



# **ACS Foster Care**

**Five-Year Plan**

**FY2024 – FY2028**

# ■ Introduction

The **FY2024–FY2028 ACS Foster Care Five-Year Plan** is informed by the lessons learned from the previous five-year plan and information gathered from a large-scale case review.

In 2016, ACS developed the [Foster Care Strategic Blueprint](#) which became the foundation and framework for the [FY2019 - FY2023 Five-Year Plan](#). The FC Strategic Blueprint focused on five key priorities:

1. Improving outcomes for youth
2. Improving foster care placements to enhance well-being of children
3. Improving health, mental health, and education services for children in foster care
4. Improving outcomes for older youth
5. Building systemic capacity

Over the last five years, ACS made strides in the areas of permanency, foster home recruitment, and improving the well-being of children in foster care. Successful implementation of No Time to Wait, Home Away from Home, Fair Futures, College Choice, and various Workforce Development initiatives contributed to these achievements. The foster care census reached a historic low with fewer than 7,000 children currently in care, down from 8,921 just five years ago. An ongoing commitment to place children with kin showed an increase in the percentage of foster children living with relatives from 31% in FY2017 to 43% in FY2022. In 2022, more than half of children who entered foster care as a result of a child protection investigation were placed with kin.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ACS initiated a process to proactively review 5,000 cases to determine whether families could safely progress forward towards permanency. Through these case reviews, ACS identified strategies to overcome barriers to permanency:

- Support parents to increase their participation and engagement in service and case planning activities
- Enhance case planning staff's capacity to assess for safety, risk, and reunification readiness factors
- Strengthen the collaboration between Family Court Legal Services (FCLS) and foster care agency staff to move cases forward
- Clearly define roles, responsibilities and processes for reunification and other permanency decision-making

After a series of conversations with stakeholders and analysis of recent data in 2022, ACS arrived at these four **Core Collective Priorities**, which will serve and guide New York City foster care practice moving forward. The collective priorities are as follows:

- Meet the present need with sufficient capacity
- Focus on family

- Create safety and stability
- Ensure child and youth success and improved well-being

These core collective priorities align with ACS's values and promote safety, permanency, and improved well-being for New York City children, youth, and families.

## ■ The Plan

The following further explains the **Core Collective Priorities** and the strategies to implement them effectively.

### Meet the Present Need

Create capacity to accept and care for children and youth with complex needs entering care.

- Work with foster care agencies to significantly revamp recruitment and training for foster parents and ensure foster parents have the support they need to increase the network of high-quality, certified foster families.
- Focus on identifying and supporting kinship parents of children and youth.
- Leverage resources, funding, and other supports to invest in staff of foster care programs.

Strategies:

- Increase the recruitment of foster parents (especially those families who can care for children with special medical or developmental needs), sibling groups, and young adults and support the successful engagement, certification, and retention of foster parents.
- Increase the number of children placed with kin upon placement and entry into foster care whenever safely possible. For children not initially placed in a kinship placement, efforts to locate, engage, and certify kin will be conducted to allow more children to be placed with kin.

### Focus on Family

Provide respectful and responsive case practice leading to timely permanency.

- Consistently involve youth in permanency planning and service plan development.
- Effectively engage parents in the case planning process through the use of parent advocates.
- Expand access to mental health and supportive services for children and families.
- Proactively plan and assess for the safe reunification of children.
- Intentionally place children with kin, which can increase the use of KinGAP (kinship guardianship) as a permanency option if reunification is not possible.
- Develop and streamline business processes on adoption and KinGAP.

