



**The New York City Council
Committee on Immigration
April 24, 2018**

**Testimony by
New York City Administration for Children's Services
Lorelei Vargas, Deputy Commissioner
Division of Child and Family Well-Being**

"How Does NYC Support Immigrant Parents of Children Ages 0-5 Years?"

Good afternoon Chair Menchaca and members of the Committee on Immigration. I am Lorelei Vargas, Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Child and Family Well-Being for the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Thank you for this opportunity to discuss ACS' programs and initiatives that serve immigrant parents of children ages 0-5 years.

The Administration for Children's Services protects and promotes the safety and well-being of New York City's children, young people, families, and communities by providing child welfare, juvenile justice, and early care and education services throughout the City. Along with our community partners, ACS provides support and neighborhood-based services to all of New York City's families—including immigrant parents—to help ensure children grow up in safe, permanent homes with strong families. Many of ACS' programs and services are offered without regard to immigration status, and printed materials for our programs and services are largely available in a variety of languages, including our parents' rights literature, which is available in 11 languages. ACS's Office of Immigration Services and Language Access (OISLA) closely monitors all program areas within ACS for compliance with language access mandates and trains the agency's foster care providers to identify and refer all non-citizen children in care for legal services, in the interests of gaining Special Immigrant Juvenile Status or other forms of legal status when possible. In the past eight months OISLA has certified over 180 U- and T-Visas, some benefiting families with children ages 0 – 5,

ACS is dedicated to promoting the well-being of all New York City’s children and families. Over the past year, the agency has significantly enhanced our work in preventive services to provide supports for families *before* a need for intervention arises. In September 2017, ACS created the Division of Child and Family Well-Being, making ACS the first child welfare agency in the country to spearhead a new “primary prevention” approach, which seeks to reach families proactively with services, resources and educational messages that can support healthy children, families and communities.

The Division of Child and Family Well-Being (CFWB) aims to engage families before they ever reach the child welfare system, with resources and services to help them thrive. CFWB focuses on the factors that contribute to family well-being—including health, education, employment, and culture—and uses place-based and population-based approaches to engage families and communities. CFWB’s scope includes ACS’s Community Partnerships Programs, Family Enrichment Centers, the Safe Sleep Initiative, the Medication Safety campaign, early care and education, and a new Office of Equity Strategies that works to identify strategies to reduce inequities, implicit bias, and other factors that contribute to disparate outcomes for the families and communities we serve.

Medication Safety Campaign

One of the first major initiatives of the new Division was the fall 2017 launch of ACS’s Medication Safety campaign, an effort to help parents and caregivers ensure that

medications and potentially dangerous household items are stored out of children's reach. In addition to this information campaign, we have begun to distribute lock boxes and bags to families engaged with ACS and we will eventually share them across city agencies, as well as with programs that provide in-home services. Lock boxes and bags are easy and effective ways to keep medication accessible to parents, but out of children's reach. We are bringing our awareness campaign across the City, and literature will be available in multiple languages.

Safe Sleep Initiative

ACS's Safe Sleep Initiative was launched in 2015 with the goal of diminishing the occurrence of sleep-related infant injury deaths. In 2016, ACS partnered with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) to launch a public awareness campaign to educate parents and caregivers about the potentially fatal risks associated with unsafe sleep practices, and our sustained efforts have yielded encouraging results. Since the launch of ACS's Safe Sleep Initiative, there has been a significant reduction in the number of sleep-related infant injury deaths (SRIDs) reported to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) (*families known to ACS*). There was a 17% decrease in SRIDs reported to the SCR from 2015 to 2016.

In 2017, the ACS Safe Sleep team trained over 10,500 child welfare and healthcare professionals and prenatal patients, fatherhood groups, community and faith-based organizations, expectant and parenting teens, formerly-incarcerated mothers, public housing residents, and homeless families. This important work was conducted in

communities with the highest rates of sleep-related infant deaths. We are now developing a Safe Sleep Kit to pilot for dissemination to maternity patients at the City's eleven Health and Hospitals (H+H) facilities. As 15% of NYC's annual births (120,000) occur at H+H facilities, we anticipate reaching approximately 18,000 families.

EarlyLearn NYC

The foundation of the Division of Child and Family Well-Being is early care and education. CFWB currently administers one of the largest publicly-funded childcare systems in the country, with the capacity to serve almost 110,000 infants, toddlers, preschool, and school-aged children to age 13. ACS provides access to child care in two primary ways: we run a contracted system, called *EarlyLearn NYC*, which serves children between the ages of 6 weeks and five years and includes both state-funded Child Care programs and federally funded Head Start programs. We also fund vouchers that parents may use to purchase care in a variety of settings for children between the ages of six weeks and 13 years. Further, ACS serves children with special needs through age 18 and up to age 19 if they are a full time student in an educational or vocational activity. Our services enhance child development and assist eligible public assistance recipients, low-income working families and families that are receiving child welfare services.

