

**Testimony Presented by  
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**Council of Family & Child Caring Agencies**

**Before the New York City General Welfare and  
Women's Issues Committees**

**March 23, 2006**

Good afternoon, my name is Jim Purcell and I am the executive director of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA). We are the principal statewide representative for nearly all the not-for-profit agencies providing services to New York's abused, neglected and troubled children and their families. COFCCA's member agencies keep families together, reunite families broken apart by substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental health problems, and find new permanent homes for children whose parents can't or won't care for them.

In New York City our 60-plus members include all of the agencies with which ACS contracts for foster care and about 80% of the providers of preventive services.

On their behalf, I thank Chairman deBlasio and the members of the General Welfare and Women's Issues Committee for the opportunity to address the budget of the Administration for Children's Services and its impact on the well-being of the children and families we serve. I also thank you for your continued attention to the need for adequate resources to protect the City's most vulnerable children.

With your support, Mayor Bloomberg made significant additions to the ACS budget in January, following the series of tragic deaths of children known to the City. At that time, we voiced our strong endorsement for the financial and programmatic changes announced to help ACS better assist the children in need of protection. We have continued to work very closely with ACS to identify cases that require further attention. All the foster care and preventive services agencies conducted safety reviews of all their cases to ensure that no cries of children go unheeded.

In addition, representatives of our agencies have been working very closely with ACS to implement greater cooperation between ACS Child Protective workers and caseworkers at Preventive Services programs. The work of protecting children through prevention of child abuse that occurs in our Preventive Services Programs, and healing children who have been victims of family dysfunction and abuse through foster care services is a vital

part of the child welfare system. The dedicated caseworkers and foster parents who provide these services need support as well.

Currently, caseworkers in Preventive Services programs are required to work with 15 families each, which means that they are monitoring the safety of as many as 35 to 40 or more children at the same time. The dramatic drop in the use of foster care should help explain how high risk are the cases being referred to Preventive Services. Five years ago, many of these children would have been placed in foster care. Now, they are being maintained in homes that present a very high risk to the children.

And while Preventive caseworkers are monitoring the safety of these children deemed at risk by ACS Child Protection Workers, they are also working to heal the families, arranging for the necessary services, and documenting every conversation and interaction in two different mandated computer systems—the Connections system required by the state and the Promise system mandated by ACS

While the Preventive Services Programs are expected to work with families whose children may qualify for foster care placement, foster care families are asked to care for children who qualify for placement in Residential Treatment Centers and Psychiatric facilities. The rates ACS pays for our foster family programs assume that each worker will have a caseload of 20 children. With a caseload of 20 children each caseworker has an average of 5.5 hours per month to devote to each child.

That is an average of 5.5 hours to:

- Visit the child;
- Visit the foster home;
- Visit the birth family;
- Recruit an adoptive family if needed;
- Prepare for and attend court hearings;
- Resolve any stipend payment changes or problems the foster family may experience;
- Arrange needed services for the birth family;
- Arrange needed services the child may need;
- Arrange supports the foster parents needs;
- Oversee training of the foster parents;
- Counsel the child;
- Counsel the birth family;
- Arrange all medical, dental, and mental health care the child needs;
- Prepare the birth family for the return of their child, including arranging housing, welfare supports, food stamps, etc;
- Follow up on any concerns raised by ACS case monitors;
- Respond to emergency calls from the child, foster family, or birth family; and

- Document all of these activities in the mandated new computer system and complete extensive forms required by the new Permanency Law.

It is not possible to do all of these tasks, all the while working energetically to keep the children in foster care only for the shortest possible amount of time, and to consistently do a good job for every child and their family.

Further, the extremely low salaries, and lack of support staff and supervisory spans of control leave workers feeling alone in their responsibilities. These factors combine to create an annual turnover rate of about 40%. This turnover exacerbates the time needed to complete all of the above-enumerated duties. Agencies are forced to leave positions vacant for weeks in order to save money that is not included in their rates or contracts. And, almost unbelievably, ACS demands that our workers continue to be responsible and to do case work for children on trial discharge, AWOL, or hospitalized even as ACS refuses to pay for any of these services. Our workers' real caseloads average far more than 20 children.

