



Dr. Jacqueline McKnight, Executive Deputy Commissioner
Testimony to the New York City Council
Committees on General Welfare, Juvenile Justice, and Women's Issues
March 15, 2016

"New York City Council Fiscal Year 2017 Preliminary Budget Hearing"

Good afternoon Chairs Levin, Cumbo, and Cabrera, and members of the Finance, General Welfare, Women's Issues, and Juvenile Justice Committees. I am Dr. Jacqueline McKnight, Executive Deputy Commissioner of New York City's Administration for Children's Services. With me today are Jill Krauss, Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Communications and Community Affairs, Andrew White, Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Policy, Planning and Measurement and Courtney LeBorious, Assistant Commissioner of Budget, Division of Financial Services. This year, ACS celebrates twenty years of service to New York's City's children and families. Before I present testimony on our budget and recent initiatives, I'm going to share a presentation with you to illustrate the progress that the City has made over the past 20 years.

[PowerPoint]

As you can see, our landscape has shifted dramatically in the past 20 years. There is no magic bullet, but we have so much more information about how to help families, we have science that tells us **what works**. We know that removing children from their families should be a last resort when the risk to their safety cannot be mitigated. We also know that, so often, we cannot help children without helping parents.

One thing has not changed over time: the children and families who come to us are among the most challenged and most vulnerable in New York City. We cannot do this work without acknowledging that the vast majority of our families are lacking resources – in health, mental health, education, money, housing, employment, emotional support, our families are struggling. Over 70% of our families receive public assistance. One in four families in Department of Homeless Services shelters have some sort of child welfare involvement. The families we serve are concentrated in the neighborhoods with the highest poverty rate. For example, 37% of the children in Brownsville have had some involvement in the child welfare system in the past five years. And we also must acknowledge that we are primarily serving families of color: 90% of the children in substantiated reports are African American and Latino and nearly 97% of our children in juvenile justice out-of-home placement are African American and Latino. Poverty and chronic stress disproportionately impact children and families of color.

Our families often lack the resources to effectively navigate the child welfare system, which can seem very intimidating and complicated. ACS has implemented conferencing models that partner with families and their support figures to discuss concerns and their strengths and form joint decision plans around the best way to ensure safety and permanency. And for the past several years, we have included Parent Advocates and Community Representatives—individuals with knowledge or

experience of the child welfare system—to support families at the Initial Safety Conference and hear and help allay their concerns.

Instead of merely focusing on what is missing, the child welfare system is starting to recognize the assets of our families—in particular, the extended relatives and kin who are critical in supporting children and parents who are in crisis. In the past, reunification or termination of the parents' rights and getting the child adopted were seen as the only routes to permanency. But more recently, kinship guardianship has emerged as an important permanency option for children to maintain relationships with their parents, their cultures, and their identities.

Our Child Protective Division is expanding a program called the Family Assessment Response, called “FAR,” to serve families city-wide. Traditionally, a knock from ACS is all too often met with fear, which presents significant barriers for us to help and be seen as a source of help. Through this new approach, in our lowest-risk cases where safety is **not** at issue, CPS are taking a slightly different approach, using social work skills to partner with families and identify needs and strengths, as well as solutions. By using this approach, we have found that families often times are more comfortable disclosing issues like domestic violence and their experience with trauma. Again, it's not a magic bullet, but the less our families feel intruded upon, the more help we can provide.

As you just saw, we have conducted over one million investigations in our 20 year history. These jobs – showing up in homes to look into claims of abuse and neglect – are bigger and harder than you might imagine. Our staff deal with almost impossible challenges every day; they are the front lines that show up in homes throughout the city to figure out what has gone wrong and how we can help prevent harm. You would not believe some of the heartbreak our staff encounters – balancing the harm . And, given how ACS is publicly portrayed, you might also not believe how hard our staff work to get struggling families the help that they need to keep children safe.

As you have just seen, the number of children and families in our system has decreased dramatically which means that those who are in the system are among the most challenged, many of whom come from families that are dealing with significant mental health challenges. ACS is pleased to participate in New York City's Mental Health Roadmap, ThriveNYC

We have seen a large gap in supports for parents who have experienced trauma themselves as children and now have very young children of their own. ACS has several ThriveNYC initiatives throughout our child welfare continuum geared to supporting these families and children. In the area of prevention, we have expanded two programs, Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) and SafeCare – both of which provide strong support for parents of young children so that they are better equipped to address their own challenges and nurture their children.

In foster care, we have launched an in-home therapeutic model called Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC) in Brooklyn to help caregivers provide responsive, nurturing and developmentally appropriate care to infants and toddlers. A young child's trust for her caregiver gives her a sense of safety and mitigates the effects of trauma so she can self-regulate during times of stress. ACS is implementing Partnering for Success (PfS) at 18 of our family foster care agencies throughout the city. Partnering for Success will improve access to and delivery of mental health services for children in foster care and their families. Finally, ACS is also partnering with the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence to provide healthy relationship training to all New York City teens in foster care, as well as to staff at ACS and our provider agencies, parents and foster parents in order to help prevent, recognize, and respond to dating violence.

