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ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES ANNOUNCES CITYWIDE EXPANSION & RENAMING OF THE 'FAMILY ASSESSMENT RESPONSE;' NOW KNOWN AS 'CARES,' ALTERNATIVE CHILD WELFARE APPROACH WORKS HAND-IN-HAND WITH FAMILIES TO PROVIDE SUPPORT WITHOUT THE NEED FOR A TRADITIONAL INVESTIGATION OR COURT INVOLVEMENT

Program's New & Improved Name, 'Collaborative Assessment, Response, Engagement & Support' (CARES), Was Generated by a Local Father Who Participated in the Program; 'CARES' Better Reflects the Program's Purpose & Approach

Citywide Expansion of CARES Means More Support for More Families & a Reduction in Unwarranted Child Welfare Investigations in New York City

NEW YORK, NY – Today, Commissioner David A. Hansell, of the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS), announced two major enhancements to the process ACS uses for responding to reports of alleged child neglect and abuse. They will expand ACS's utilization of an alternative child welfare approach that focuses on family support and does not require a traditional investigation, in cases where there is no indication of significant safety risk or physical abuse to a child, but a family may be in need of services.

First, ACS Commissioner Hansell announced a new name for the Family Assessment Response (FAR) program, the alternative response framework, that will better reflect the program's purpose and approach: Collaborative Assessment, Response, Engagement and Support (CARES). ACS believes that the new name will give families a better understanding of the program and be conducive to fuller family engagement. ACS sought input from the ACS Parent Advisory Council and parents who participated in FAR to generate new names for the program. The new name, CARES, was suggested by a local father who had previous experience in the FAR program.

Second, ACS Commissioner Hansell announced plans to expand the CARES program citywide. Currently, only families in Brooklyn, Queens and parts of the Bronx are eligible for CARES. Today's announcement means the CARES program will reach more New York City families in need, as it will be expanded from 16 units in 3 boroughs to 32 units citywide by December 2021.

"ACS cares about children and families, and that's why we're thrilled to announce a new name and expansion of the FAR program that will allow us to better respond to the service needs of families: CARES. More and more, ACS has been elevating the voices of families and communities to inform and improve our work and we're proud that this new name, CARES, was smartly suggested by a local father served by the program," **said ACS Commissioner David A.**

Hansell. “Often times, families reported to the New York State child abuse hotline are simply in need of a helping hand -- whether that’s food, clothing, or extra support -- and specially trained child protective staff help connect those families to the resources they need.”

Poverty, oppression and racial inequity are often factors that lead to reports to the New York Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR). These families, of which the overwhelmingly majority are Black and Latinx, typically become known to the child welfare system not because their children are at imminent risk but because they need access to critical resources, like food, clothing and mental health counseling and more.

Without launching a traditional investigation, the CARES program focuses on engaging families in supportive services that meet their needs and their ability to care for their children. In CARES, specially trained child protective staff partner with the family to identify their needs, educate the family, empower the family to make decisions that address their needs and the needs of their children, and connect families to appropriate services. The CARES approach is family-centered, family-driven, and solution-focused.

Commissioner Hansell continued, “Citywide expansion of the CARES program means more support for more families and a reduction in unwarranted and unnecessary child welfare investigations. This expansion is a critical component of our Equity Action Plan and just one more step ACS is taking to address racial disproportionality and other inequities that have historically existed in the child welfare system.”

ACS is required by law to respond to every allegation of child abuse or neglect that is referred to the agency by the SCR. Child Protective Specialists at ACS gather facts, assess child safety, and work with families to find out what they may need to keep children safe. Child protective investigations last up to 60 days and, at the end of the investigation, a determination is made of whether the report is “indicated” (credible evidence of abuse or neglect exists) or “unfounded” (no credible evidence of abuse or neglect exists). Throughout the investigation, ACS helps provide families with what they need to keep children safe at home, including referrals for prevention services such as: counseling, drug treatment, mental health services, and concrete supports to meet housing, child care, or other basic needs.

Alternatively, when Child Protective Specialists see that there is no immediate danger to children and no allegations of serious child abuse, families may be referred to the CARES program. With CARES, there is no traditional investigation, no court involvement and there is no determination of whether maltreatment occurred.

Although ACS has expanded CARES over the years, it currently only serves families in Brooklyn, Queens and some parts of the Bronx. In FY19, 42% of families with an open child protection case in New York City were estimated to be eligible for the CARES program, but only 11% of those families were referred to this approach.

Expansion of CARES is also a core strategy for combating racial disparity and promoting social justice in the child welfare system and a key component of the ACS Equity Action Plan. First, the CARES track offers a less intrusive response for families with service needs. It helps enable families to drive solutions for themselves. Second, because CARES does not require traditional investigations that end in a determination of ‘indicated’ or ‘unfounded,’ the approach allows ACS to promote child safety by connecting families with services and supports, without having to conduct a full evidentiary investigation.

Today's announcement builds upon the work already being done at ACS to address racial disproportionality across the child welfare system. ACS is committed to ensuring that equity strategies are both innovative and evidence-based. On July 1st, ACS launched its redesigned prevention services system. The new system offers universal access to the full range of programs to all families across the City, regardless of where they live, expands therapeutic supports to families, increases parent voice and choice in service delivery and promotes racial equity through mandated efforts to address racial disparities in all programs. Additionally, ACS is currently implementing its Equity Action Plan, which addresses racial disparities across the child welfare system. The plan is being led by the ACS Office of Equity Strategies, a dedicated office that works to develop and advance practices that reduce disparities in outcomes for children and families that are the result of biased based on race, ethnicity, gender and gender expression and/or sexual orientation.

For more information, visit: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/acs/child-welfare/cares.page>

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