We assert that New York City has been inappropriately withholding funds from our foster care agencies. The foster care contracts with ACS say that our agencies will be paid the rate deemed appropriate by the state's rate setting system unless the City has insufficient funds. Yet the City systematically withdraws funds from the foster care account. The impact is that our agencies are paid millions less than they have already spent to care, support, and keep safe your children. The state was so concerned that last year they said that by July 2006 the City must pay the full amount to residential facilities caring for the most difficult youth; and we worked with the Governor's Office and the Legislature to get that requirement fully funded by the state. ACS has so reduced the number of youth in these facilities that there is enough state funds in the foster care budget you passed as well as the new funds in the Governor's budget for NYC for this purpose to fund those rates today. Why wait?

Similarly, ACS has developed their own rate system for the community based foster family programs. It sounds good; it's described as a "performance based" system. We're all for high performance; but when the rate system itself ignores the real costs which agencies must incur and again systematically underpays agencies it's only real connection with performance is to inhibit high level performance by ignoring the actual needs of the agencies for adequate revenue to pay for what the City wants to buy: high quality care for all children.

. Is it any wonder that experienced workers are leaving Foster Care and Preventive Services Programs because of the newly mandated demands that distract them from their first obligation of working with families? In the past six months, out of a sample of nine agencies, more than an average of ten workers has left each agency because of the combined demands of the Connections implementation, the Permanency Planning changes that call for more time in Family Court,

their Preventive Programs.

If New York City really wants the highest quality child welfare program it says it wants and if it expects our preventive services and foster care agencies to deliver these vital safety services at consistently high quality then these issues must be addressed.

We ask the City Council to work with Mayor Bloomberg to make the following happen now.

Caseload sizes for preventive services and foster care workers must be lowered. We propose that preventive caseloads be no larger than 12 families; and that this level be reduced for very high-risk cases and for large family sizes. Foster care caseloads should be an average of 15:1 and all children should count and be paid for by the City. In both instances it is critical that sufficient funding be included to enable agencies to recruit replacement workers rapidly so that caseloads are not increased every time a worker leaves.

Salaries for workers must be increased so that the turnover rate is reduced. Salaries more comparable to similar ACS front line workers are appropriate. We believe very strongly that if the caseworkers stayed in their positions longer, that children would stay in foster care for less time and families would be deemed safe and healthy for their children quicker. Worker turnover is a blight that makes children and families wait while new workers learn their jobs.

Provide the funds and require ACS to comply with the contract and pay the correct rates now, while developing the enhancements described herein. We are fully prepared to work with ACS to incorporate a performance base in our contracts so long as reasonable costs of caring for the children, monitoring their safety, and expediting their permanency are included.

The addition of family and youth advocate positions to every unit of workers in both preventive services and foster care programs would free up workers for higher priority work, better support permanency efforts, and will speed discharges. These types of para-professional workers have proven their value over and over in better linkages with families, better linkages with community resources, etc. They are not funded in either our foster care or preventive services contracts.

The most recent ACS contracts for intensive preventive services have included significant pools of money to purchase needed services and supports, notably substance abuse treatment and mental health services. But the regular preventive contracts which already serve thousands of high need families have only token funds available for these critical services. Additional funds to meet the immediate needs of these high-risk families are vitally needed for all families.

Determine if additional preventive services are needed. While the foster care census has declined drastically, 22% last year alone there has not been a concomitant increase in the number of families receiving preventive services.

ACS has announced some additional program slots over recent months, but a more careful analysis is needed particularly because there was actually a slight decline in the use of preventive services last year.

In particular we believe that greater use of Homemaker services for high risk families is a great investment, not only in improving parenting skills, but also because it puts a worker in the home for hours at a time in support of the family.

Finally, while it is “politically incorrect” to say this, the basic support and management needed to operate high quality programs are not funded by New York City. Even as ACS has substantially improved its own internal management, created specialist functions to support their front line workers, added dozens of staff to ensure quality, improved office space, etc these components of a quality programs are denied to the not-for-profit agencies.

Included in any review of administrative costs must be recognition of the substantial costs associated with multiple and overlapping automated systems required by OCFS and ACS. The agencies need both more in-house technical support but also recognition of the front line staff time devoted to these endeavors. Training resources as well as most Quality Assurance staff are included in administrative costs centers.

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