



**David A. Hansell, Commissioner  
Testimony to the New York City Council  
Committees on General Welfare and Finance  
May 10, 2021**

**“New York City Council Fiscal Year 2022 Executive Budget Hearing”**

Good afternoon, Chair Levin, Chair Dromm, and members of the Committees on General Welfare and Finance. I am David Hansell, Commissioner of the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS). With me today are Winette Saunders, First Deputy Commissioner, and Michael Moiseyev, Deputy Commissioner for Finance. We appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Committees today. I know that today is ACS's last budget hearing with you both as Chairs, and I want to thank you for your tireless commitment to children and families, and for being such valuable partners in our work to protect children and support families.

I also want to start on a celebratory note by acknowledging that 2021 marks ACS's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary! We have come a long way as an agency, rethinking and reshaping the ways in which we have served children and families over the past 25 years. I am grateful to have been a part of this work over the past four years as Commissioner. I am inspired every day by my colleagues within ACS and our partners and colleagues, including parents, youth, provider agencies, attorneys, advocates, and of course the City Council. Together we are building a system that strengthens and supports families; removes barriers for parents and caregivers to access what they need to keep children safe and well; and invests in the potential of New York City's children.

Today, I will update you on the critical investments that NYC and ACS have made to achieve these goals, and I will highlight the exciting new investments that we are making to further enhance our ability to support children and families, particularly at this pivotal time as the City moves forward with pandemic recovery.

## **Investments in NYC Children and Families**

### **Providing the Right Child Protective Response, and Enhancing Race Equity**

We are proud of the many reforms we have made in our child protection work, which have enhanced our ability to conduct high-quality child protective assessments that identify when safety concerns may be present, so that we can quickly connect families with needed resources and supports, while minimizing more intrusive interventions.

Race equity remains a critical lens for this work. As you know, we had been urging the State to require implicit bias training for mandated reporters, such as teachers, doctors, and social workers, like the requirement that we have in place for all ACS staff. It is crucial to guard against implicit biases that may influence our perceptions and interpretations, and we want to make sure that when mandated reporters contact the Statewide Central Register (SCR), their reports are objective and based on true child safety concerns and not influenced by a family's race, ethnicity, or other factors. I'm pleased to share with you that, as required by the new state budget, the State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) will be updating its mandated reporter training to include implicit bias training. Additionally, OCFS is now required to implement implicit bias procedures when screening SCR reports. We are thrilled to see this change go into effect, as it is one more step towards a more equitable system.

As we work to curb unnecessary investigative involvement with families, ACS is continuing to expand CARES, ACS's alternative, non-investigatory child protection response to reports where there is no immediate or impending danger to children or

allegations of serious child abuse. Through CARES, specially trained child protection staff partner with families to assess child safety and family needs to identify supportive services when needed. Since November 2020, ACS has added 7 new CARES units and expanded to all five boroughs. We are on track to have 32 CARES units citywide by the end of 2021.

It remains essential that that our frontline child protective staff are equipped with the necessary experience, skills, and supports to conduct high-quality safety assessments and respond to families' needs. During my time as Commissioner, we have focused on lowering Child Protective Specialist (CPS) caseloads and improving CPS retention. After years of moving in the wrong direction, we now see fewer CPS leave the agency after a short time in service. We equipped all CPS with smart phones and tablets, and implemented the Safe Measures dashboard, which helps CPS and their supervision team track and manage key case milestones and metrics. By enhancing our technology, CPS can be even more responsive to the families they serve, quickly locate resources and information for families, and of course, this technology has been even more critical during the pandemic.

As Commissioner, I have focused on building ACS's culture as a learning organization so that we can continually address challenges and improve our work. We have dramatically expanded continuing professional development for CPS through our Workforce Institute and the James Satterwhite Academy, in partnership with CUNY. ACS has also implemented and continued to build a safety-focused culture in our child protective practice and when reviewing critical incidents, using a nationally recognized approach that draws from the same knowledge base and critical incident protocols that

safety-critical industries such as healthcare use to improve systems. Through this approach, ACS has promoted a culture of openness among staff and managers, and establish shared agency-wide accountability, all of which strengthens our investigative practice and the child welfare system as a whole.

The jobs of our frontline staff are among the most difficult in the City, and it is imperative that our staff receive the specialized training they need to do their complex work. We are particularly excited to move forward, after a pause due to COVID-19, with our state-of-the-art simulated training sites that will allow staff to train in apartments and courtrooms that replicate a real-world environment. A new class of 100 CPS joining ACS later this month will get to experience these new training sites for themselves, working with our team of practice experts and skilled actors to experience what the day-to-day work is like prior to going out in the community to work with families. Later, these sites will be used not only for onboarding new CPS, Youth Development Specialists (YDS), and provider staff, but also to work with them to build their expertise throughout their careers.

