

**New York City Administration for Children’s Services
Lorraine Stephens, Deputy Commissioner, Family Permanency Services
Testimony to the New York City Council Committees on General
Welfare, Youth Services, Public Safety, Fire and Criminal Justice
Services
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“Oversight: Children of Incarcerated Parents”

Good afternoon Chairs Palma, Fidler, Vallone and Crowley, and members of the General Welfare, Youth Services, Public Safety, and Fire and Criminal Justice Services Committees. I am Lorraine Stephens, Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Family Permanency Services at the New York City Administration for Children’s Services. I am joined today by Camelia Pierre, Assistant Commissioner of Resource Development and Support Programs and Paula Fendall, Director of the Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (CHIPP). Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to discuss our work with children in our care whose parents are incarcerated.

As you are aware, Children’s Services is responsible for providing child protective, foster care, preventive and publicly funded child care and Head Start services to families in New York City. The Division of Family Permanency Services works directly with the 32 agencies contracted to

provide foster care services to children and young people. Family Permanency Services establishes practice standards that each of our providers must meet in caring for the almost 15,000 children currently in foster care. These standards include our efforts to support children of incarcerated parents.

At Children's Services, we take very seriously our commitment to ensuring that children in foster care remain connected to their families. This is no less true for children of incarcerated parents. Children in foster care whose parents are incarcerated face many of the same issues as other foster children. They confront issues of loss, separation, abandonment, fear, and uncertainty. For the last ten years, ACS has focused on strengthening our services to foster children whose parents are incarcerated. Very early on, we recognized that in order to lessen the trauma for children of incarcerated parents and improve their opportunities for permanency, there must be resources and services specifically targeted to keeping these children connected to their parents despite the parent's incarceration.. In order to accomplish this, we developed a program that facilitates the ability of caseworkers to fulfill their legal mandate to provide appropriate visits between children and their incarcerated parent. This program was created in

collaboration with the NYC Department of Correction (NYCDOC) and is called the Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (CHIPP).

CHIPP: Children of Incarcerated Parents Program

Children's Services CHIPP program was developed in 2000. Then, as in now, CHIPP's main focus was on facilitating visits between foster children and their incarcerated parents. Research has shown that preserving the bond between children and their incarcerated parents reduces the negative impact they often experience as a result of the dual trauma of being in the foster care and having a parent who is incarcerated.

CHIPP started with the NYC Department of Correction's Rikers Island Visiting Program. This collaborative program was piloted at the Rose M. Singer Center, the female facility on Rikers Island. Six months later, the program expanded to include Child and Father visits at the male facilities of Rikers. Today CHIPP has expanded to serve children whose parents are on Rikers island, as well as parents in four female state correctional facilities: Albion, Beacon, Bedford Hills and Taconic, and in over 25 upstate male correctional facilities. CHIPP conducts visits to most New York City facilities twice a month and to upstate facilities at least once a month

CHIPP arranges visits to City, State and Federal male and female correctional facilities in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. .

CHIPP Outreach and Identification of Incarcerated Parents

The CHIPP program was designed to complement the provider agency's responsibility to ensure visits and enhance communication between children in foster care and their incarcerated parents. Foster care agency caseworkers are responsible for alerting CHIPP when a parent is incarcerated so that ACS can help coordinate visits. Currently CHIPP is supporting approximately 400 children with visits to their parents.

CHIPP continuously provides outreach to foster care agencies about the benefits of visits between incarcerated parents and their children, and to ensure that agency staff is aware of our services. CHIPP staff share information about the program at every quarterly Foster Care Directors meeting, and provide training and technical assistance on working with incarcerated parents.

One of the challenges that ACS and our provider agencies face in serving this group of children is that sometimes we may not have information on the whereabouts of a child's mother or father. We continue to work on a number of fronts to meet this challenge. CHIPP developed a hotline number for parents to call to arrange for visits with their children. This hotline number is shared with incarcerated parents so that if they do have children in foster care, they know who to call to arrange visits. We have also provided training and support to foster care agencies on navigating the criminal justice system so that they can better identify parents who may be incarcerated.

We continue to work to leverage City resources to identify and track more children who could potentially benefit from CHIPP. Our staff at ACS frequently utilize the Department of Correction's Inmate Look-up system to find incarcerated parents so that we can coordinate visits and engage them in permanency planning. We have also recently begun to use the City's new Health and Human Services (HHS) Connect tool to find incarcerated parents who we cannot find in the Inmate Look-Up system.

We are confident that we will continue to gain valuable information to help us to better identify those children in foster care with a parent who is incarcerated. We have also worked very closely with the State to add a field

in CONNECTIONS, the New York State child welfare database, to include whether a parent is incarcerated. This information allows us to record the location of parents during intake as well as ongoing permanency planning.

In addition to our visiting program, ACS's CHIPP program also partners with external leaders in the field, such as the Osborne Association. For example, Children's Services has been actively involved in The Osborne Association's New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents. This initiative brings together ACS and other City, State and community-based agencies to work on the many issues that impact families dealing with parental incarceration. In June 2010, CHIPP partnered with the Osborne Association to conduct four half day trainings to ACS and foster care agency staff. ACS's CHIPP program was also a partner with Osborne and others last November in holding the first ever "Summit on Children of Incarcerated Parents", where Commissioner Mattingly addressed the audience and gave his commitment to continue to provide quality services to this population of children in foster care. Recognizing the importance of fostering these external partnerships, CHIPP is in discussions with Osborne about doing another training aimed at foster parents who care for children of incarcerated parents.

We believe ongoing collaboration with external organizations is key to supporting this group of children. Especially considering the limitations on resources during these tough financial times, we hope to forge even stronger relationships with organizations and programs who can help us to expand our capacity to support children of incarcerated parents. New Yorkers for Children has been a key partner in providing financial support to assist coordinating special events for our incarcerated parents which include Mothers and Fathers Day events as well as other holiday events.

ASFA Legislation

Before closing my testimony today I'd like to briefly note the new law that was passed in 2010 relating to the rights and responsibilities of incarcerated parents whose children are in Foster Care. Since 1999, Children's Services has had a set of guidelines for best practices when working with children of incarcerated parents. In 2006, we updated these guidelines and issued a new memorandum regarding permanency planning with these children. The new state law, therefore, will not be the first time that we look at how our permanency practice can be strengthened with incarcerated parents.

We are working with the State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), the New York City and New York State Department of Corrections (NYCDOC/DOCS), our ACS Division of Policy and Planning and our provider agencies to integrate this new legislation into our ongoing work. This will only improve our critical decision making regarding a child's safety, well-being and permanency. This work has been strengthened in past years with the implementation of Family Team Conferencing. The Family Team Conference model also allows children ten and over to participate in the decision making about their lives and permanency plans. We continue to explore the options of having incarcerated parents participating by telephone and video conferencing in these family team conferences. We see Family Team Conferences as a clear gateway to permanency for our children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that my testimony conveys the importance that we place on the needs of children of incarcerated parents and the services that we must maintain and improve to meet their needs. There is, of course, more work to be done, and Commissioner Mattingly and I appreciate the support and advocacy of the Council and all our stakeholders in ensuring that we do right by this vulnerable population of children and youth.

We welcome the Council's partnership in this endeavor and we will continue to keep you updated on our ongoing work. Thank you again for giving us this opportunity to discuss such an important issue. I will now take your questions.