

TESTIMONY OF JAMES F. PURCELL
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BEFORE THE
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL GENERAL WELFARE COMMITTEE
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Good afternoon, I am James F. Purcell, the Executive Director of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA). COFCCA is the primary statewide membership organization for child welfare services providers, representing 110 not-for-profit agencies that contract with the New York City Administration for Children's Services and the county departments of social services to provide foster care, preventive services, adoption, and aftercare services as well as education for children on our facility campuses. Our member agencies provide foster care to almost all of the City's children in care and preventive services to well over 85% of the families served by NYC.

On behalf of the vulnerable children and families served by these agencies, I gratefully thank Chairman de Blasio for your leadership on all issues affecting the safety and well-being of the children of this city. I also thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Preliminary Budget and its impact on these very vulnerable children and their families.

We come before you today with one request: that you continue and expand your commitment to ensure that preventive services are offered to families whose children are at risk of abuse or severe neglect as determined by the City's Administration for Children's Services—so the children can remain safely at home and their families can remain together. Let us not lose our resolve or our focus: the children of New York City need the supports you can provide in this budget to keep them safe and at home.

Last year, as you well know, was a year during which a group of terrible tragedies, the deaths of Nixzmary Brown and several other children, focused much public attention on the child welfare system. Up to that tragic event there had been much praise for the dramatic reduction in the number of children placed in foster care, but scant notice of whether the children left at home at continuing risk were receiving the services necessary to keep them safe. Those services, called Preventive Services, were developed to avert foster care and assure the safety of children remaining at home in settings that jeopardize their well-being through abuse or hazardous neglect due to unsafe housing, substance abuse, domestic violence, severe mental illness, and sexual abuse.

Subsequent investigations brought to light the fact that not all children known to the City to be at high-risk in their families were getting access to the protection and assistance afforded by Preventive Services. The Mayor and the City's Administration for Children's Services acted quickly and strongly, with the support of the City Council, to remedy the gaps in services, hire more Child Protective Workers and better train them to respond properly to situations of children at risk of abuse and severe neglect.

The City also acknowledged the need for more funding for Preventive Services Programs. \$9 million was found in the budget to enhance the provision of services by programs in high need areas of the city, which included nearly all Preventive programs. This money has been used very effectively in helping families at risk. In addition, a Safety Initiative was passed by the City Council adding \$4.2 million to reduce caseloads in all General Preventive and Beacon Programs from the prior ratio of 1 caseworker overseeing 15 families to the current 1:12 ratio. Since nearly all families receiving Preventive Services have more than one child, this ratio is more like 1 caseworker to e likely 40 individuals.

Thanks to the Safety Initiative, the implementation of the reduction in caseloads has had an immediate impact on the ability of our preventive services caseworkers to address the complex problems and needs of the families with which they work. I would like to cite specific examples from Preventive Programs in the various boroughs.

“As a result of the reduced caseloads the workers are more involved with visits and interventions related to high risk cases. They are better able to keep up with the documentation demands and deal with the computer systems of Connections and PROMIS. *..Puerto Rican Family Institute—South Bronx*

“Although it is early in the caseload reduction, I can tell you that staff morale has dramatically improved. Hiring for the vacant positions has become ... easier and we have been able to hire some very impressive MSW (Masters of Social Work) staff due to a much more manageable caseload. The staff has come very close to averaging three casework contacts per family, which is much more realistic with a reduced caseload.”

Good Shepherd Services—Red Hook, Brooklyn

“Reduced caseload is particularly helpful for the Intake Case Planner/Social Worker, for whom early engagement and rapid assessment of the needs of high risk families is critical to establishing an effective service plan and treatment plan.”

Harlem-Dowling Westside Center for Children and Family Services

- “Less overtime therefore less burn out
- Better ability to organize time and work
- Better quality paperwork
- Better able to handle the extra demands of PROMIS and Connections
- Better quality of casework contact
- Better ability to focus on outreach and establishing relationships with clients more intensively at the beginning of services
- More time to attend training and improve as human service workers
- More time to spend on cases during supervision

- More time to participate in projects and coordinate enhancement of services
- Better quality of group services with extra time to prepare
- More time to collaborate with other service providers
- More time to be in the field to advocate and translate for our non-English proficient clients (which is most of our clients)”

Lower East Side Family Union—Queens Program

“The staff feel they have more time to work with families. This is especially true as the families are presenting more complex and difficult issues than in the past.”