While New York City residents may access a variety of services through ACS regardless of their citizenship or immigration status, such information is required in order to access some child care services through ACS. Children in families that receive

cash assistance must follow TANF eligibility rules, which require the parent to be a citizen. Families applying for non-mandated CCBG funded child care through vouchers and *EarlyLearn NYC* (except *EarlyLearn NYC* Head Start programs) must certify that all children to receive child care are citizens, nationals or persons with satisfactory immigration status, but are not required to note citizenship or immigration status of anyone else in the family. However, the application does require families to attest to understanding that information about the children noted in the application may be submitted to INS. Head Start programs do not require documentation of citizenship/immigration status, and DOE-funded pre-K seats are exempt from the citizenship/immigration status requirements.

ACS works in earnest to make sure that families understand citizenship and immigration status requirements to access our child care programs. To help ensure clarity, CFWB works with all of our child care providers so that they can clearly discuss these requirements with families, and we also created signs that clearly articulate immigration status requirements, which are posted conspicuously in our resource areas where families apply for child care. I am also excited to share that our child care application will officially be updated as of May 1. We worked collaboratively with MOIA to implement changes to our application to ensure that immigration information is collected only for the child in need of subsidized care and that the instructions were clear for parents and guardians.

While New York City has gone to great lengths to ensure that child care services are accessible to all families in the City, we firmly believe that immigration status should

not be a barrier to accessing quality child care and early education programs. We are proud that CFWB's *EarlyLearn NYC* program has become a pillar for promoting healthy childhood development, while also providing wraparound support to families—a hallmark of *EarlyLearn NYC*.

As you know, ACS's *EarlyLearn NYC* contracts will be transferred and integrated into the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Education in 2019 as part of the Mayor de Blasio's commitment to early education. This integration will build on the important work done by *EarlyLearn NYC* programs today, strengthening birth-to-five care and education in New York City and creating a more seamless experience for children and families into elementary school and beyond. The transfer of *EarlyLearn NYC* will also support the Mayor's 3K For All initiative, which will ultimately offer free, high-quality early education services to all three-year-olds in NYC.

As *EarlyLearn NYC* transfers to DOE, ACS will continue to administer the City's child care voucher system. We will continue our efforts to bolster the quality of care in this system, which serves 29,000 children under the age of 5, in collaboration with the Human Resources Administration (HRA), the DOHMH, and DOE, and we are committed to continued efforts to make child care available to some of the most vulnerable families in NYC.

Collaboration with DHS

As a City we all share a responsibility for protecting children and supporting families. To help further this mission ACS and the Department of Homeless Services

(DHS) executed a Memorandum of Understanding which enables ACS and DHS to share information between agencies about children and families in the shelter system and also requires shelter providers to issue vital information to families, such as information on availability of child care and safe sleep practices for infants. All staff at 162 shelters citywide have been trained on the new protocol.

Family Enrichment Centers

In the first half of 2018, ACS is helping launch an innovative new model for providing comprehensive, community-focused support to families, known as Family Enrichment Centers (FEC). FEC is a family-centered primary prevention strategy that is designed to reduce rates of child maltreatment and increase family stability and well-being. Everything about each Center—from the name, to the physical layout, to the services offered—is co-developed with families and the community. The FECs are open to all families in their communities and will provide a range of services that support healthy child development. Because the design of each center is community-driven, they are an important vehicle for helping all children and families to thrive. In communities with large immigrant populations, we expect our Family Enrichment Centers to mirror the needs of the community, and therefore to help immigrant parents to locate and access the resources they need to succeed. The first pilot Center is now open in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx, and two additional pilot Centers will be located in the Bronx and Brooklyn.

Community Partnerships

The Community Partnerships Program (CPP) is ACS' first funded community-based initiative committed to partnering with local communities in key aspects of the agency's work. The program embodies a commitment to the children, youth, and families of New York City—a commitment that is shared by both the City and local communities. Community Partnerships serve as ambassadors to the community, advocates for families, and advisors to ACS and the City. The Program focuses on community organizing, community education and capacity-building, recruiting and training community leaders, managing community coalitions or partnerships, and engaging children, youth, or families in social service programs. CPPs are vital to ACS work to build strong and meaningful relationships with the most vulnerable communities, including immigrant parents of young children.

Conclusion

In closing, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss some of the many ways ACS supports families in New York City. ACS is deeply committed to providing high quality programs and services to meet the needs of all families in the City, including immigrant populations. ACS is grateful for the support of the Council in this mission and we look forward to further cultivating our partnership with you to carry out this important work.