

Office of the Mayor Health and Human Services

Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity | December 2021



Photo credit: ACS

ACS Equity Strategies

Agency: **Administration for Children's Services**

Context

ACS seeks to administer equitable child welfare, juvenile justice, and child care systems so that a child or family's race, ethnicity, national origin, immigration status, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation do not predict their outcomes. However, within New York City and nationally, Black/African American and Latinx/Hispanic families have long been overrepresented at key points along child welfare pathways. As part of the agency's Equity Assessment, ACS looked at the disparities that exist at key stages in the child welfare system.

Data shows there is significant over-representation of Black and Latinx families in reporting to the Statewide Central Register (SCR). In New York, to make a report of child abuse or neglect, a person must call the SCR. ACS is required by State law to respond to any report accepted by the SCR and referred to ACS. Comparing Black and White children in NYC, a Black child is 5.93 times more likely to be reported to the New York State child abuse hotline than a White child. Data also shows

Black/African and Hispanic/Latinx children are disproportionately placed in foster care, and disproportionately less likely to be in prevention case openings following a substantiated investigation.

Through a wide range of initiatives, ACS has been working to address the disparities that exist at each of the stages throughout the child welfare system.

Response

In 2017, ACS created an Office of Equity Strategies. The Office leads ACS's efforts to develop and advance specific policies and practices that reduce disparities in outcomes for children and families that are the result of bias based on race, ethnicity, gender and gender expression, and/or sexual orientation. As part of this work, the Office oversees ACS's implementation of Local Law 174 Equity Action Plan, which was developed in response to inequities identified in the agency's Equity Assessment.

Rooted in the belief that all New Yorkers should have access to quality resources and opportunities that enhance their capacity to thrive and enjoy self-determination, ACS launched a new division, called the Division of Child and Family Well-Being, in 2017. This 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 families and children across New York City.

As part of this work, ACS along with community stakeholders are providing "primary" prevention services, which are aimed at getting families the support they need completely independent of the traditional child welfare system, and with the goal of avoiding any involvement with that system. One vehicle for these services is ACS' Family Enrichment Centers (FECs). First launched in 2017, there are currently three FECs (in Hunts Point, Highbridge and East New York). The FECs work alongside community members to provide concrete resources and other offerings responsive to their needs and interests. Families and communities determine the activities, events and offerings of FECs. By providing families and children the resources they need, ACS aims to ultimately reduce the risks of involvement with the child protection system. Their success has led to the plan to expand from 3 to 30 FECs over the next 3 years, focused on the communities that were hit hardest by COVID-19.

While legally required to respond to all SCR reports referred to the agency, ACS has been emphasizing responses that focus on the provision of support and services to address the family's needs. ACS is expanding its utilization of an alternative child welfare approach that focuses on family support and does not require a traditional investigation, in cases where there is no indication of significant safety risk or physical abuse to a child, but a family may be in need of services. The approach is called Collaborative Assessment, Response, Engagement and Support (CARES). In CARES, specially trained child protective staff partner with the family to identify needs, empower the family to address them, and connect families to appropriate services. The CARES approach is family-centered, family-driven, and solution-focused. The CARES pilot began in 2013 in Queens, and by early 2021 it had expanded to all five boroughs.

ACS strives to keep families together by providing a full range of prevention services – services that address challenges that families are experiencing and that are provided in the home. In 2020, ACS also implemented a new set of prevention programs that now offers 10 different service models to families across all parts of NYC offering choices to families across the five boroughs. For the first time, provider agencies are required to incorporate efforts to address racial disparity in their organization and service provision, including through the formation of racial equity committees that include all levels of staff representation.

ACS is working to identify ways to incorporate family voice into services and contracting with providers with an explicit focus on incorporating racial equity strategies into their service portfolios.

- ACS created the role of Parent Engagement Specialist to increase the voice of parents with lived experiences in all aspects of ACS’s work around practice, policy and programming. The Parent Engagement Specialist supports the Parent Advocacy Council, which meets and shares recommendations with ACS leadership regularly.
- ACS also has a Youth Leadership Council that includes youth who have experienced the foster care and/or juvenile justice systems.
- In 2020, ACS launched an initiative called “Parents Supporting Parents,” that partners a parent with lived child welfare experience with parents of children currently in foster care. The parent advocates will be crucial allies to empower parents and dismantle bias and oppression in the foster care system, and ultimately help to reunify families.
- ACS will also expand the Parent Advocacy initiative- a peer support program in which parents with prior experience in the child welfare system offer advocacy and support to parents currently involved in the child welfare system.

