

**New Jersey Department of Children and Families Commissioner Allison Blake  
Testimony on Fiscal Year 2015 Proposed Budget  
Before the New Jersey State Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee  
April 3, 2014**

Good afternoon Chairman Sarlo and the members of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. I'm pleased to join you today, along with my colleagues from the Department of Children and Families, to discuss the Fiscal Year 2015 Proposed Budget. With me are Assistant Commissioner Joseph Ribsam, Chief of Staff Barbara Rusen and Chief Administrator Doris Windle.

I would like to take a moment to thank Governor Christie and the State Legislature for their ongoing commitment to the women, children, youth, and families of New Jersey and their support for our department's mission, which is to work in partnership with our

communities to ensure the safety, well-being, and success of our children and families.

The Governor and State Legislature's support has been vital to the successful realignment our department, creating four new focus areas: Child Protection and Permanency, Children's System of Care, Family and Community Partnerships, and Women's Services. Our nearly 7,000 employees work within and among these focus areas to serve more than 100,000 women, children, youth, and families each month, with an annual budget of \$1.6 billion.

The Department of Children and Families is a vision-focused and mission-driven department. We embrace 14 core values that frame our work with every individual we serve. This approach has allowed us to tackle new challenges, while continuously monitoring and improving upon our ongoing critical responsibilities. These new challenges, which will be the focus of my testimony this afternoon, include human trafficking, long-term Sandy recovery, and expanding the Children's System of Care for children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities and youth struggling with substance abuse.

### **Human Trafficking**

Over the last year there has been greater attention on human trafficking. And as we further understood this problem, we responded.

We set out to develop greater awareness and education about the tragedy of human trafficking by launching an e-newsletter for our staff and stakeholders. We also conducted a full-day training course for our front line staff and provided awareness and clinical training to our provider agencies that serve individuals at greatest risk.

We developed partnerships and strong working relationships with the Attorney General's Office, FBI, U.S. Immigration and Customs and others. We supported law enforcement operations and partnered with the Attorney General's Office in a training program about the role of gangs in human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Critical to our human trafficking work is providing treatment services and support to youth survivors. Our Children's System of Care provides immediate intervention and assessment and our Care Management Organizations provide ongoing services for these survivors.

We also expanded capacity for residential treatment services for youth impacted by this challenging issue. We are one of the first states in the nation to develop residential behavioral health services specifically for trafficking survivors.

### **Creating An Integrated System of Care for Children and Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Youth Needing Substance Abuse Treatment**

We have devoted significant attention and resources to the successful integration of services for children with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

You may recall that between July 2012 and January 2013, over 16,000 youth with developmental and intellectual disabilities transitioned into our Children's System of Care.

These children and their families now have a single point of access to needed services 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The growing use of heroin among young people is a disturbing trend. To begin to respond to this problem and the expected increase in opioid use and dependence among youth in Sandy-impacted communities, we contracted with Lighthouse of Mays Landing for residential drug detox services, providing new treatment beds for youth who need help. The transition of substance abuse services from the Department of Human Services to DCF means youth under 18 now receive continuous and uninterrupted care for their substance abuse problem. When discharged from detox, these youth continue to receive substance abuse services seamlessly and without interruption.

Recognizing that children and youth often experience co-occurring disorders, the integration of these services into our Children's System of Care has allowed us to identify and develop treatment strategies responsive to their needs. While this has resulted in greater use of our behavioral health services, I wholeheartedly believe that by appropriately identifying and treating the entire child, we can forestall many of the challenges that later become debilitating and more costly.

We're very proud of our Children's System of Care team and their efforts throughout the transition. Parents have told us they're pleased that they can more easily schedule care for their child. It is this type of consistent feedback that tells us the transition and single

point of access system is having a great and positive impact on these families and their children.

### **Educating Our Children**

Just a few weeks ago we partnered with the Department of Education to release new guidance to help school districts and local child protection staff work cooperatively to ensure the educational success of the children and youth we jointly serve. This guidance is an important step forward to help the more than 7,000 children in foster care move ahead in school.

At the same time we joined with the Administrative Office of the Courts and the Department of Education to co-train local-level child protection staff, attorneys and educators to develop strategies to bolster and support the education of children and youth in out-of-home care.

### **Adolescent Planning**

Since my appointment as commissioner in the spring of 2010, we have made great strides in improving policy, practice, and programming for DCF involved adolescents.

Accomplishments include expanding housing programs, creating a centralized online system to access housing, enhancing the independent living stipend, offering online financial literacy programming, and entirely restructuring and expanding our Youth Advisory Boards to promote youth leadership and ensure that youth drive important changes.

In order to continue this forward momentum, we applied for a Federal planning grant in 2013 to develop a model intervention for child welfare involved youth and young adults who are at-risk for, or have experienced, homelessness. Thanks to an impressive number of support letters from stakeholders statewide, our *ConnectingYOUth! Project* was awarded a \$720,000 two-year planning grant.

Receiving this federal grant acknowledges the great progress we have made, and our plans for further progress moving forward, to improve the lives of the adolescents we serve.

### **Sandy Recovery Work**

National research demonstrates that many social ills, including child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, sexual violence, and domestic violence can increase in the months and years following a natural disaster.

Informed by feedback from our staff, stakeholders, and critical community partners, as well as national research, we developed a recovery plan to improve post-storm outcomes for Sandy survivors that focuses on:

- strengthening families and preventing child abuse,
- preventing violence and exploitation, and
- building resiliency and supporting recovery.

Our work includes expanding services available at Family Success Centers; conducting outreach to homeless youth; training vulnerable youth and their caregivers in human trafficking prevention; supporting psychosocial intervention at schools; training pediatricians to recognize disaster related trauma, and expanding substance abuse services.

For example, we extended the hours of our Family Success Centers in Sandy-impacted counties and added outpost locations. We made services more accessible and convenient to Sandy survivors right in their own community.

We anticipated an increase in domestic violence and responded by working with our statewide network of DV agencies to expand our prevention and intervention services for women and their children. These services include expanded housing assistance, counseling, and other supports.

Cognizant that research indicates that natural disasters can increase sexual violence against women, we again responded by expanding the number of sexual violence prevention coordinators as well as accompaniment, counseling, and other supports.

To help women impacted by the storm who lost their primary source of income, we expanded our displaced homemaker program to serve more people. These programs provide important job skills training for today's labor market and include transportation, clothing, and child care assistance.

These are just some of the many supports we've provided in the wake of Sandy.

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While I could happily continue to talk about all of the remarkable work that DCF's staff and providers offer to over 100,000 women, children, youth, and families each month, I was asked to keep my opening remarks to ten minutes. So in conclusion, I would like to quickly mention DCF's strategic plan, which provides for us a clear path as we move forward. Our long-term strategic planning process, which began three years ago, has helped sharpen our focus to integrate our services across the department so that we can provide a full continuum of care for New Jersey's most vulnerable.

I am proud that much of the work we set out to undertake as part of the strategic planning process has either been accomplished or is actively underway. These accomplishments represent our department's collective efforts over the last three years

and were achieved while simultaneously responding to Superstorm Sandy, integrating services for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and responding to the challenge of human trafficking.

As we look to the future and consider the goals we set three years ago, our efforts going forward will include a continued focus on transparency and accountability as well as moving toward more evidenced-based and trauma-informed practice.

This focus is central to fulfilling our department's mission to work in partnership with

New Jersey's communities to ensure the safety, well-being, and success of New

Jersey's children and families.

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