



Leadership, voice and vision for child welfare in New York State

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO
THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY
COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
SUPPORTS FOR FOSTER PARENTS AND RELATIVE AND NON-RELATIVE CARETAKERS

Thursday, December 14, 2017

Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies

Greetings, Assemblywoman Jaffee and members of the Committee on Children and Families, and thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the state's support of foster parents, relative, and non-relative caretakers. The Council of Family and Child Caring agencies, also known as COFCCA, represents 100 New York State child welfare agencies, organizations that provide foster care and child maltreatment prevention services to many thousands of families. Our members range from large multiservice agencies to small community-based preventive services programs from Buffalo to Riverhead. All of our members, regardless of size, work to assist children, youth and families to maximize their potential participate in making New York move "Ever Upward."

COFCCA's member agencies are also very involved in helping New York State recruit, train, support and sustain caregivers in the many types of child placements utilized to keep children safe and promote their well-being. These caregivers include kin- and non-kin foster parents opening their homes to children and child care staff nurturing youth in residential milieus. While both of these groups do similar work with New York's children and families, some of their needs are different.

Foster parents (by which we mean both kinship and non-relative) are, first and foremost, volunteers. Yes, they receive a stipend to offset some of the expenses of caring for the children entrusted to their care, but the stipend does not completely cover the costs of providing for these children's often-complex needs. Besides direct costs



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like room and board, foster parents shoulder the costs of transporting children to medical and behavioral health appointments, Family Court, family visits, agency meetings, and multiple other destinations, often multiple times each week. Foster parents pick up the slack when day care enrollment is delayed, or the school bus route isn't changed right away, or the school district drags its feet completing transfer paperwork. They are incurring costs not just of money but of time, and if the foster parent is employed outside the home (as we believe most are), the time spent providing care is often time taken away from paid employment. With the passage of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act in 2014, the reasonable and prudent parenting standard requires foster parents to "normalize" foster care by ensuring foster youth have access to those things accessible to their peers, such as participating in sports teams, using computers and the Internet, acquiring driver licenses and cell phones, etc. Of course we do not want foster children to be treated differently (especially "less-than") other children, but these are new costs outside the traditional foster care rate parameters. While the foster parent rates issued each year by the Office of Children and Family Services sometimes includes a small % increase for foster parents, it is our estimation that it has been 40 years since the last serious examination of whether the foster board rate meets the needs of the children and what we expect the foster parents to do. As more children enter care in areas suffering from the current wave of opiate addiction, we need to be able to recruit more foster parents and assure them when they step up to take on these responsibilities we will, in turn, adequately cover their expenses. Finally, while some areas of the state are experiencing foster care placement increases, overall foster care placement has declined as local districts (rightly) divert lower-risk cases to foster care prevention programs. This means the number of youth coming into foster care are fewer, but are a concentrated group of high-needs children. Our foster parent pool must expend more time and energy to manage the complex needs of those children who are currently in foster. This is especially true as we look to place older adolescents in family settings rather than group care.



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A particular issue regarding kinship foster parents (relatives or fictive kin of a child entering care who are recruited to serve as foster parents for these children) is the current funding stream for the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP). This program allows kinship foster parents to become the legal guardians of their relative/fictive kin foster children, allowing these children to leave the foster care system for a permanent family without having to go through the lengthy and emotionally-fraught process of terminating the children's parents' rights and the formality of adoption. KinGAP subsidies, much like Adoption subsidies, help kinship foster parents afford to take on permanent guardianship. However, New York State funds the KinGAP subsidies (unlike the Adoption subsidies) with Title IV-E federal foster care funds –through the Foster Care Block Grant, despite KinGAP being a program that removes children from foster care. KinGAP is proving to be successful and as its popularity grows, the state will have to determine whether to shortchange the KinGAP families or the children still in foster care unless KinGAP is funded through another funding stream. We support removing the KinGAP subsidy from the state's foster care block grant, funding it instead in the same manner as adoption subsidies.

In addition to our foster parents, the front-line workers at our child welfare agencies play a very significant role in providing care and stability for our children and youth in foster care. We thank Assemblywoman Jaffee and your colleagues in the legislature for working very hard over this past year to advocate for higher wages and more support for our child care workers. We are thrilled that this year's foster care rates permitted our agencies to be able to provide increases for our dedicated workforce. In addition, the creation in the 2017-18 NYS budget of the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program will begin to provide tuition and student loan support to the state's child welfare workforce. We must do even more going forward to invest in our child welfare workforce to ensure the best care and support for our children and youth in foster care.



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Our child care workers are trained professionals, responsible for providing 24-hour supervision and support to those youth whose needs cannot be met in a family setting. They establish meaningful relationships with youth who have experienced significant trauma to in turn elevate the youths' abilities to self-regulate and appropriately express themselves, all while direct care pay barely keeps up with minimum wage. Many of our direct care workers have second jobs to make ends meet; for some, the work in child welfare programs is their "second" job. Turnover is high and the effects of turnover on the youth in care is dismaying. We cannot speak highly enough about the dedicated people who enter this work driven to make a difference in the lives of youth but who are forced to leave the field for their own well-being. They, too, need our support. As we have done in the past, COFCCA will advocate for additional supports for child welfare direct care workers in this year's budget process, including advocacy for increased pay and additional support for the workforce's student loans and tuition programs that have now been created. They need salaries competitive with others with the same education and training, along with quality fringe benefits.

We at COFCCA would be happy to answer any questions the Committee members may have, or to arrange for members to see their local child welfare agencies in action. We thank you for allowing us to submit our testimony.



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