Through the creation and expansion of our Workforce Institute trainings, ACS is building the capacity of our staff at all levels to respond effectively to structural racism and individual bias, and promote culturally competent policy and practice. All ACS employees receive implicit bias training.

Results

- Submitted ACS’s Equity Action Plan for 2019 and 2021 to City Council and the Mayor.
- All 7,000+ ACS employees have received implicit bias training.
- As per findings from the most recent [“ACS Prevention Family Experience Survey,”](#) families are overwhelmingly satisfied with the quality of prevention services received: 91 percent of participants agree services helped them achieve their goals and 93 percent of survey recipients said they are happy with the prevention services their families received.
- In 2020, ACS released the results of its first-ever [“Family Enrichment Center Evaluation Report,”](#) which suggests the FECs are having a positive impact on families living in highly-marginalized neighborhoods.
- The majority of respondents (61 percent) reported an improvement in their family function since joining the FEC.
- The majority of respondents (52 percent) reported an improvement in their nurturing and attachment score since joining the FEC.

- The majority of respondents (72 percent) reported improved social support since joining the FEC.
- Reduced the New York City foster care census to fewer than 7,200 children – a dramatic reduction from the 11,000 children in foster care in 2015.
- Findings from a [recent study suggest that the Parent Advocacy Initiative](#) in the initial child safety conference is helping to improve outcomes for children and families. The recently published study revealed that, with the Parent Advocacy Initiative in place, ACS saw a significant increase in the conference attendance by parents in comparison with the past; a reduction in child removals; and an increased use of kinship care for children who had to be removed due to safety concern
- Worked with City partners to issue guidance for staff at NYC Department of Education (DOE) and [NYC Health + Hospitals \(H + H\)](#) to help reduce unnecessary reports to the state child abuse hotline.
- Successfully advocated to the State to require mandated reporters to complete implicit bias training.
- Successfully advocated for statewide legislative training to help address the collateral consequences of being reported to the SCR. As a result, beginning with investigations starting January 2022, New York State will raise the standard of indication from some credible evidence to a fair preponderance of evidence, which is more consistent with the standards for indication used throughout the country. The new law also reduces the length of time an ‘indicated’ case for maltreatment would be accessible to potential employers. Under pre-existing law, an ‘indicated’ case for abuse or maltreatment remains on a person’s record for ten years after their youngest child turns 18, regardless of the severity of the incident. Under the new law, neglect records (not abuse) will be sealed from employers if the record is 8 years or older.
- Created an [LGBTQAI+ Action Plan](#) in 2020 to strengthen services and supports for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care. The multi-pronged action plan includes the creation of a dedicated LGBTQAI+ Committee as part of the ACS Youth Leadership Council; expanding recruitment targeting foster parents interested in fostering LGBTQAI+ youth; revising and strengthening staff training on LGBTQAI+ issues; increasing services and supports for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care; and more.
- ACS was able to quickly mobilize primary prevention programs and other stakeholders helped deliver food, clothing and diapers to families; helped families enroll in public benefits; offered transportation and more during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Next Steps

Describe any next steps to be taken on the action/program/policy.

- Expanding CARES to all child protective offices so that families citywide who need extra support can connect to resources that will keep their children safe, without having ACS conduct a full evidentiary investigation.
- Select organizations for expansion of Family Enrichment Centers which will align to Mayor's Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity’s (TRIE) priority communities where child welfare involvement remains disproportionately high.

- Release RFP for expansion of Parent Advocacy programs. In partnership with ACS, these providers will guide families through processes in which staff are aware of and actively addressing potential disparities in service quality and outcome, particularly racial disparities.
- Increase access to subsidized childcare for thousands of additional children, enabling families to work while their children are safely cared for.
- Issue an updated Equity Action Plan in 2023.

Relevant Publications

- [ACS' 2021 Equity Report](#)
- [Foster Care Strategic Blueprint](#)
- [Testimony to the New York State Assembly. "Family Involvement in the Child Welfare System"](#)
- [Press Release on Family Enrichment Center Survey](#)
- [Press Release on Annual Prevention Family Experience Survey](#)