### Strategies:

- Leverage and employ foster care alumnae as credible messengers to support engagement, provide crisis intervention, and increase initiative buy-in.
- Partner with the ACS Youth Leadership Council to bring youth and adult leaders together to work in partnership on youth-related areas of policy and practice.
- Collaborate with parent advocates to increase parent voices to support parent engagement and participation in service and permanency planning.
- Further implement and refine the [ACS LGBTQAI+ Action Plan](#) to improve the experiences and outcomes of LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care.
- Encourage and facilitate frequent, high-quality Family Time, which is essential to supporting and increasing the likelihood of safe and timely reunification. Family Time promotes child well-being and supports family engagement in the permanency planning process.
- Conduct regular and ongoing assessments of children to determine strengths and identify any additional treatment or service needs as well as their readiness for stable permanency.
- Work closely with contracted foster care providers to ensure that children and youth in foster care have access to the full array of mental health services. This includes accessing all mental health and other services available through Medicaid programs, including, for example, Child and Family Treatment and Support Services (CFTSS), and promote collaborations with the Nurse-Family Partnership program for expectant and parenting youth.
- Continue facilitating Family Team Conferences to ensure timely reunification and other types of permanency when reunification is not an option.
- Coordinate foster care and prevention services and leverage other community-based services to provide seamless services, greater stability, and improved outcomes for children and families.

## Create Safety and Stability

- Provide safe, stable placements for children and youth in foster care.
- Implement robust foster parent support, recruitment, and certification strategies.
- Offer training for foster parents and staff.
- Support children and youth with higher needs in both family-based and residential programs.

### Strategies:

- Provide the resources necessary to support a well-prepared and stable workforce that delivers high-quality services to meet families' and children's needs.
- Continue low caseworker caseloads and enhanced training and professional development for the child welfare workforce.

- Support foster care agency practice to successfully recruit, train, certify, and retain foster parents and implement a new foster parent therapeutic training – Trauma-Responsive Informed Parenting Program (TRIPP). TRIPP is a learning program that prepares and supports foster parents and child welfare professionals working with children who are assessed to have therapeutic needs. Learners develop a trauma-informed lens and are equipped to understand and respond to children’s complex needs.
- Continue to raise awareness about trafficking, identify appropriate services available to help youth at-risk and victims of commercial sexual exploitation and their families, and provide training and other trafficking preventative interventions.
- Conduct regular review of agency practice to assess for safety and ensure practice meets expected standards.

## Ensure Success and Improve Well-Being

- Enhance partnerships with the New York City Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Youth and Community Development to expand academic enrichment and supports for children and youth in foster care.
- Leverage Fair Futures to provide dedicated coaches; tutors; and education, employment, and housing specialists for youth in foster care or to those who exited between the ages of 11 to 26.
- Use available supportive housing slots and provide accessible information on housing resources for youth and families.
- Scale college bound and college support programs for youth in foster care and continue to develop initiatives to enhance youth readiness for the world of work.

### Strategies:

- Collaborate with the Department of Education (DOE) to share education-related data for children and youth in foster care with foster care agency staff and provide technical assistance around how best to use these data to information service planning.
- Develop a partnership with the new DOE Foster Care Education Office, launched in 2022, which provides educational support services to children and youth in foster care, such as assisting with school enrollment and transportation assignment and facilitating special education services/placements.
- Implement the full expansion of the Fair Futures Initiative, which aims to enhance and improve outcomes for youth in foster care ages 11-21 in the areas of education, employment, housing, and permanency. In FY23, the Mayor’s Executive Budget further increased funding to \$30.7 million. This increase will expand the reach of Fair Futures to serve youth ages 21 to 26.
- Link youth and families to various housing programs, such as New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing, supportive housing and vouchers such as CITYFHEPS and FYI (Fostering Youth to Independence), rapid re-housing, and HPD set-aside units.

- Offer employment readiness and career opportunities to youth in foster care:
  - Through a partnership with the Workplace Center at Columbia University, deliver the Young Adult Work Opportunities for Rewarding Careers (YA WORC) evidenced-based curriculum to build the capacity of foster care agency staff to provide comprehensive, developmentally appropriate career readiness programming to youth in foster care ages 14 to 21.
  - Promote VCRED, a vocational and apprenticeship program for youth ages 16 to 24 and made possible by the Kellogg Foundation that allows youth to participate in professional certification courses and paid internships/apprenticeships in five career pathways, including information technology, electrician’s helper, Allied Health (e.g. EMT, EKG technician), pharmacy technician, and building trades.
  - Offer the College Internship Program, a paid summer internship for young adults with current or previous foster care and/or juvenile justice systems experience who are enrolled in continuing education, undergraduate, or graduate educational programs. Through the summer internships program, youth are matched and hired to work on public service projects within the Administration for Children’s Services and other community and government agency partners.
  - Partner with Google, New Yorkers for Children, Hopeland, and foster care agencies to develop a pipeline of youth for careers in technology. The program is designed to strengthen the youth’s core computer science skills while supporting them to reach their aspirations to start a career in technology.
- Continue innovative programs such as:
  - College Choice, which aims to increase the number of youth who enroll and graduate from a two- or four-year college/university. The program provides each student with options about where they want to attend school, where they want to live, and what type of academic support they would like to receive while covering tuition costs up to \$15,000.
  - First Star Academy, a long-term college-prep program for high school youth in foster care. It includes four immersive residential summer programs on a university campus and monthly weekend sessions during the school year.
  - LifeSet, an evidence-based program for young adults ages 17 to 22 who have been involved in the foster care, juvenile justice, and/or mental health systems as young adults. The LifeSet model uses specialists to provide youth with intensive and skill-building interventions with the goal of supporting youth to maintain stable and suitable housing, participate in educational/vocational programs, find and sustain employment, remain free from court involvement, develop healthy relationships, and build a strong and permanent support systems.

