



**The New York City Council,
Committee on General Welfare
February 27, 2015**

“Oversight- Interagency Coordination Between DHS and ACS to Protect Homeless Children”

**Testimony by
New York City Administration for Children's Services
Dr. Jacqueline O. McKnight, Executive Deputy Commissioner, Child Welfare Programs**

Good afternoon, Chair Levin and members of the Committee on the General Welfare. I am Dr. Jacqueline McKnight, Executive Deputy Commissioner of Child Welfare Programs at the Administration from Children's Services. With me from ACS, is my colleague Andrew White, Deputy Commissioner of our Division of Policy, Planning, and Measurement. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the ongoing work at Children's Services, in partnership with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and other city agencies, to ensure the safety and well-being of children and families experiencing housing instability and homelessness.

Families and children experiencing housing instability and homelessness are among the city's most vulnerable families. Since the beginning of Mayor de Blasio's administration, ACS has, in close collaboration with DHS, developed a series of new measures to better understand the needs of ACS child welfare-involved families in shelters and to increase interagency coordination to ensure that proper services and supports are in place.

In particular, the agency is focusing our efforts on coordinating with DHS to ensure that all families in shelters are able to access a wide variety of preventive services. These services, offered by community-based providers, include individual and family counseling, prenatal care, substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence counseling, as well as vocational services and early care and education services. We also offer services for families with medical conditions and/or developmental disabilities. These services can be obtained without having an open child protective investigation. Community organizations and other city agencies can make referrals. In addition, families can also refer themselves to these services. Referrals for preventive services from DHS are high priority referrals and ACS and DHS regularly coordinates to address the needs of specific cases.

Better Understanding the Needs of Families in Shelter

To assess practice and inform program improvement efforts, ACS and DHS gathered information on child welfare-involved families residing in DHS shelter. Together with DHS, we developed a tool that caseworkers affiliated with both of our agencies can use to assess child safety and risk issues, as well as services that are or could be put in place. We also reviewed physical space concerns such as cleanliness, upkeep, and presence of safe sleeping arrangements. This review reinforced the importance of ACS and DHS jointly and regularly conducting visits together to coordinate service delivery.

Through this review, we identified 3,629 families with an active ACS child welfare case either in preventive services, foster care, or an open investigation by Child Protection Services during the period of June 30, 2014 through September 30, 2014. When conducting any safety and risk assessment, ACS considers a variety of factors, including the family's history of ACS child welfare involvement, age of children, signs of domestic violence, as well as substance abuse and mental illness. Some of the findings of the case review include:

- One-fourth of the families in shelter during the review period were actively involved with ACS, either through a preventive program, a child protective investigation, court-ordered supervision, or they had children in foster care.
- Almost two-thirds of the families in shelter who were actively involved with ACS had a youngest child from birth to 4-years-old. More than half had a youngest child from birth to 3-years-old.
- We made visits with 1,168 of these families to make sure they were receiving appropriate services and to assess safety and risk. More than one-fifth (21%) of the

families we visited had a child with special medical needs, and one-quarter of them had a parent or child with a developmental disability.

- Of the ACS-involved families in shelter, we found that on average they had entered shelter three times.
- We also found that one-quarter of the families had a concern related to domestic violence.

In other words, as the data shows, many of the families jointly served by DHS and ACS have very high needs. The review also identified several areas of practice to be strengthened – including better connecting these families to appropriate services, and continuing to encourage *all* families to participate in supports such as child care. We have already integrated these into our current practice and there are additional measures we plan to implement this year.

Current ACS Practice with Families At-Risk of and Entering Shelter

Entering the homeless shelter system should be our families' last option. Working with DHS, NYCHA, Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), Human Resources Administration (HRA), and other partners, ACS makes all possible efforts to locate other resources to keep families in stable housing, including DHS' HomeBase homeless prevention program. ACS also has housing subsidies for families receiving preventive services or reunifying with their children placed in foster care and young adults transitioning from foster care. We encourage and work with provider agencies to identify eligible families and youth for supportive housing through New York/New York III. In addition, we work closely with NYCHA to ensure applications submitted by our reunifying families as well as youth leaving foster care maintain a priority code for rental purposes. Our providers help families advocate for themselves

in housing court and public assistance as well as mediate issues between family members and/or landlords. When there are domestic violence concerns, ACS collaborates with the Family Justice Center.

