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**ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES ANNOUNCES GROUNDBREAKING
'PARENTS SUPPORTING PARENTS' INITIATIVE TO IMPROVE REUNIFICATION
OUTCOMES FOR FAMILIES IN THE NYC FOSTER CARE SYSTEM**

Parent Advocates Have Lived Experience With the Child Welfare System & Will Be Trained to Help Inform, Support and Mentor Parents with Children Currently in Foster Care

Initiative Builds Upon Agency's Work to Elevate Parent Voice, Improve Reunification Outcomes and Address Racial Disproportionalities in the Child Welfare System

NEW YORK, NY – Today, New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Commissioner David A. Hansell announced the groundbreaking "Parents Supporting Parents" (PSP) initiative in which parent advocates will draw upon lived experience with the child welfare system to support, inform and mentor parents with children currently in foster care. The parent advocates will each be assigned to a foster care case planning unit and connected with every parent entering that unit, playing an integral role in case decision-making and helping families reunify with their children.

ACS is launching this effort in partnership with Rise, a nationally recognized parent advocacy organization, and the foster care agencies Graham Windham and Rising Ground. Starting this fall, parent advocates working at these two ACS contracted foster care agencies will receive training, coaching and professional development from Rise in order to ensure they are fully empowered as credible messengers to support parents and to function as full members of the foster care team.

ACS is grateful to Casey Family Programs, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Redlich Horwitz Foundation and the Warner Fund for helping to make this pilot a reality and for their commitment to improving outcomes for families.

"Parent advocates have walked in the shoes of those currently navigating the child welfare system, and their lived experiences can help empower parents with children in foster care," said **Commissioner David A. Hansell**. "Elevating the voices of parents is a critical strategy to reunify families more quickly and is part of our effort to increase parent involvement and input across all of our programs. We are confident that engaging parent advocates will result in better outcomes for children and families in New York City."

"A child's removal is devastating to parents' humanity, dignity and identity, and there is so much working against parents being able to use our power when facing the system. Advocates trained by Rise will be working in a way that resists system dynamics of shame, blame, punishment and harm and that creates a community of care and support for one another. By also including Rise resources like the TIPS handouts, which are tools that help parents get through the system,

advocates will give parents information, help protect their rights, and offer support and empowerment to take lead and advocate for themselves,” **said Jeanette Vega, Assistant Director of Training and Policy at Rise.**

“We at Graham are committed to do our work grounded in the wisdom of those we serve. Advocates with lived experience with the child welfare system have long been a vital part of our partnership with parents. We are thrilled for this opportunity to expand on that foundation. Thank you to ACS and New Yorkers for Children for the opportunity to continue to learn alongside our colleagues at Rise, to get stronger for our families and to take meaningful steps to undo some of the racist practices and outcomes that have too long been a part of our child welfare system,” **said Jess Dannhauser, President of Graham Windham.**

“Across Rising Ground, children, adults, and families benefit from the expertise of individuals with lived experience. We are thrilled to be part of this critical initiative, which will expand this practice, specifically for families with a child in foster care. Based on their knowledge, familiarity and ability to relate to their peers, trained credible messengers are uniquely qualified to help individuals and families navigate systems, and guide them as they move forward in their lives. We applaud ACS for advancing this effort,” **said Rising Ground CEO Alan Mucatel.**

“When parents share their own experiences overcoming significant obstacles in their lives to reunite with their children, they give parents the hope they need to believe that they, too, can achieve that same success,” **said Dr. William C. Bell, president and CEO of Casey Family Programs.** “This initiative recognizes that families are our greatest asset in building hopeful futures where all children can thrive.”

“Navigating the child welfare system can be overwhelming to anyone, but especially parents who are new to the experience,” **says Sandra Gasca-Gonzalez, vice president of Casey’s Center for Systems Innovation.** “Parent advocates have walked many miles in those same shoes and are uniquely, and compassionately, equipped to support parents and their families in growing and thriving through this process. A program such as this is a lifeline to parents and children as they rebuild their lives together.”

“We are so pleased to expand our funding for parent advocates to ensure even more parents in child welfare can benefit from the emotional support and guidance provided by a knowledgeable, empathetic peer,” **said Sarah Chiles, executive director of the Redlich Horwitz Foundation.** “We all want more children to exit foster care more quickly to their parents; and parent advocates play a critical role in making that happen.”

“The Joseph LeRoy and Ann C. Warner Fund is pleased to support the Parent Advocate Initiative project proposed by ACS. “The Warner Fund believes that family reunification whenever possible is critical in a child’s overall wellbeing, growth and future success” **says Joseph Madonia, Executive Director of the Warner Fund.** “Having the opportunity to support advocates for parents / family members will be a tremendous support for the stress and frustration they encounter on a daily basis while working toward regaining custody of their loved ones.”

The role of parent advocates is to support and guide parents with children in foster care as well as assist families with accessing services in the community. Parent advocates focus on orienting and supporting parents right from the beginning; informing parents about the child welfare and family court process as well as about coping with trauma and toxic stress; supporting parents’ self-determination in case planning; supporting high-quality Family Time

(visiting); assisting parents with basic needs as access to public benefits, community-based services, and education and employment opportunities.

ACS aims to scale this approach across the foster care system so that every parent with a goal of reunifying with their child has an assigned parent advocate, in order to increase safe and timely reunification of families with children in foster care.

This initiative builds on the agency's continued work to incorporate parent advocates into decision making processes across the child welfare system. In 2013, ACS began to incorporate parent advocates into its child protective work by supporting families during Initial Child Safety Conferences. During the past three years in particular, Commissioner Hansell has prioritized initiatives that help strengthen parents' voice and success. In FY 2019, ACS created the Parent Engagement Specialist position to work with parents in providing input and advocating around key policy and practice issues. The Parent Engagement Specialist supports the Parent Advisory Council, which advises ACS leadership. Commissioner Hansell has said that, through listening and learning, ACS works tirelessly with the Parent Advisory Council in a way that challenges the agency to do better. Additionally, the redesigned prevention services system, which launched in July 2020, was the result of rigorous research by engaging over 300 stakeholders, including parents and parent advocates. The recently implemented new prevention services contracts also include roles for parent advocates.

Today's announcement builds upon the work happening at ACS to address racial disproportionality across the child welfare system. ACS is committed to ensuring that equity strategies are both innovative and evidence-based. On July 1st, ACS launched its redesigned prevention services system. The new system offers universal access to the full range of programs to all families across the City, regardless of where they live, expands therapeutic supports to families, increases parent voice and choice in service delivery and promotes racial equity through mandated efforts to address racial disparities in all programs. Additionally, ACS is currently implementing its Equity Action Plan, which is designed to address racial disparities across the child welfare system. The plan is being led by the ACS Office of Equity Strategies, a dedicated office that works to develop and advance practices that reduce disparities in outcomes for children and families that are the result of biased based on race, ethnicity, gender and gender expression and/or sexual orientation. Most recently, ACS announced plans to expand CARES, New York City's Family Assessment Response program, citywide. Citywide expansion means more support for more families and a reduction in child welfare investigations.

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