Cabinet is being established, and will bring together over 14 city agencies in order to establish and improve interagency communication and services related to children and families.
- Introducing and supporting State Legislation that will assist child protective practices by giving ACS the ability to access arrest records, in addition to the criminal records we now are authorized to view;
- Creating a public awareness campaign to emphasize that the safety of children is a collective responsibility and to raise awareness about the many ways that New Yorkers can impact and improve child safety and well-being.

To oversee and insure the implementation of these reforms, ACS will hire an internal monitor who will report directly to me and assume responsibility for establishing a robust child fatality and review process and will identify ways to improve the services ACS provides and to overcome systemic barriers to child safety and well-being.

As we implement these reforms in child protective practices, we are continuing to strengthen relationships and improve collaboration with our preventive and foster care providers. Preventive services provided by ACS and our network of social service agencies include counseling, parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence intervention, home care, support for pregnant and parenting teens, support for families with children with special medical or developmental disabilities, sexually exploited youth, and other services. In 2013, ACS expanded our preventive continuum of services to include evidence based, evidenced informed and promising practice models of service delivery. We currently have total capacity for 12,791 preventive services slots, which includes 497 slots that were awarded in August 2013 to serve high-risk teens.

New York City's foster care census continues to decline; in 2013, approximately 11,690 children were in foster care, down ten percent from the 12,950 in care in 2012. For those who are in care, we are working to ensure they build the skills that foster stable adulthood. Last year, ACS created The Housing Academy Collaborative (HAC) to better prepare young people to maintain long-term possession of NYCHA and supportive housing when they leave foster care. The Housing Academy also offers workshops on resume and career building, employment, and financial literacy. Since inception, over 240 young people have participated in the Housing Academy.

### **Early Care and Education**

New York City oversees the largest publicly-funded early care and education system in the country, where we invest over \$1 billion annually to meet the needs of about 100,000 children. Mayor de Blasio's plan to expand free Universal Pre-Kindergarten presents ACS with an opportunity to review both our contracted and non-contracted systems of care in order to assess how we can improve our system. This will be our focus over the next year.

We know high quality early care and education programs do much more than provide child care; they promote healthy early childhood development and offer extensive support to

parents and caregivers and get children ready to learn. The Mayor's plan to expand high-quality, full-day pre-kindergarten builds on this same vision and ACS is working closely with the Department of Education to ensure that all four year-olds will receive the same quality standards, regardless of whether contracted under ACS or by DOE. In the first year of the Mayor's Pre-K plan, ACS will implement quality enhancements for the 12,681 seats that contract with ACS to serve four-year-olds. These enhancements will make it possible to provide full day UPK services without any cost to the parent.

This opportunity to assess our early care and education allows us to look at both our contracted and non-contracted systems. Our new contracted system, *EarlyLearn NYC*, began in October 2012. Since that time, ACS staff and providers have worked very hard to implement a systemic transformation. Currently, 136 ACS contracted providers serve over 31,000 children in 363 centers and in 1,628 Family Child Care providers' homes across the five boroughs. Our center-based enrollment is at 88% today and ACS continues to work with our providers to ensure that they have the support they need and that families are aware of the nearest *EarlyLearn NYC* center in their neighborhood. But even before I arrived at ACS, I have heard concerns about *EarlyLearn NYC* – that it falls short of reaching its aspirational vision. We know there is always room to do better, and I am confident that working together with providers, agencies, and other stakeholders, we can continue to make improvements to the system.

In addition to the 31,000 plus children served in the contracted system, ACS funds child care for about 66,000 additional children through a voucher system. As ACS has explained in the past, as families are choosing formal care settings and younger children are being served in non-*EarlyLearn* settings, the total cost of care has resulted in a significant deficit against our budget. The City is continuing to explore ways to encourage voucher recipients to enroll in vacant *EarlyLearn* seats in order to both address this deficit and to ensure the long term viability of a high quality contracted-care system.

Children's Services has also been working to assist families impacted by the March 12 tragedy in East Harlem. It was brought to our attention that some families are in need of child care, and our Early Care and Education staff have been working hard to identify services in the community for these families.