If no options are available other than to enter to shelter, ACS will notify DHS about the incoming family prior to their arrival at PATH. This notification includes demographic information, general reasons for ACS involvement, any mental, medical, and educational service needs and domestic violence issues. Whenever possible, ACS or our provider case planning staff will accompany the family to PATH. Currently, four ACS Child Protective staff are located at the DHS PATH Intake Center in the Bronx. This ACS unit primarily performs child maltreatment clearances on incoming families to determine whether the family has an active protective or preventive case.

Bolstering our Work and Strengthening Coordination

Over the past year, ACS, in collaboration with DHS and others, has developed new initiatives to bolster our work and coordination efforts. They include:

- Establishing Additional Child Protection Units at DHS Shelter Intake
- Developing an ACS Predictive Analytics Risk Assessment Tool
- Launching an Early Childhood Education Enrollment Campaign
- Building a City-wide Collaboration to Prevent Homelessness

Establishing Additional Child Protection Units at DHS Shelter Intake

Given the small size of the current ACS presence at DHS intake, ACS has been limited in being able to fully help families. ACS is planning to add two additional child protection units at

DHS intake facilities. The units will include 17 staff (one Child Protection Manager, two Child Protective Supervisors, and ten Child Protective Specialists, in addition to the four current staff members). Working in tandem with DHS intake staff, these units will assess families and help them access a wide array of preventive services, community supports, and childcare.

ACS Predictive Analytics Risk Assessment Tool

The most important and challenging part of child protection work is making accurate risk and safety assessments. We must continuously enhance our process to identify families who have the greatest need for support. New York City is joining other jurisdictions like Los Angeles and Pittsburgh in developing a “predictive” risk assessment tool that is driven by data. This dynamic tool will vastly improve our capacity to provide appropriate services to the families we come into contact with who are most in need of support. Using aggregated data from hundreds of thousands of child welfare cases, we are able to determine what factors predict that a family *already known to ACS* is more likely to be the subject of a future substantiated report of abuse or neglect. Such factors include a history of foster care involvement, history of domestic violence, age and number of children, and the absence of services following their first involvement with ACS. We are currently analyzing how key characteristics align with potential risk factors for children involved in both DHS and ACS. We anticipate having a tool ready for trial use in our general child protection practice by the end of 2015.

Early Childhood Education Enrollment Campaign

In addition to providing child welfare services, ACS administers the largest publicly-funded child care systems in the country, serving approximately 100,000 infants, toddlers, preschool, and school-aged children through *EarlyLearn NYC* as well as other options such as

vouchers issued to eligible families, which may be used to purchase care in a variety of settings. High quality early childhood education (ECE) programs like *EarlyLearn NYC* are invaluable for children coming from highly stressed environments.

Last year, ACS launched an initiative with DHS and the DOE to facilitate the enrollment of children in DHS shelters in *EarlyLearn*. ACS routinely conducts presentations and trainings on the importance of high-quality early education and how to access these services for families. Currently, ACS is reviewing *EarlyLearn* vacancies in proximity to nearby shelters in preparation for enrollment drives to be held with DHS later this spring to better reach families in shelter who are not enrolled in early education programs. In addition, we are working with frontline ACS, DHS and provider staff on how best to engage parents around the benefits of quality early childhood education and to assist them in applying to programs that best serve their needs.

Building a City-wide Collaboration to Prevent Homelessness

The entire city shares a role in addressing the housing needs of children and families. Numerous agencies administer various services that can promote stable housing. As directed by Deputy Mayor Barrios-Paoli, ACS hosted a meeting last month with DHS, NYCHA, Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence (OCDV), HPD, Human Resources Administration (HRA) to collaborate more closely. Leaders from each agency pledged to continue to share data, information about each of our services and programs, and advance creative strategies to maximize the resources of our agencies. One of our overarching goals is make sure our staff understand each other's programs and find ways to help our families navigate a complex patchwork of benefits, programs, and supports often with different eligibility criteria, regulatory schemes, and limited funding. Beginning next month, ACS leadership will be hosting borough-

based convenes to continue sharing information and resources with our frontline staff along with our foster care and preventive services network.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the important work we are doing to along with our partners to serve families facing homelessness and in the homeless shelter system. We look forward to sharing broader ACS initiatives to improve our practice in our Preliminary Budget hearing in a few weeks. And now we are happy to take any questions you may have.