Seamen’s Society for Children and Families—Staten Island

These are just some representative statements that reflect the critical importance of keeping caseloads lowered. We know that the Council and the Mayor could not have meant to reduce caseloads for a year, because the numbers of children at high risk isn’t a temporary occurrence. That is why we’re urging the City Council and the Mayor’s Office to renew and baseline the funding for reduced caseloads in Preventive Services.

The total need is \$6.7M. The amount is larger this year because it includes all the General Preventive Programs and the Beacons as well as the Family Rehabilitation Programs (FRP), which work with families affected by Substance Abuse, and the Specialized Medical Programs, which work with families and/or children afflicted with HIV/AIDS and severe handicapping disabilities. Earlier you heard Commissioner Mattingly call for these same funds because ACS recognizes that the Council’s actions to reduce case loads last year kept more very vulnerable children safe while our preventive services programs worked to strengthen their family’s ability to care for them.

The additional funding would reduce the staffing ratio in the FRP programs and the Specialized Medical to 1:8. Each of these types of programs offers intensive services. Caseworkers in the FRP programs work closely with parents undergoing drug and alcohol rehabilitation to ensure that their addictions do not compromise the safety of their children. Parents and children in these families require intensive counseling to heal and develop health family patterns. Parents must learn to understand and cope with the anger of children who have suffered from the violence and/or neglect resulting from the parent’s addiction.

In the Specialized Medical programs, children who would previously have been institutionalized because of their disabilities are functioning in society and in their families thanks to programs that provide counseling and constant support to the families, and exceptional medical treatment to the children. The three specialized Medical programs serve families in need citywide, therefore unlike community based General Preventive Programs and Beacons, caseworkers at these programs often must travel to opposite ends of the city to family homes to ensure the safety and well being of the children. Furthermore, the limited mobility of the children and families requires workers to visit homes far more frequently. Thus the caseload reduction is crucial for ensuring the quality of the work in these programs. Such programs enable severely disabled

children to participate in school and limited recreational activities. They enable their families to function together in a way that would have been impossible just 10 years ago.

Just as the City recognized the need to reduce caseloads for General Preventives and Beacons because of the increasing complexity of the families at risk and the increasing demands for computerized documentation, so should the City lower the caseloads in these specialized programs from the current 1:10 ratio to the far more manageable 1:8.

While lowering the caseloads for caseworkers is of critical importance, it is also essential to retain the current 1:5 ratio for supervisors. In Preventive Services programs, supervisors play the vital role of reviewing the caseworkers' assessments and plans and helping to chart the course using their experienced professional and clinical skills to address the stressors that threaten child safety.

The total cost of lowering caseloads in Preventive Programs is \$6.7 million for the City, which would bring a 65% match from the State—making it a very good investment in the safety and well-being of our City's children.

While the good news is that far more children at risk are staying safely at home due to the City's reliance on Preventive Services, the harsh reality is that the demand is exceeding the supply. We really shouldn't be surprised at this development given the dramatic drop in foster care. Just because far fewer children are being placed in foster care, doesn't mean that the risk has disappeared. The number of reports to the State Child Abuse Register has remained extremely high and investigations continue to prove that more than one-third of these reports are accurate. It is clear from the current picture that Preventive Services must be expanded to accommodate the increasing need to protect children at home. Virtually all of the preventive services slots are full, and too many families are on waiting lists. This is dangerous. It is time to expand the capacity of these programs to match services with vulnerable families in every borough. We urge the Council to work with the mayor and ACS to increase the number of families served by at least 10% this year, and to see that these increases are vital to the safety of children.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Preventive Services has made it possible for children at high risk of abuse and hazardous neglect to remain safely at home. For these programs to continue to do their job well, they need;

- The City Council to re-appropriate \$4.2 M and add \$2.5 million for a total of \$6.7 million to reduce caseloads in all Preventive Programs to manageable levels. These funds must be baselined this year.
- ACS to baseline the \$9 million in Enhancement funding that has been used so effectively in working with high risk families in high need communities to ensure the safety of their children.

- Expanded capacity to reduce the strain on currently over-utilized programs and make sure that children at risk have the protection of Preventive Programs for as long as necessary.
- A Cost of Living Adjustment of \$8.1 Million for all Preventive Services Programs to match the increase provided to city workers.