



**David A. Hansell, Commissioner
Testimony to the New York State Assembly
Committee on Children and Families
October 21, 2021**

“Family Involvement in the Child Welfare System”

Good afternoon, Chair Hevesi and members of the Assembly Children and Families Committee. I am David Hansell, Commissioner of the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and for being such valuable partners in our work to protect children and support families.

Our fundamental child welfare goal at ACS is to connect parents and caretakers with the services and supports they need to safely care for their children. We are committed to the goal that a child or family's race or ethnicity does not determine how they fare – and the same is true with regard to gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and other factors. Toward these ends, ACS has taken many steps to avoid unnecessary family involvement in the traditional child protection system, by connecting families to the resources and supports they need while minimizing more intrusive interventions. Today I will focus on our work to 1) reduce unnecessary child protection investigations; 2) expand primary prevention; 3) strengthen our prevention services continuum; and 4) empower parents by significantly expanding Parent Advocates in our work.

Reducing Unnecessary Investigations

We appreciate that while the work of ensuring children are safe is essential, child protection investigations can be intrusive for families. Thus, not only have we trained our CPS staff to conduct investigations as professionally and sensitively as possible, but we have been advocating for policy and programmatic changes to reduce unnecessary investigations.

As you know, ACS is required by State law to respond to any report accepted by the New York Statewide Central Register (SCR) and referred to us. The data show that the greatest source of racial disparity in New York City's child welfare system is at the front door; there is significant over-representation of Black and Latinx families in reporting to the SCR. While ACS does not control reports that are called in and that the State accepts and refers, we are taking steps to address disparities in reporting.

ACS is educating professionals on the many ways to provide support to families without an SCR report, when there is no reason to suspect that a child may have been abused or maltreated. We have worked with major categories of mandated reporters, such as schools and hospitals, to understand the impact that reporting has on families and that calls should be made only when there is a concern about the child's safety. For instance, we worked with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on guidance that makes clear when it is and when it is not appropriate for hospitals to report possible child abuse or neglect related to newborns prenatally exposed to substances. We have also worked with the Department of Education throughout the pandemic on guidance for school personnel.

As Chair Hevesi knows well, we had long urged the State to require implicit bias training for mandated reporters, like the requirement we have in place for all ACS staff, so that unconscious prejudice does not lead to overreporting of Black and Latinx families. I thank you, Chair Hevesi, for ensuring that this requirement was included in last year's state budget bills. ACS is also looking forward to implementing the SCR Reform that becomes effective this January which, among other changes, raises the level of proof from "some credible evidence" to a "fair preponderance of evidence"

before a case can be indicated. ACS supported this law while it was being considered in the State Legislature because we know it will bring more fairness and equity to the child welfare system, while maintaining child safety.

To further reduce the number of unnecessary investigations, 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 maltreatment. 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 12 new CARES units for a total of 28 units across all five boroughs. We are on track to have 32 CARES units citywide by the end of 2021.

Expanding Primary Prevention

We want to ensure families have the support they need to thrive: to feel connected to strong communities that support them; to have access to resources that address the effects of poverty, social isolation and the stresses of parenting; and to be armed with science-based information about how to keep their children safe.

ACS currently supports three "Family Enrichment Centers" that provide parents with a safe and nurturing environment to build social connections and receive concrete resources like food and clothing – which was especially critical during the pandemic. Since they were launched in 2018, every aspect of the FECs has been co-designed with local community members, from the space to the offerings provided.

And I'm thrilled that, with the Mayor's support, we are expanding the FECs from three to 30 centers over the next three years. In fact, the Request for Proposals (RFP)

for the first additional 9 Centers is currently open until November 17, 2021 and ACS is seeking local community-based providers, with deep ties to their communities, to run the new sites. All the new centers will be located in the priority neighborhoods identified by the Mayor’s Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity (TRIE), based on their inequity burdens and the undue impact of COVID-19.

