



**Office of Children
and Family Services**

**LEGISLATIVE FISCAL COMMITTEES'
JOINT BUDGET HEARING**

State Fiscal Year 2017-2018

Executive Budget

Human Services

Wednesday, February 8, 2017

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Sheila J. Poole, Acting Commissioner
New York State Office of Children and Family Services

Good morning Chairwoman Young, Chairman Farrell, Senate Children and Families Committee Chairwoman Savino, Assembly Children and Families Chairwoman Jaffee, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. I am Sheila Poole, Acting Commissioner of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss this year's proposed budget for OCFS.

The Executive Budget maintains a strong investment in OCFS's core programs that serve to protect New York's most vulnerable citizens in the critically-important areas of child welfare, child care and juvenile justice. It maintains \$635 million for Child Welfare Services, which provides enriched state share reimbursement of 62 cents for every local dollar spent on child protective, preventive, after care, independent living and adoption services. This funding helps to support community-based services throughout the state and ranks among the highest in the nation.

I. Foster Care Block Grant

The Executive Budget includes \$383.5 million in Foster Care Block Grant funding to support foster care services, including kinship guardianship programs. A \$62 million adjustment is included in the proposed budget, which reflects a proportionate rightsizing in state share funds following a dramatic reduction in New York State's foster care population since this fund was established in 2002. This change aligns the state's share closer to 50 percent, which is consistent with the original intent of the fund.

II. Runaway and Homeless Youth

The Governor has shown a steadfast commitment to persons experiencing or on the brink of homelessness in New York State, and to that end, the budget provides greater flexibility to municipalities receiving Runaway and Homeless Youth funds. The proposal raises the upper age limit for programs serving at-risk youth in transitional independent living programs from 21 to age 24 and allows programs to extend the length of residential services from 18 to 24 months. This is an option for municipalities and is in recognition that finding long-term, stable housing for homeless youth and young adults

may take longer than is currently provided for in statute. The proposal also allows counties the option of increasing the length of stay for runaway youth in crisis shelters from 30 days to 120 days.

III. Re-investment for Preventative Services

The Executive Budget includes authority for OCFS to invest adoption assistance savings of \$7 million, an increase of \$2 million, for preventive services and other post-adoption services as required by federal law for children at risk of entering foster care. OCFS used savings last year to invest in the establishment of eight new Permanency Resource Centers throughout the state to support post-adoptive and kinship families. In addition, we used some of the funds to expand Healthy Families NY, our evidence-based home visiting program. This year's additional funds will allow the state to establish Permanency Resource Centers in new areas and enable further expansion of Healthy Families.

IV. Protecting New York State Children

Protecting children and keeping kids safe are our core mission at OCFS. I am sure you are aware of recent high-profile child fatalities and child abuse cases that have occurred statewide. These cases are horrific and always lead us back to the question, "What can we do to correct problems within the system and how can we further protect the children in our state?" OCFS's role is to review all of these cases, assess the adequacy of any child welfare services involvement with the family, and determine where there are failures locally and systemically. We employ a wide range of responses and take aggressive action to address any failures, including the appointment of an independent monitor, which we have done in several circumstances and, most recently in New York City.

We are committed to continuing our statewide focus on improving front line supervision of child welfare staff. We will soon unveil a new, state-of-the-art project to improve training for child welfare caseworkers that includes live simulations of the complex environments and critical decision making processes they must navigate on a daily basis. We also look to adopt best practices to bring forward new ideas for improving our system of child protection in New York State. We are examining the benefits of new technologies, such as data mining resources and policies that show promise. And we plan to launch a child welfare dashboard, which will display key safety and permanency data points, which will assist local districts in their investigations and the state in its oversight role.

V. Child Care for Low Income New Yorkers

The Governor's budget includes several related proposals to help low-income working families. The Executive Budget maintains our critical investment in the Child Care Subsidy Program at \$806 million. New York State is a national leader in directing the majority of its entire Child Care Development Fund allocation to support child care subsidies that are crucial to working families and providers. The Governor has proposed a \$35 million expansion of after-school programs, which is projected to add an additional 22,000 slots statewide. OCFS looks forward to administering this program. In addition to this, the Governor continues his commitment to Pre-K expansion with an additional \$5 million investment in this year's budget.

VI. Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility

This year's budget proposal also reflects the Governor's continuing commitment to raising the age of criminal responsibility in New York State. It is simply unacceptable that we have yet to raise the age.

OCFS has spent the past three years significantly modifying our juvenile residential programs through enhanced security, expansion of educational and vocational certification programs and developing a nationally-recognized quality assurance system.

Youth and staff safety is the first priority and we are seeing an overall decline in youth-on-youth and youth-on-staff violence. We are ever vigilant in our efforts to further reduce these incidents, and we exceed the national average in staffing our secure facilities. Youth are required to participate in a full day of school, college courses or vocational programming that will increase their chances for successful re-entry into their communities. We currently provide post-release supervision for juvenile delinquents and have created juvenile offender (JO) specialists who are working to assist parole officers in supervising youth returned to their families and communities.

It is time that we treat all 16- and 17-year-olds in a system that is specially designed to address their unique needs. It is time for New York to finally join the rest of the nation in recognizing the potential of our youth, and OCFS will be ready to provide that system of care.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address you today. I welcome your questions and comments.