Budget Overview

Children's Services' budget for the 2017 preliminary budget plan provides for operating expenses of \$2.97 billion, of which approximately \$884 million is city tax levy. Last year's Adopted 2016 budget was \$2.95 billion. The difference of \$19.8 million is primarily due to new need funding, which I will describe in greater detail, as well as the Federal IV-E waiver funds added to the budget. Like all agencies across the City, ACS has been asked to identify efficiencies in our budget. I'm pleased to say that we are able to achieve savings through technical adjustments that will in no way impact services to families.

For the past two years, we have testified before the Council about the Mayor's unprecedented investment in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and early education system. In total, the City has added a total of \$119 million to support core initiatives and collective bargaining increases, allowing ACS to create 723 positions that are significantly improving our ability to protect and work with vulnerable children and families.

Workforce Institute

The most extraordinary single investment to date has been last year's \$14 million commitment to create the ACS Workforce Institute, a state-of-the-art professional development institute which is providing frontline staff the skills and support they need to best serve our families. In partnership with the CUNY School of Professional Studies, the Workforce Institute is focusing on core competencies for child welfare and juvenile justice workers, such as analytic thinking, interviewing and investigation skills, and critical interpersonal skills of empathy, adaptability and advocacy. The Institute is also transforming how supervisors work in our systems, preparing them to more effectively coach and support their teams. We are now providing learning programs for thousands of staff employed by ACS and by our more than 75 provider agencies in the child welfare sector.

Early Care & Education

In Early Care and Education, the Administration is investing \$4.1 million to implement a trauma-informed care model across our *EarlyLearn NYC* system. The investment is made up of three components, all of which are part of the larger ThriveNYC Mental Health Roadmap: ACS will spend \$1.7 million to hire 24 staff, 22 of whom are social workers that will support for *EarlyLearn* programs across the city; ACS will dedicate \$1.7 million to procure an evidence-based trauma-informed model. Through this model, ACS will provide on-going intensive support approximately 90 programs in the south Bronx and the Brownsville area of Brooklyn that have been identified as serving particularly high-risk families. Finally, we are allocating \$800,000 in one-time funding to train early care and education providers in the social and emotional foundations of learning—addressing everything from promoting a positive classroom environment, engaging parents, and helping children cope.

As you may know, *EarlyLearn* contracts expire in September 2016, at which point we will take advantage of the option to renew contracts for two years through September 2018. We recognize how tirelessly our providers have been working since *EarlyLearn* began in 2012. We hope that the two-year renewal coupled with the transition to an expensed-based reimbursement system gives our providers some relief so that they can continue to help the City's youngest children learn and grow. We are continuing to talk with City Hall, OMB and are keen to engage external stakeholders, such as the Council, providers, and advocates to determine how the next iteration of our childcare system will look.

Juvenile Justice

As the Council has heard for the past several years, in 2012, New York City transformed our juvenile justice placement system by launching the first phase of *Close to Home*. And, after significant construction-related delays, the second and final phase of *Close to Home*, Limited Secure Placement (LSP), launched in December 2015. Currently, 13 youth are placed in Limited Secure facilities. In 2015, 226 youth were placed in non secure facilities and another 237 youth completed services in residential care and have returned to their home communities and are receiving aftercare services.

As always, the safety, security, and well-being of our young people and the community are paramount to ACS. After a serious incident in 2015, we recognized the need to reinforce the oversight of our providers. This year, we received additional funding to help us create a stronger safety framework and allow us to monitor their ability to keep the children in care, as well as the surrounding communities safe. In FY 2017, ACS is hiring 35 new staff to carry out this work within several different divisions throughout the agency. ACS will allocate \$4 million to bolster the monitoring of the daily census of youth, frequency of site visits, swift response to incidents, and ability to promptly locate and return youth from unauthorized absences, as well as refine an IT system that will assist with the comprehensive monitoring of providers.

Council Partnership

We thank the Council for recognizing ACS as a partner in the citywide Cure Violence initiative by awarding us \$250,000, which will expand our ability to do this

work. In November 2015, with strong support from Chair Cabrera, we began to pilot this initiative in collaboration with Community Connections for Youth in the Bronx.. The program is hosted at a community center operated by Good Shepard Services and facilitates a relationship between youth and peer mentors from Community Connections who serve as “credible messengers.” Young people receive a stipend for attending each mentoring group as well as dinner and travel allowance. Additionally, Good Shepard’s BRAG (Bronx Rises Against Gun Violence) team is on hand to offer case management services specifically related to violence interruption and mediation.

