



ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILIES

**December 14, 2017**

**Supports for Foster Parents and Relative and Non-relative Caretakers**

**Testimony of the  
New York City Administration for Children's Services**

Julie Farber

Deputy Commissioner, Family Permanency Services  
New York City Administration for Children's Services

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Good morning Chair Jaffee and members of the Assembly Standing Committee on Children and Families. My name is Julie Farber and I am Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services (FPS) at the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS). On behalf of ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell, thank you for the opportunity to discuss supports for foster parents and relative and non-relative caregivers in New York. ACS appreciates the Committee's attention to this issue and I am pleased to participate in this important dialogue.

There are few responsibilities as important as caring for children who have faced the trauma of neglect or abuse and have been removed from their families. ACS has continued to make strides in our work to strengthen and support families and keep children with their families when safely possible. When children must be removed from their homes, ACS works closely with our provider partners to make sure that families receive targeted services and supports in order to achieve family reunification, adoption or kinship guardianship.

**Foster Care Blueprint, 2017 Implementation Status Report Highlights**

ACS is aggressively implementing a Foster Care Strategic Blueprint that identifies key priorities and strategies for improving case practice and results for children and families in the foster care system—from family reunification to kinship placement and adoption to supporting older youth. This focus, combined with the unprecedented investments by the de Blasio administration to strengthen child welfare, is yielding promising results. Earlier this week, we released our FY 2017 Blueprint Status Report.

While the numbers of children in foster care nationally has been on the rise, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of children in foster care in New York City – currently, fewer than 9,000, a historic low. This is a momentous shift from 25 years ago when there were nearly 50,000 children in foster care in New York City, and from even just 10 years ago, when there were almost 17,000 children in care.

Through our **No Time to Wait** initiative, ACS is implementing a range of strategies to improve permanency outcomes for children and youth in foster care. ACS partnered with Casey Family Programs this past year to conduct “Rapid Permanency Reviews” (RPRs), which examined the cases of 2,500 children who had been in foster care for more than two years. These reviews identified case-, agency- and system-level barriers to permanency. Based on the RPR findings, ACS is streamlining administrative processes and providing targeted technical assistance to foster care agencies to help reduce time to reunification and accelerate adoption and KinGAP where appropriate. In FY 2018 and scaling up through FY 2020, ACS and the Dave Thomas Foundation have established an \$11 million partnership to expand the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids child-focused adoption recruitment model to increase the number of older children and children with special needs who exit foster care to a forever family through adoption and KinGAP.

The majority of children who enter foster care in New York City return home to their families. In the City’s 2017 Fiscal Year<sup>1</sup> (FY), more than 2,000 children were reunified, 899 children were adopted and 378 children exited foster care to kinship guardianship (KinGAP).

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<sup>1</sup> Use of the term “Fiscal Year” or “FY” refers to the New York City Fiscal Year, which begins on July 1<sup>st</sup> and runs through June 30<sup>th</sup>.

While there is more work to be done, we are making solid progress toward our goal to connect children and youth in foster care to permanent, safe, and loving families.

### **Home Away from Home**

ACS' **Home Away from Home** (HAFH) initiative is focused on increasing kinship placements and redesigning the way we recruit and support foster parents. In partnership with national experts Public Catalyst and Action Research Partners, and with \$1.1 million in funding support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, ACS launched HAFH in Fiscal Year 2016 and this critical work is ongoing. To date, ACS has:

- Completed the diagnostic phase of HAFH, which included intensive data and process analysis and a review of best practices;
- Awarded \$2 million in additional funding to our foster care providers to launch a two-year pilot to implement new kinship, foster parent recruitment and support strategies;
- Established a \$300,000 flex fund to cover certain expenses incurred by foster parents during the certification process (e.g., paying for the installment of radiator covers);
- Improved customer service for prospective foster/adoptive parents by upgrading our technology for the ACS WishLine (212-876-WISH), where New Yorkers interested in fostering or adopting can call to receive information;
- Established a uniform foster parent application form across all of our foster care provider agencies; and

- Provided intensive technical assistance with our partners, Public Catalyst and Action Research Partners, to our foster care provider agencies focused on increasing kinship placements and foster parent recruitment and support.

Research shows that children in foster care fare best when they are placed with kin.

Children in kinship care experience less trauma, benefit from increased placement stability, and achieve better permanency outcomes. In FY 17, the ACS Division of Child Protection, that conducts investigations of child maltreatment, placed 32% of children removed during an investigation with kin. In addition, foster care agencies transitioned 11% of children who had been initially placed in non-relative foster homes into kinship homes. Overall, 31% of NYC foster children lived with kin at the end of FY 17, and we are working to further increase kinship placement through a number of strategies:

- **Increasing initial placement with kin**, i.e., placing children with kin immediately upon removal during an investigation. ACS has launched a campaign with the staff who conduct child protective investigations to raise awareness of the importance of kinship care, train staff on the regulations related to kinship placement, and clarify myths and facts about kinship care. We are also in the process of establishing kinship specialists in our investigative offices who will be exclusively dedicated to searching for and engaging kin during the course of child maltreatment investigations.
- **Increasing the proportion of children who are moved to kin within 45 days of entering foster care.** We are providing intensive technical assistance to our foster care agencies to support these efforts.

