

Assembly Budget Committee – FY 2020 Budget Testimony
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Good morning, Chairwoman Pintor Marin, Vice Chairman Burzichelli and members of the Assembly Budget Committee. Thank you for giving me and my leadership team an opportunity to discuss the Governor’s proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2020, and the Administration’s ongoing commitment to support and strengthen children and families in the Garden State.

At the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, we are engaged, every day, in the process of supporting the well-being of children, youth, families and women by seeing to it that every New Jersey resident is safe, healthy and connected. The individual children, youth, women and families we serve are our neighbors, your constituents and members of all of our communities. Frankly, there is nothing that separates each of us from “them.” When we ourselves, and when the constituents we all are here to serve, are safe, healthy and connected – that is when we are all capable of reaching our fullest potential, and contributing the most to our families and to our communities.

At DCF, we support individuals and families to become their best selves through a network of social service programs and supports, community partnerships, engagement with nonprofit advocacy organizations, and provider contracts.

Under this administration, DCF will focus on using state of the art analytic and social science approaches to design and maintain this service continuum to ensure that the network uses the most effective approaches and meets the needs of all constituents.

We know that there are forces in people’s lives that challenge their ability to reach their full potential.

We know, for example, that Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are present in not just the children we are charged to protect, but have also interrupted the life course of parents, caregivers, neighbors, and other trusted adults – and that the pattern of adversity can sometimes stretch across generations.

We know that poverty, racism, lack of education, inadequate health care, stigma and other social determinants can stand in the way of individuals’ and families’ ability to thrive.

But, we also know that there is inherent strength and resilience in children and adults. And that with the right assistance at the right time, most families can remain intact, most individuals can not only survive, but heal from adversity, and most family systems can work together to return to, or become, a stable, healthy and loving unit.

That’s why our work at DCF is focused on helping families and survivors of family violence to move beyond ACEs and trauma, overcome the significant challenges they face, and move forward, to a place of resiliency, recovery and repair.

I am continually inspired by the capacity for courage and compassion that our families exhibit as they navigate through our system to achieve a positive outcome. Our constituents, with help and support from our dedicated DCF workforce and our network of providers, do the hard work to achieve their best selves.

I had the opportunity this past year to hear from many of the people we serve through the Department's programs and initiatives.

I conducted a 21-county Listening Tour, meeting with about 500 parents and older youth who are engaged in DCF's services. It was important for me to take time to hear directly from constituents regarding their personal experiences with our Department and with our contracted providers.

And let me say, the stories I heard during the Listening Tour were equally heartbreaking and inspirational.

For these survivors, parents and youth who shared their stories with me, and for everyone we strive to serve – we owe them all our very best.

At DCF, we are fortunate that we have committed, collaborative partners – in Governor Murphy and in all of you – because, collectively, you have given us the tools, the resources and the backing we need in order to meet the needs of New Jersey's women, children and families.

The Governor's proposed budget allocates more than \$1.15 billion in state funding to continue to preserve DCF's priorities and programs through FY 2020.

New Jersey is continuing its investment in the services that make a difference in our families' lives – the safety interventions to protect children, programs to support mental and behavioral health, domestic violence and sexual assault prevention, substance abuse treatment, therapeutic interventions for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, prevention-first initiatives through our family and community partnerships, and much more.

Beyond maintaining a high level of excellence in the services that New Jersey families have the right to expect, Governor Murphy's budget continues to support promising programs that will keep New Jersey at the forefront of efforts across the country to continually improve public service systems.

And as we begin to envision DCF as part of a 21st Century model of child welfare, we will look to strategically realign those services in order to put greater emphasis on the primary prevention of child abuse and neglect before it occurs, rather than to focus the lion's share of our efforts on responding to maltreatment after it occurs.

Our Division of Family Community Partnerships is tasked with connecting families to community-based supports and to each other, so that we can head off adversity and advance resiliency.

We're excited to partner with First Lady Tammy Murphy and our sister agencies in state government to promote the Nurture NJ campaign. Reducing racial disparities in maternal and infant health care means directly confronting racism, the greatest stain on our national culture. At DCF, in addition to examining the extent to which our prevention programming is meeting the needs of all New Jersey families, we are also digging in deep to understand racial disproportionality and disparity in the child and family serving systems, nationally and locally, by working with Dr. Carol Spigner, a leader in national work to address racial inequities in child welfare. Dr. Spigner will be working with us this year to help us integrate policies that advance racial equity in the work that we do.

In addition to efforts to directly address systemic racism, DCF's Home Visiting services are key to this approach. Through Home Visiting, we provide in-home services and supports to new parents to improve maternal and child health outcomes, connecting new moms with postpartum care and depression screening, ensuring babies are healthy and meeting developmental benchmarks, and supporting parents with training and education.

In 2018, across all 21 counties in the State of New Jersey, seven thousand families opted to receive evidence-based home visiting services, resulting in more than 73,500 home visits. Given that our Home Visiting model is an invaluable tool that can help mitigate racial disparities in access to postpartum treatment and support, we hope to see those numbers rise in the next fiscal year.