Child Welfare

Strong Families

ACS is moving aggressively to improve outcomes for children and families across the child welfare system. By improving our practice at our “the front door” (investigating allegations of maltreatment), we have significantly and safely reduced the number of children coming into foster care. As the Powerpoint showed, our foster care census has dropped below 10,000, reaching an all-time low of 9,957 as of December 2015. Concurrently, ACS has increased the number of children and families served in preventive services with cutting-edge, research-based support programs that help stabilize families and keep children safe and thriving at home.

In addition to the major professional development opportunities that we are providing through the Workforce Institute, ACS also launched our federal Title IV-E

Waiver initiative, Strong Families NYC, which invests more than \$200 million over five years. The “Strong Families NYC” initiative contains four innovative components: 1) Comprehensive trauma screening for all children who come into care; 2) Dramatically reducing caseloads for foster care agency staff and increasing their supervision; 3) Promoting healthy development of infants and toddlers who have experienced trauma and adversity; and 4) Increasing the collaboration between mental health clinicians and foster care workers. So far, Strong Families has reduced caseloads for foster care caseworkers to historically low levels. Caseworkers now carry caseloads of 10 children, compared to previous caseloads of more than 20 children at a time.

Achieving Permanency

New York City is taking a number of steps to continue improving our ability to help children achieve permanent, safe, and stable homes. In 2015, an ACS initiative named “No Time to Wait” began streamlining processes to speed reunification and adoption. Last year, we significantly streamlined the adoption subsidy process; centralized the process for procuring birth certificates; streamlined the KinGap (kinship guardianship) application process; and conducted technical assistance sessions with every foster care agency on kinship guardianship. For example, in 2015 just four percent of adoption subsidies were approved in 30 days because of a complicated process that involved both ACS and the NYS Office of Children & Family Services (OCFS). Today, we handle it internally at ACS, and this year so far, 56 percent of adoption subsidy applications have been approved within 30 days of submission.

ACS is building on this work and we are implementing several new initiatives focused on accelerating reunification, KinGap and adoption.

For the first time in our 20 years, ACS will celebrate National Reunification Month. This June, ACS will join child welfare organizations across the country as we recognize the important accomplishments of parents in getting their children returned to their care safely, and the professionals who support them. Reunification takes hard work, commitment, and investment of time and resources by parents, family members, social workers, attorneys, courts and the community.

We are also working to strengthen our network of foster and adoptive homes, and launched the Home Away from Home: Caregiving for Well-Being initiative to improve our recruitment, retention and support of foster and adoptive parents. With support from the Warner Fund, Redlich Horwitz Foundation, Pinkerton Foundation and Casey Family Programs, we completed an analysis of the current state of our system and are compiling recommendations for the future state will be implemented in the coming years.

Gender-Responsive Programming

As ACS deepens our attention on the influence of trauma on our young people's development, we are also shifting how we address gender in our services. Girls' experiences of and responses to trauma can place them at significant risk of numerous negative outcomes, including sexual victimization, teen pregnancy, and involvement in the justice system. This is a challenge that we are focusing on as a city and I know that

Speaker Mark Viverito and Chair Cumbo are also investing in the health and well-being of New York City's girls and young women.

One of the important initiatives we are committed to is launching the Girls Health Screen at ACS. This is the only validated health, mental health, and trauma screening tool in the nation designed exclusively for girls between 11-17 years old who enter residential programs. Girls Health Screen will allow us to assess the needs of and determine the best interventions for the girls who come into our care. We are developing an implementation plan for the Screen throughout both our juvenile justice and our child welfare systems.

We are also excited to bring together national and local experts at our upcoming *Girls Matter!* forum on March 29th to discuss the importance of gender-responsive programming in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. ACS and the New York Women's Foundation will host a number of national leaders and practitioners at an all-day convening to share knowledge and examine some of the gender-specific interventions for girls in NYC.

Conclusion

This year, as we celebrate our twentieth anniversary as a standalone agency, we are also preparing for a city-wide celebration of National Child Abuse Prevention Month in April. It is a time for all New Yorkers to come together to celebrate, strengthen and support families. Throughout the month, ACS will highlight ways to keep families strong,

healthy, and safe. Our April recognition events will include: a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge to raise awareness, a “Party for Prevention” (a community event open to City residents) in Mott Haven’s St. Mary’s Park, and a “Weekend of Prayer” that engages the faith-based community to prevent child abuse and support families. There will be more information on our website. I hope you can join us in April, and follow us on Twitter at @ACSNYC, hashtag NYCFamilyStrong.

In closing, I would especially like to thank our dedicated workforce and our provider partners for their tireless efforts to support the safety and well-being of our children and families. I would also like to thank the City Council for supporting our agency’s efforts, and for the commendable work you do every day to advocate on behalf of the City’s most vulnerable citizens. I look forward to our continued productive collaboration and I welcome your questions.