The Executive Budget includes the funding for our successful CPS Mentorship program, which we launched in 2020 in collaboration with DC37 and Local 371. This important program gives newly hired CPS the opportunity to receive additional support and helpful insights from more senior CPS colleagues who will serve as mentors and who understand what it is like to be new to this challenging job. Mentors build important leadership skills and are compensated for their efforts to provide this support to new CPS. ACS initiated the program with 120 mentors, and we plan to add an additional 120 mentors in fiscal year (FY) 2022. As we grow this program, we expect it to further

enhance morale, by allowing staff to discuss challenges in a supportive peer environment, help keep our attrition low, and benefit the long-term growth of our experienced frontline employees. All of this in turn helps us better carry out our important mission of making sure children are safe and families are supported.

### **Prevention Services to Support Children, Youth, and Families at Home**

Just last month in April, we acknowledged National Child Abuse Prevention Month with a month-long series of virtual events to celebrate ACS and community-based prevention provider staff and to highlight the array of services we have available to support NYC children and families. We were also able to celebrate an important victory at the state level: the reversal of proposed cuts to prevention services that would have further reduced the state's share of prevention services reimbursement, and that would have harmed our ability to offer essential supports to families that have become especially critical during the pandemic. We are grateful to our state legislators who worked tirelessly to stop these cuts.

Throughout the pandemic, our prevention providers have continued delivering services virtually and in-person to families, and these services include concrete goods like food, clothing, and diapers, mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, homemaking services, and more. I am especially proud of the prevention continuum that we have grown and strengthened during my time as Commissioner. We recently took additional steps to build an even stronger portfolio of services for families with teens who are experiencing challenges with behavior, substance misuse, mental health, or other crises that place the young person at risk of out-of-home placement or justice

system involvement. Through the reprocurement of our Family Assessment Program, ACS and five community-based partners, Children's Aid, The Children's Village, Community Mediation Services, JBFCS, and New York Foundling, are positioned to help parents meet the common challenges of raising young adults through targeted adolescent services that range from family support and resource navigation to more intensive, evidence-based models that offer in-home therapy, skill-building to increase behavioral control, and support to restore positive family interaction.

### **Transforming Foster Care**

When reflecting on ACS's history, these facts always bear repeating as the significant markers of reform: Approximately 20,000 families with roughly 41,000 children served annually through prevention services to support and strengthen families and keep children at home. At the same time, there are fewer than 8,000 NYC children in foster care, the lowest number in decades, and a number that has decreased each year of my tenure as Commissioner. We honor that progress and the hard work it took to achieve, and we are strongly recommitted to our efforts to both ensure that foster care is always the last resort intervention and that children in our care are placed in safe, loving homes with opportunities to flourish and meet their goals.

When children must come into foster care as a necessary safety intervention, ACS is intensely focused on placing them with relatives or other trusted adults with whom the child has a connection. So far this fiscal year, more than half of the children who have entered foster care as a result of possible abuse or neglect were placed with kinship caregivers. By continuously strengthening our work to identify and support

kinship caregivers, we have been able to achieve an overall increase in the proportion of the city's foster children who are with kinship caregivers from 30% in 2017 to more than 42% in 2020.

As you know, ACS has been aggressively implementing a Foster Care Strategic Blueprint that has produced significant measurable results. In addition to fewer children in foster care, ACS has reduced length of stay in foster care; increased kinship placement and kinship guardianship; increased foster home recruitment; and expanded programming for older youth. ACS will soon release our RFP for new foster care contracts to begin on July 1, 2022. We are using the transformational opportunity of this RFP to build on our success and scale best practices and proven strategies to achieve the best possible safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for New York City children and families. We intend to implement a shared framework across prevention and foster care services that aims to shorten stays in foster care, and to provide greater support and stability to families during reunification following foster care. Finally, we are working with New York State to align New York City with the implementation of the federal Family First legislation this September, which includes new assessment and court processes to limit residential care to youth who have a clinical or therapeutic need for a higher level of care, and to enhance the residential care continuum to meet those needs through the creation of Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs).

Supporting youth in foster care is critical to the work we do to ensure youth in care receive the support and services they need. The Mayor and ACS remain committed to the Fair Futures program, which has provided critical coaching and tutoring services to thousands of youth in foster care. There is \$2.7 million of state



funds in the Executive Budget for the continuation of the program, which is a top priority for ACS. We look forward to working with the City Council to ensure that the adopted budget contains sufficient funds to continue the full implementation of the program.