# ■ New Family and Residential Foster Contracts Starting in FY2024

To move the Core Collective Priorities forward, ACS will launch new family and residential foster care contracts that will begin on July 1, 2023. These new foster care contracts create an opportunity for ACS to build on the success of existing services for children and families, including the new ACS Prevention Services contracts that launched in July 2020.

The new foster care contracts seek to increase therapeutic supports and services in both family and residential foster care settings that align with ACS's Core Collective Priorities. With additional resources and enhancements, the contracts will equip the system to better respond to the acute needs of children in foster care. Key services offered through the FY24 contracts include:

- A new Enhanced Family Foster Care (EFFC) program which blends the current, separately contracted Family Foster Care (FFC) and Therapeutic Family Foster Care (TFFC) program into one program. EFFC recognizes that all children in care have experienced some level of trauma, that their needs may change over time, and that their strengths must be supported so they can reach their full potential. Through EFFC, foster care providers are better positioned to meet families where they are and adjust services accordingly. EFFC also supports placement stability, reducing the chances of moving a child to another home, program, or agency due to their changing needs. With this stability comes the ability for children to build trusting and secure relationships with the caring adults in their lives.
- The Parents Empowering Parents (PEP) program embeds Parent Advocates in each case planning unit. Parent Advocates are individuals with lived experience of the child welfare system who have successfully addressed the issue(s) that brought their families to the attention of the system. Parent Advocates will receive training to work with parents currently involved in the child welfare system and support them to understand and navigate the foster care system, remain hopeful, and address family challenges in order to accomplish their goal of reunification.
- Expansion of proven practices to safely reduce the time to permanency:
  - Reunification supports including Family Time (also known as family visiting) and utilization of ACS's Prevention and other community-based services before, during, and after reunification to support families and help prevent re-entry into foster care.
  - Adoption and KinGAP specialists leveraged to strengthen concurrent planning practices to facilitate permanency through kinship guardianship and adoption when reunification is not an option.

- Enhancements for residential care programs through increased funding and support. These enhancements include:
  - Additional resources to support the implementation of trauma-informed treatment models and other evidenced-based models.
  - Greater use of various types of permanency supports such as Family Time, parent engagement, kin-finding, adoption models such as Wendy's Wonderful Kids, etc.
  - Access to Fair Future coaches, tutors, and workforce and employment opportunities.
  - Workforce enhancements to support pay equity, staff recruitment, and stability.
  - A revised payment structure that provides great flexibility to cover fixed costs necessary to maintain adequate staffing, infrastructure support, and other services to deliver stable services.

## ■ Summary

The Core Collective Priorities are the basis for ACS's FY2024-2028 five-year foster care plan. This plan incorporates best practices and lessons learned of the vast efforts currently underway in New York City to meet the needs of children and families involved in the foster care system. Together, ACS and the foster care providers will continue to strengthen the solid partnership already in place to effectively meet the needs of children and families being served. With an intentional focus on lifting the voices of youth and parents, the Core Collective priorities are designed to promote permanency, safety, and well-being. Over the next five years, ACS will use quantitative and qualitative data to measure key areas of performance to assess progress toward meeting these Core Collective priorities and strengthening the system's capacity to improve child and family well-being.