Our foster parent recruitment work is also producing results. This calendar year to date, NYC has recruited 14% more foster caregivers than last year, and we continue to work collaboratively with our foster care provider agencies to continue this trend. We also know that in order to build and maintain a robust pool of quality foster homes, we must ensure that foster families have the supports they need to care for the young people placed in their homes.

### **Supports for Foster Families**

After a child's initial placement in foster care, ACS facilitates immediate arrangements and necessary referrals to ensure a smooth transition for the child and foster family. These immediate needs range from childcare and school placement to coordination of parental visitation. During subsequent meetings with the child and foster family, ACS works to identify further service needs, making referrals to medical and mental health service providers, connecting families to training opportunities, and providing information about how to obtain other available services. On a case-by-case basis, ACS may also offer special supports to foster parents such as respite care, home health aide services, foster parent support groups, emergency on-call support, safety planning, and connections to community-based supports and trainings.

### **Strengthening KinGAP**

The kinship guardianship program, or "KinGAP," offers a vital source of support for guardians to receive a subsidy to provide a safe and stable home, allowing children to achieve permanency and maintain family ties, rather than lingering in foster care. KinGAP also provides a critical alternative to adoption and lengthy termination of parental rights proceedings. ACS has steadily increased the number of children exiting foster care to KinGAP every year. In FY 2016, 343 children exited the foster care system to KinGAP—a 25% increase from the previous fiscal year. KinGAP continued to increase by 10% with 378 children exiting the foster care

system to KinGAP in FY 2017.

New York City strongly advocated in support of the state legislation that will increase the availability of KinGAP for children in foster care, and particularly older youth. Under the current law, kinship guardians were narrowly defined as related to a child by blood, marriage, or adoption, and guardians could only receive payments up to the child's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday if they were appointed prior to the child turning 16. Once the new law goes into effect, kinship guardianship assistance payments will be available to the guardians of all children up to age 21, regardless of the child's age when the guardianship was finalized. Additionally, the law expands the definition of potential guardians to include "fictive kin," which could include someone like a close family friend, and will allow more children, including older youth, to access KinGAP as a way to achieve permanency.

While we strongly support the amendments that will expand access to KinGAP for children in foster care, we respectfully urge New York State to remove the subsidized guardianship program from the Foster Care Block Grant (FCBG), and to appropriate dollars in a separate funding stream. Due to the cap on the FCBG, implementing the proposed amendments for KinGAP would fall on municipalities if not given a separate funding stream. This raises significant fiscal concerns, not just for the City of New York, but for any jurisdiction where spending already exceeds the monies provided through the FCBG—which was additionally cut by \$62 million in the State's Fiscal Year 2017–2018 budget, including a \$44 million reduction to New York City. ACS estimates the cost range of the legislation to be up to \$25 million in New York City alone.

We urge the State to take a new funding approach to KinGAP that is similar to the funding approach for adoption subsidies, as both are vital permanency options for children.

When a child achieves permanency from foster care through adoption, the adoption subsidy is funded separately from the FCBG and the funding is not capped. For adoption, the subsidy continues until the child reaches age 21, regardless of the age of adoption. The amended KinGAP law creates similar opportunity for kinship guardians to receive the subsidy until the child reaches age 21. Dollars invested to fully fund implementation of this legislation will transform the lives of real families who will now have access to the kinship guardianship program, allowing more children to achieve permanency without delay.

### **NYC Interagency Foster Care Task Force**

Another way in which ACS is working to achieve permanency and improve permanency outcomes is through the work of the New York City Interagency Foster Care Task Force. The NYC Interagency Foster Care Task Force was established through legislation introduced by the New York City Council and was signed into law by Mayor Bill de Blasio last fall. The goal of the Task Force is to develop recommendations to improve services for youth in foster care and outcomes for those aging out of care. The Task Force is charged with making recommendations specifically pertaining to improving education, housing, health, mental health, employment and permanency outcomes for youth in foster care. Membership includes foster youth, parents, advocates, foster care agencies, as well as leadership from the City Council, the Office of the Public Advocate, and various New York City agencies including the Department of Education, the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the New York City Housing Authority, and the Department of Social Services (which encompasses the City's Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services).

The Task Force first convened in June 2017 and will produce a report with recommendations in March 2018. This kind of interagency collaboration is critical to improving outcomes for children and families. ACS looks forward to incorporating the recommendations from the Task Force into the agency's Foster Care Blueprint and to partnering with our sister agencies, providers and other stakeholders to implement them.

### **Closing**

In closing, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning and discuss some of the many ways New York City is working to support caregivers and help children achieve permanency. ACS is grateful for the Committee's support in this mission and we look forward to further cultivating our partnership with you and all of our partners in Albany to carry out this important work.