### **Enhancing Our Juvenile Justice Environments and Programs**

During my time as Commissioner, ACS has collaborated with youth advocates, our partner agencies, and the Council to usher in a new era of juvenile justice reform with Raise the Age. NYC now serves youth who are arrested for crimes they are alleged to have committed at age 16 or 17 in our juvenile justice continuum, which has increasingly meant community-based services and links to therapeutic supports. As we continually work to divert young people from justice-system involvement, through programs in ACS's continuum and in partnership with our sister City agencies, ACS must also ensure that our juvenile justice environments are tailored to support the youth in our care. For the two secure detention facilities that ACS manages, Horizon in the Bronx and Crossroads in Brooklyn, this means continuing the critical capital projects that will enhance our youth-centered environment and help ensure the facilities are safe and secure for youth and staff.

The Executive Budget adds \$94.6 million to ACS's capital budget, for a total of \$336 million committed to renovations at Horizon and Crossroads which will provide the essential and comprehensive upgrades that both of our detention facilities require to become safe, state of the art facilities for youth. This work will include critical infrastructure upgrades to HVAC, electric, and safety and security systems, as well as food service upgrades. Additionally, we will expand programming, vocational, education,

medical, mental health, and family visiting spaces, all of which will help us better meet the needs of youth, including the older population of youth we are now serving since Raise the Age. We look forward to keeping the Council updated as this work progresses.

Currently, we are focused in both detention and Close to Home on supporting youth to successfully complete the school year and plan for summer. Like other NYC students, the students in detention and Close to Home are now participating in blended learning schedules, with a mix of in-person and remote learning. In addition to the academic program provided by the Department of Education, ACS is continually adding supports and educational enrichment opportunities for youth beyond the regular school day. For example, to support youth during the pandemic, ACS has partnered with organizations such as the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) and The Kite to offer an array of tutoring services for youth in secure detention, and with Tier NYC to provide similar tutoring and support services for youth in Close to Home. In partnership with CUNY, CCA, and The Kite, youth in secure detention and Close to Home have accessed specially created college and career exploration content during the pandemic. Youth have also participated in college prep and college credit-bearing courses through CUNY College Now and Kingsborough Community College.

ACS offers enrichment and skill-building opportunities for youth in our care, which is crucial to positively engage youth. We have planning well underway to offer a full array of enriching opportunities for our youth this summer. We are excited to once again offer the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School, a six-week summer literacy and enrichment course. Additionally, ACS has begun to share information and facilitate

the enrollment of youth in the Summer Youth Employment Program across our juvenile justice continuum.

### **Promoting Child and Family Well-Being**

ACS's newest division, which I established my first year as Commissioner, represents the future we hope to realize in child welfare. We want all families to have access to concrete resources that address the effects of poverty, social isolation and the stresses of parenting; to feel connected to strong communities that support them in times of need, and to be armed with actionable information about child safety. After a highly successful 3-year demonstration project, ACS recently completed the RFP process and issued awards for our three Family Enrichment Centers (FECs) in East New York (Good Shepherd Services), Hunts Point (Graham Windham) and Highbridge (Bridgebuilders/Children's Village.) The FECs have been co-designed with local families and community members since they were first developed in 2018, starting with each community naming their own FEC. Today, Parent Leaders co-design and share concrete supports and resources with families and community members, who in turn, bring their knowledge, passion, and talents to the FEC. Grassroots planning is at the root of this model, which helps to set it apart from a traditional social service program. These community hubs have proven crucial throughout the pandemic, providing community members concrete goods as well as both an in-person and virtual community to prevent social isolation.

In addition to the 3 FECs, ACS has 11 Community Partnership Programs (CPPs). The CPPs leverage existing services and help to connect the service dots, so

that families are aware of, and can better access, the full continuum of supports in their neighborhoods. The CPPs have also been invaluable throughout the pandemic, providing families with the concrete resources and supports they have needed.

Through the FEC and Community Partnerships models, we aim to disrupt the historic racial disproportionality that we have seen in child welfare, with Parent Leaders, FEC staff, and Community Ambassadors working to connect members to the unique type of family support that they need, when and how they need it. Our goal is to reduce this disparity and decrease families' interaction with child welfare through primary prevention supports.

There is perhaps no greater primary prevention service than child care, which enables families to work while their children are safely cared for in a developmentally appropriate and stimulating learning environment. After more than a year of stress, disruptions, and economic uncertainty, it is critical that NYC families—and especially our most vulnerable families—have enhanced access to child care. ACS is implementing a bold new plan to increase access to low-cost, federally-funded child care vouchers for thousands of additional families, with a number of measures to expand access and eligibility. The Executive Budget includes \$2.5 million in City Tax Levy funding in FY2022 to support ACS's administrative costs needed to process the applications for what we believe will be thousands more families.