## **Juvenile Justice**

Working to transform the juvenile justice system was a priority of mine when I served as the state Commissioner and will continue to be now that I am serving the City. We are committed to providing preventive services for youth in crisis. Out-of-home juvenile justice placement is, and should be, our last option. ACS oversees two community-based alternative programs that offer young people involved in, or at risk of involvement in, the juvenile justice system the opportunity to receive services at home. FAP, the Family Assessment Program that identifies services and provides referrals to help families work through their challenges before the need for court involvement arises, was able to serve 6,700 families in 2013. The other program, JJI, the Juvenile Justice Initiative, links young people and families with intensive therapeutic interventions aimed at diverting youth from residential placement. JJI seeks to reduce recidivism, improve youth and family functioning and reduce the number of delinquent youth in residential facilities and has the capacity to serve 280 young people each year.

We are also happy to report that the NYS Division of Criminal Justice services awarded a contract to ACS, NY Foundling and the Center for Court Innovation, which will expand our capacity and enable us to provide alternative to detention (ATD) services to youth in Queens. In total, through partnerships with the NYC Probation and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, we have leveraged city tax levy dollars, federal, state and private foundation funds to invest close to \$37 million dollars in diversion programs. Adding our investments in DYCD Beacon and Summer Youth Employment programs, ACS' child welfare preventive dollars that fund services for our most vulnerable youth and families, and the ATDs administered by the NYC Office of the Criminal Justice Director, support by the City for programs designed to keep youth out of our Juvenile Justice system is substantial.

It comes as no surprise that many young people who have engaged in delinquent behavior have a history that involves abuse or neglect. ACS is dedicated to understanding and addressing the needs of this population, known as "crossover youth" who are involved in both our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University developed a "Crossover Youth Practice Model," which recognizes that we must build on individual and family strengths in order to help young people overcome challenges. ACS in collaboration with the Family Court is incorporating this model to improve on-going work between juvenile justice and child welfare partners and family members. Our CONFIRM unit

works with young people involved in both systems to reduce the number of out-of-home placements where safe and appropriate and to consistently engage families.

I am also committed to build upon my statewide efforts to work with judges and others to further reduce the unnecessary use of juvenile detention. While we have seen a marked decrease in the use of detention, too many young people are in detention for just a few days, and it is clear that these young people are not a risk to the community. While a young person is in detention waiting for his or her case to be adjudicated, ACS has an opportunity to ascertain what that young person's needs are and begin to address them. We will work with detention facility staff to ensure we are capturing this opportunity to evaluate and meet the educational, medical, mental health, vocational and family needs of young people in detention.

Eighteen months ago, the City and State launched Close to Home, which gave ACS custody of New York City's young people adjudicated as juvenile delinquents. The City launched the first phase of Close to Home, Non-Secure Placement, in September 2012. Since then, nearly 300 young people have successfully completed their court orders, which ACS divides into two components: residential care and aftercare. Approximately 200 youth are currently in residential care, and 85 are on after care status. Central to Close to Home is the ability for youth to remain connected with their families and communities. We will work to build a strong network of community providers in the neighborhoods where our children return after they leave our system. Our young people need to be connected to supports in their communities that will offer them options that lead to success.

ACS is preparing to launch Limited Secure Placement this fall. We had planned to launch earlier in the year but I want to be certain that New York City has ironed out any remaining NSP challenges before we accept responsibility for higher needs youth. The LSP sites are larger than the NSP sites, and are presenting some challenges with respect to construction and renovation. ACS is working with three local non-profit agencies to provide LSP services at nine residential sites in and just outside of New York City. These residences will have more restrictive features to ensure the safety of residents, program staff, and communities and will provide many services, including education, onsite. We anticipate that each site will serve twelve to twenty youth, for a total projected census of approximately 140 young people in the LSP system.

**For too long our communities have been seen as the problem, for too long children have been sent far away and their families ignored or even vilified, these families and communities are assets that we need to support and embrace to achieve better outcomes for our children.**

## **Conclusion**

I am honored to have the opportunity to continue to serve New York City's Children and Families in my new role as Commissioner of ACS. It is my sincere hope that as I endeavor to strengthen the work of ACS, I can also reframe our work to impact on measures of well-being that speak to the success of our young people and the public's understanding of our role. That as a city, we are all committed to keeping our children safe, our families strong and our young people on pathways to success. This is a shared responsibility.

I'm very much looking forward to a fruitful and productive collaboration with the City Council. Thank you for your time this morning. I welcome your comments and questions.