ACS has also recently created a new Office of Safety and Injury Prevention to further strengthen our work to educate New Yorkers on how to keep children safe. ACS’s child safety campaigns focus on important topics for parents, like safe sleep practices for newborns, safe storage of medication that’s hazardous to children, and ensuring homes with children are equipped with window guards. Our newest child safety campaign is related to cannabis edibles, which might look like candy to young children but can be very dangerous to their health. ACS is reminding parents to keep these products up and locked away from young children.

Finally, there is perhaps no greater primary prevention service than child care. 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 greatly appreciates the Chair and Committee’s similar interest and we look forward to continuing to work together this year to enact state legislation that will expand access to free and low-cost child care options for families.

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

We believe that the best way to keep children safe is to provide families with the services and supports they need. We do this through both the primary prevention services I discussed, as well as through our nationally recognized prevention services

continuum. We serve approximately 20,000 families with more than 40,000 children annually through prevention services to support and strengthen families and keep children safely at home. Today, in NYC, largely because of our focus on prevention services, there are fewer than 7,300 children in foster care, the lowest number in several decades.

In addition to the decrease in foster care, we have other powerful evidence that New York City's prevention services system is working. We have found that families that complete child welfare prevention services are half as likely to have an indicated investigation within one year, and four times less likely to have a child placed in foster care within one year, compared to families that were referred to prevention but did not participate.

Not only do our numbers indicate prevention services are working, but families are telling us themselves. The results of our most recent survey of families receiving prevention services overwhelmingly showed families believe the services have helped to strengthen their parenting. Approximately 93 percent of survey respondents said they were happy with the prevention services their families received and 87 percent of respondents said they would recommend these services to a family or family member. Overall, 86 percent of parents who responded said prevention services helped them reach their parenting goals.

Our continuum of prevention services was relaunched in 2020, offering families access to all prevention models regardless of where they live across the five boroughs. We have also expanded our investment in evidence-based and research-informed models. The system also specifically addresses racial disproportionality by requiring

provider agencies to incorporate strategies to combat it in their organization and service provision, including through the formation of racial equity committees that include all levels of staff representation. Finally, it better promotes incorporating parent voice and choice in the development of service plans and in organizational program improvement activities in order to ensure services reflect what families want and need.

The breadth, depth and success of New York City's prevention system would not be possible without the State's partnership and commitment to prevention services. The State's child welfare financing structure of open-ended reimbursement of a substantial share of local district expenditures is essential for our success. I want to thank the Assembly, and Chair Hevesi in particular, for your tireless advocacy to maintain this financing structure. We at ACS look forward to working with you again this budget season, as we work together to reauthorize child welfare financing in New York State and restore state reimbursement to 65%.

Finally, I want to thank OCFS for the thoughtful draft Prevention Plan that they are looking to implement as part of the Family First Prevention Services Act. The child welfare financing structure will be critical to the Plan's success.

Parent Advocates

ACS has long understood and valued the role of parent advocates, trained professionals who have lived experiences in the child welfare system. They can draw on their extensive personal and professional experiences to support, counsel and guide parents who are involved in the child welfare process.

ACS currently supports two organizations to provide parent advocates in Initial Child Safety Conferences, where families and the ACS child protective team meet to

develop a child safety plan. A recent study of our Parent Advocacy Initiative, which expanded the role of parent advocates in these conferences, found a significant increase in conference attendance by parents; a reduction in child removals; and an increased use of kinship care for children who had to be removed due to safety concerns. We have issued a concept paper laying out a new model based on this research, with an RFP forthcoming.

Finally, ACS is re-procuring our entire foster care system, using this transformational opportunity to scale best practices and proven strategies to achieve the best possible safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for New York City children and families. One of the most significant transformations pertains to Parent Advocates; there will be an entirely new, system-wide workforce of approximately 150 Parent Advocates at our foster care agencies, who will work with parents so that more children go home safely and timely, improving reunification and race equity outcomes.

Conclusion

I am proud of the progress we have made at ACS during my five years as Commissioner, but appreciate that there is much more to be done. I am grateful to the Assembly, this Committee and Chair Hevesi for your continued support and advocacy on behalf of NYC children and families.

I am happy to take your questions.