ACS is eager to fully leverage federal child care funds to enable more families to receive federally funded child care. ACS's multi-part plan includes seeking New York State approval to:

- Increase the income eligibility from 200% to 265% of the federal poverty level;

- Eliminate the requirement in State law that a family must earn at least minimum wage to qualify for subsidized child care assistance; and
- Increase the length of time an eligible family can continue to receive child care from 12 months to 24 months, without having to recertify.

ACS is also seeking state approval to use federal Child Care Block Grant funding for a demonstration project that will target child care vouchers to high need families, targeting the eleven community districts in neighborhoods that are supported by ACS's Family Enrichment Centers and Community Partnership Programs.

We also want to assure that families most in need of child care have access. We have restored prioritization of post-transitional child care vouchers, so that low-income families transitioning off other public assistance benefits can continue to receive child care. Additionally, we are prioritizing vouchers for families who are homeless and for families who have recently participated in ACS's in child welfare programs, such as families who have adopted a child from the foster care system or received preventive services. We are very excited that income-eligible families who have been receiving child care while their child welfare cases are open, will be able to continue to receive child care after reunification, adoption, KinGAP, and after prevention services end. We are also expanding child-care access to include families participating in an approved substance abuse treatment program. We know that many families rely on home-based providers, and we will be increasing the rate for those providers who participate in at least 10 hours of training annually.

ACS anticipates this plan will enable thousands more New York City families to receive federally funded child care vouchers. Child care vouchers can be used for

center-based or home-based child care options. The Executive Budget also adds funds to ACS's budget for additional staff support to carry out expansion and enrollment activities, making sure that families are supported through the application process; applications are determined as quickly as possible so that families can have child care arrangements in place when starting work or other activities; and providers receive training and assistance to help ensure they are timely reimbursed for their services.

### **Summary of Executive Budget**

I have mentioned some the key investments that we are excited to see in the Executive Budget, and I will now share further details. In summary, ACS's Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Executive Budget is \$2.69 billion, including \$983.7 million in City Tax Levy (CTL) funding. We received new need adjustments to our FY2022 budget including \$69.7 million in CTL. Highlights from the ACS FY2022 Executive Budget include:

- Funding for enhanced operational capacity to support ACS's planned expansion in child care access, with additional enrollment and eligibility staff to support Child Care Block Grant funded child care for families, as well as resources to market child care in the communities that are part of the demonstration project (\$2.5 million CTL).
- Funding for ACS to be able to comply with the State mandate to track child care time and attendance by the hour rather than as part-time or full time. This funding will enable ACS to add staff capacity to support providers with training, ensure payments are processed timely, and perform related quality assurance activities (\$2.4 million CTL).

- Funding to partially fund the Fair Futures program with \$2.7 million in FY2022 from prior year state revenue.
- Funding to address the budget gap in FY2022 created by the federal elimination of the Title IV-E waiver and the end of the federal transition funding (\$54.9 million CTL in FY 2022 for the structural deficit).
- Funding to stabilize ACS's residential care providers through a more predictable funding methodology. Specifically, since FY2020 providers have received a higher rate to help offset budget uncertainty, due to federal and state funding structures that reimburse providers based on the number of children in their care each day, which can widely fluctuate. This allocation was baselined at \$9.8 million CTL starting in FY2022, and helps providers address staffing, turnover, and other basic infrastructure issues, which in turn improves agency stability and the quality of services for children in their care.
- Funding for the CPS Mentorship program, which gives newly hired CPS the opportunity to receive additional support and helpful insights from more senior CPS who will serve as mentors (\$272,000 in CTL).
- Additional funding in ACS's capital budget for renovations at Horizon and Crossroads, to support upgrades to infrastructure, and to enhance programming and recreation areas for youth (\$94.6 million).

In addition to the City's important investments in ACS's programs and services, we were pleased that the final enacted state budget did not contain any of the devastating cuts that were initially proposed, including reversing the 20% across the board cut to

many of ACS's services, including prevention, adoption subsidy and detention. We know many state legislators, City Council members, providers and advocates worked hard in Albany to reach this good result, and we are thankful for their support and efforts. Importantly, the state budget also included implementing legislation for the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, and we will continue to work with OCFS and our child welfare partners to implement the new requirements.

### **Conclusion**

I am immensely proud of the progress we have made at ACS over the past four years, and just as proud of the fact that we continue to remain laser-focused on opportunities to better serve children and families. We are grateful to the City Council for your continued support and advocacy on behalf of NYC children and families. I feel personally privileged to have worked throughout my tenure with Chair Levin and Chair Dromm, and I know that each of you has a strong personal connection and dedication to this work, as do so many of your colleagues. We look forward to sharing more details about ACS's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations this summer, and we hope you will all join us for the festivities.

We are happy to take your questions.