As we consider the mandate to address child and family wellness, we know that clinical supports and coordinated treatment help our families that may be struggling to parent a child, adolescent or young adult with substance abuse disorder, mental or behavioral health challenges or intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The Children's System of Care was a hard-fought victory for parents in New Jersey, parents who fought for years to insist that public systems meet our collective obligation to help when a family in which a child, adolescent or young adult is in need of treatment to address a serious behavioral health condition. Several years ago, the scope of the Children's System of Care was expanded to include services to youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. DCF continues to evolve in order to be responsive to the needs of children and youth and their families, and I look forward to working with our stakeholders. We will soon be launching an advisory committee, including providers and advocates with lived experience to help design an integrated health care approach to services available through the department. Two clear areas of focus in this endeavor will be to ensure that we have family voice at the table at every turn, and to endeavor that the rate structure is adequate to support the work of our provider network.

Throughout DCF, our network of public services for children, youth, families and women continues to innovate and perform well.

Last month, the Division on Women issued an RFP to support Displaced Homemakers statewide. Programs will be added in the final five counties: Cape May, Salem, Camden, Mercer and Somerset to offer services designed to enhance participants' employability and earning potential and to increase the quality of their lives and those of their families. Partnerships and collaborations with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development's, One Stop Career Centers, industry partners, higher education, nonprofit organizations and local or state government agencies are critical to the success of Displaced Homemaker Programs. These alliances provide Displaced Homemakers with additional avenues to economic self-sufficiency.

In addition to increasing services to displaced homemakers, the Division on Women is working to expand our footprint across the state and bring the Division back to its intended role of advocating for and raising the profile of women in New Jersey. While continuing the efforts to prevent sexual assault and domestic violence, and heal its victims, the Division on Women is also focused on the empowerment of girls and young women and those in marginalized communities.

A recent report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation recognized New Jersey as among the national leaders in keeping kids with families – rather than relying on group homes or congregate care - when a child has to be removed from the home in order to keep them safe.

In New Jersey, we reserve congregate care primarily for clinically-based treatment through the Children’s System of Care. And while we are focused, as a department, on increasing the number of children placed with kin when an out-of-home placement is necessary, I’m proud of New Jersey’s track record in shifting children away from congregate care as a whole – because in New Jersey, we know the value in keeping children in their own homes and in their own communities.

I’m also proud to share with you today that New Jersey’s track record in the use of family and community based care is not the only way in which New Jersey is leading the family-centered service field in the United States.

As evidenced by the US Administration for Children and Families’ most recent review of child protective services across the United States:

- The rate at which children are maltreated in New Jersey is lower than the national average.
- The rate at which children continue to be maltreated following an initial child welfare intervention is significantly lower than the national average.
- And the rate at which New Jersey relies on out of home placement as an intervention to keep children safe is amongst the lowest in the United States.

Remarkably, from January, 2018 to January 2019, we safely reduced the number of children in out-of-home placement by 10 percent, at a time when other jurisdictions across the United States are seeing increases in their use of foster care as they confront the opioid epidemic. At the height of child welfare reform in the Garden State, approximately 13,500 children were served outside of their homes. Today, that number stands at under 5,600. Especially at this moment in our nation’s history, New Jersey’s track record in reducing family separation as a public policy is something we can all be proud of.

None of the work I have described to you is possible without an amazing staff of dedicated individuals, who are willing to do whatever they can to support children and families in New Jersey.

To support the efforts of our workforce, DCF is committed to creating a culture of safety and accountability, of fairness and forward-thinking.

In the past year, we advanced two major initiatives related to staff health and wellness. First, with the generous support of Casey Family Programs, Alia Innovations, a national non-profit dedicated to child welfare reform, is providing training to senior leaders and managers throughout the organization regarding trauma and resilience. Alia also conducts ten monthly workforce well-being groups and telephone micro-learnings available to all 6,600 DCF staff.

In addition, DCF began working with Collaborative Safety, LLC, a consulting practice that assists human services agencies in using state-of-the art safety models like those used in aviation, heavy industry and health care, to promote organizational cultures that use systemic factor analysis to promote safety for children, families and staff. To date DCF senior leadership have received initial training in human factors

and system safety, and DCF is training a team of reviewers to use this approach to manage critical incident review processes, including critical incidents related to staff safety.

And stemming from the feedback I received during my Listening Tour, I've created an Office of Family Voice, to advance DCF's ability to collaborate with our program participants as consultants, embedded in our policy making and program design. State services can be hard to navigate. The Office of Family Voice will provide a resource and outlet for people to engage with the department, organizationally and operationally.

Despite all that I have outlined, and despite all of the strengths of our systems in the national context, however, I believe we have a moral obligation to do more.

As I've said to my staff before, the families that we serve don't care if we rank first in the nation or 50th – they care about the services they're receiving today.

And if one child is struggling in our system, that's one child too many.

New Jersey's child and family service system is at a pivotal crossroads, and while we have much to be proud of, the hard work of transforming our system – of creating a true paradigm shift in how we think about and how we engage in the service of strengthening families– that hard work is in motion.

To enact the sea change that I believe is demanded and warranted for our children and our families, it's going to take all three branches of government, working together – executive, judicial and legislative.

Each of us has something to contribute, and working together, we can positively impact the lives of children and families throughout the Garden State.

This is how we will transform our system to become the 21st Century child and family serving system that our families need and deserve.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions about DCF's budget and about the future direction of our Department.