



**Elizabeth Wolkomir, Deputy Commissioner of the Division of  
Child and Family Well-being**

**Testimony to the New York State Assembly  
Committee on Children and Families  
October 18, 2022**

**“Primary Prevention”**

Good morning, Chair Hevesi and members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families. My name is Elizabeth Wolkomir, and I am the Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Child and Family Well-being (CFWB) at the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS). With me today is Stephanie Gendell, the Deputy Commissioner for External Affairs. We are very pleased that the Committee is holding this important hearing, as we at ACS strongly believe that upstream investments in communities and families are critical to reducing stressors for parents and caregivers and to improving the quality of life of parents and children. Today we will focus on some of ACS's programs and New York City's vision for the future.

I first want to thank the Chair for his long-standing commitment to supporting children and families. Thank you for taking the time to visit several of the Family Enrichment Centers in New York City, both before the pandemic and just last week.

CFWB works to ensure families and children have the critical supports they need to thrive and enjoy self-determination. The Division focuses on leveraging concrete resources, stakeholder relationships, and community and family strengths, to drive toward greater equity and social justice, reduce disparities and disproportionality in the child welfare system, and create conditions that foster well-being for all families across New York City. Our work includes the provision of quality child care; development and execution of strategies to prevent child injury and promote child safety; and oversight of community-based approaches, namely a network of Family Enrichment Centers (FECs) and Community Partnerships

Our vision is for government, including ACS and other state and city agencies, to proactively address the underlying factors that cause families to become involved with

the traditional child welfare system. This requires a commitment to provide all families access to resources that address the effects and disrupt the cycle of poverty; to make investments in community-driven solutions that strengthen resiliency, foster social connectivity, and reduce the stresses of parenting; and to share the knowledge and tools parents need to keep their children safe. We are pleased that the State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) had adopted a similar vision, laid out in their Prevention Services Plan. Today I will be testifying about some of the primary prevention programs in New York City as well a vision for the future.

### **Our Commitment in New York City**

Across New York City government, there is a substantial investment and commitment to provide supports that help parents and children thrive. Notably, these services are not administered by the child welfare agency alone – for example, in New York City, the continuum of home visiting programs are administered by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and play an important role in the well-being of our youngest children. ACS has also made important investments in in this space, and I will focus on these today.

After a highly successful implementation of three Family Enrichment Centers (FECs),<sup>1</sup> ACS is in the process of expanding to 30 FECs over the next two years, to be located in the neighborhoods hit hardest by COVID. This past summer, ACS awarded contracts for the next 9 FECs and all of these new sites are due to open in the coming months.<sup>2</sup> We recently issued an RFP for the next 9 FECs, and anticipate announcing

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<sup>1</sup> The original three FECs are located in Hunts Point/Longwood in the Bronx (Graham Windham); Highbridge in the Bronx (Bridge Builders/Children’s Village) and East New York (Good Shepherd Services).

<sup>2</sup> These are The Reggio Emilia Montessori Center in Mott Haven/Melrose; Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice in Soundview/Parkchester; Little Flower Children and Family Services in Bedford Stuyvesant; Riseboro Community Partnership in Brownsville; Living Redemption Community Development Corporation in Central Harlem; Union

these awards in the spring<sup>3</sup> and then we will release an RFP for the remaining 9 FECs soon thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

The FECs are warm, inviting walk-in centers that are free and open to all community members. Their goal is to strengthen families' protective factors, including by providing concrete resources, amplifying resiliency to weather challenges all parents face, and creating stronger social connectivity. FEC spaces and offerings are designed by and for community members so that they are responsive to individual community's needs and interests – and in this way, each is unique and cherished by the community it serves.

Research has shown the relationship between protective factors and positive developmental outcomes for children and youth. [A 2019 evaluation of the FECs](#), conducted by Youth Studies Inc., surveyed parents who visited the FECs and found that respondents generally reported improvements in their access to social supports, in their nurturing and attachment and in their family functioning.

In addition to the FECs, ACS has 11 Community Partnership (CPs) – coalitions of community stakeholders, including service providers and community members. The CPs 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.

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Settlement Association in East Harlem; Forestdale in Jamaica/Hollis/Queens Village; Ocean Bay Community Development in Rockaway/Broad Channel and the Staten Island Justice Center in St. George/Stapleton.

<sup>3</sup> These will be located in the following 9 communities: Jackson Heights; Elmhurst/Corona; Ozone Park/Woodhaven & South Ozone Park/Howard Beach; Bushwick; East Flatbush; Morrisania/Crotona & Belmont/East Tremont; Fordham/University Heights; Washington Heights/Inwood; and Lower East Side/Chinatown.

<sup>4</sup> The remaining 9 communities are: Coney Island; Sunset Park; Flatbush/Midwood; Flatlands/Canarsie; Astoria; Flushing South/Briarwood; Williamsbridge/Baychester; Kingsbridge; and Morningside Heights/Hamilton Heights.

ACS has also expanded our Group Attachment Based Intervention (GABI) program to be available to community members, without the need for child welfare involvement or a traditional prevention services case. GABI, which is now available at 6 sites across all 5 boroughs, takes community referrals in Brooklyn and Queens. GABI is a therapeutic intervention developed at Montefiore, which helps caregivers of children under age 4 build strong bonds with their young children and foster healthy development. GABI provides clinician-facilitated play therapy, allowing parents to strengthen attachment to their children, which research demonstrates reduces the risk of child maltreatment. The program also provides parents with individualized support, peer support through parent groups, and concrete goods such as diapers and baby wipes.

### **The Future**

At this time, ACS does not receive any federal or state support for the upstream services and supports I talked about today, even though they can meaningfully disrupt the risks of child welfare involvement. We remain hopeful that the implementation of the state's Prevention Plan, will open up opportunities to support deeper investments in these services.

ACS is grateful the Chair and other members of the Children and Families Committee who have been advocating for this type of support for many years. ACS remains committed to providing these types of services, and we know that if we had additional supports we could continue to grow and innovate. One option would be to start by investing the 3% reimbursement for prevention that is annually cut in the state

budget, to support counties in the provision of primary prevention services, and then continue to increase this state support.<sup>5</sup>

We know that families are struggling to recover from the impact of the pandemic. We cannot wait to deepen our investments in keeping children and families strong and stable - investments that will allow families to realize their dreams and prevent more costly and intrusive interventions such as child protection and foster care.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I want to again thank the Chair and the Committee for their interest in the investments that best support families. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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<sup>5</sup> Social Service Law Section 153-k says that after the use of available federal funds, the state will reimburse counties for 65% of the cost of prevention services (for those prevention services where we have opened a case in the child welfare database for the family). Since 2008, the state has been annually cutting this reimbursement to 62% in the state budget.