

Department of Children and Families

Commissioner Allison Blake, PhD, LSW

Testimony Before the Assembly Budget Committee

April 14, 2011

Good afternoon Chairman Greenwald and members of the Committee.

I am pleased to be here with you today to discuss the Fiscal Year 2012 proposed budget for the Department of Children and Families.

I would like to first take this opportunity to thank the New Jersey Legislature for your continued support for the critical work of the Department. Your ongoing commitment clearly demonstrates that children and families are a priority in New Jersey.

I would also like to take this opportunity to introduce a few of the members of the DCF leadership team accompanying me today: Barbara Rusen, Chief of Staff, Robert Sabreen, Chief Administrator, and Doris Windle, Budget Director.

I want to thank them, as well as our entire DCF staff- and our front line caseworkers – who are the backbone of the work we do every day. Their commitment and dedication to protecting and improving the lives of children and families throughout the state is not only admirable, but vital to our continued success.

Overall, I am both pleased and thankful for DCF's Fiscal Year 2012 proposed budget-as it conveys a good news budget for the Department. The DCF proposed budget reaffirms the Governor's commitment to child welfare reform, continues to provide the level of service required to meet the needs of the children and families we serve, and strengthens our ability to meet the benchmarks set by the Modified Settlement Agreement.

This recommended budget is responsible, is based on data and provides the fiscal resources that support the Department's work. The Department's progress in selected areas of the reform, as supported by the Federal Monitor's report, is symbolic of the significant efforts we have made "managing by data."

These efforts have allowed us to successfully build our child welfare system from the bottom up, improving performance and enhancing our capacity toward long-term stability.

This is key, considering the fiscal reality that New Jersey and many other states are currently facing. Today, the children and families we serve can be comforted- and assured- in the fact that New Jersey's Governor and Legislature have provided the strongest level of support possible.

On their behalf – I sincerely thank you.

With your historic and steadfast commitment, New Jersey's child welfare system has been able to truly focus on its core mission – that is, achieving the safety, permanency, and well-being for the state's most vulnerable children and families.

While we remain a federally monitored state, our emphasis in managing by data, using performance based measures, and incorporating best practices is transforming New Jersey into the paradigm in which other states are looking to as a national model.

In fact, the most recent Federal Monitor's Report highlighted that New Jersey has made significant strides over the course of the last five years –meeting and in some cases surpassing many of the Modified Settlement Agreement's (MSA) benchmarks- gaining even more positive outcomes for children and families.

This is a strong indication that the state's continued investment in the child welfare system has –and continues to- yield significant progress- some of which I am very excited to share with you today:

First, we continue to reduce the number of children in out of home placement. Currently we serve 7,181 children in out of home placement (as of February 28, 2011). This compares to 7,900 only one year ago, and more than 12,000 during 2004 and 2005- a total reduction of 42 percent.

In addition, our efforts in foster parent recruitment and licensure of resource families, which include kinship, foster and adoptive caregivers have established New Jersey as a national model for other states to emulate. DCF continues to strengthen this area-expanding and maintaining a diverse pool of loving families able to meet the needs of our kids. In Calendar Year 2010, we licensed 1720 homes and, as was true for CY09, almost 50 percent of the newly licensed families during this past monitoring period were relatives. This is in comparison to CY07 when 28 percent of our resource families were relative families. As I mentioned we currently have 7,181 children in out of home placement; however we have a total capacity to serve more than 17,300 (17,378) children in out of home placement. I am so proud to share with you that our work with relative

families is so strong, that we were recently asked to provide technical assistance to another large, northeastern state struggling with their practice in this area.

In CY 2010 we successfully finalized 1,171 adoptions. During the month of November alone almost 300 adoptions were finalized, largely coordinated with family celebrations of National Adoption Month across the state. We have taken real strides in achieving permanency for children regardless of age and finalized adoptions for 91 teens over the age of 14 during 2010.

These are very positive results for New Jersey, but we want to do more in this area. Finding a forever family for a child is our primary mission, regardless of a child's age. Since my appointment, many of our stakeholders, including the Monitor, had recommended that we place a greater focus on our aging out population, and we agreed. In response, DCF elevated the status of the DYFS Office of Adolescent Practice and Permanency to a department level office. This new office is solely focused on improving services and outcomes for older youth.

As you can see engaging stakeholders is an integral part of the work that we do and helps to ensure that our work remains on the right path. This is why DCF has launched a new department level Office of Advocacy to better address constituent concerns across the department and gain additional stakeholder feedback.

We have also substantially reduced the number of children receiving behavioral health care out of state. In fact, as of February 28, 2011, 15 youth were placed in DCHBS out of state facilities, down from 31 this time last year – and down from 327 in March 2006. I need to take a moment to point out that this is another area where New Jersey's practice has become a model for other states, and as a result we have presented at national conferences and provided technical assistance to other jurisdictions.

Statistics convey that children thrive most when placed in family like settings and we continue to make this a priority for the children we serve by implementing best practices. To this end, DCF has made the decision to close the DYFS operated residential treatment centers. I would like to assure you that this was not a budgetary decision- but one based on the principles of best practice and the needs of the youth being served- as well as being a critical element to the state's overall child welfare reform plan.

DCF is also leading the nation in providing access to health care to children in out of home placement through our Child Health Units, co-located in each of our local DYFS offices. Specifically, in 2010 more than 94 percent of children age 2 and above are up to date with their annual well child exams and 92 percent of the youngest children are up to

date. This far exceeds the national average, which ranges between 60 percent and 64 percent. Further, 87 percent of children were up to date with semi annual dental exams, surpassing the national average of 60 percent for these important preventative exams. Lastly, more than 95 percent of children in out of home placements were up to date with immunizations.

Through our Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships' network of 37 neighborhood-based Family Success Centers, we were able to serve more than 45,000 families in Fiscal Year 2010. The prevention work of our Family Success Centers not only provides services to children and families, but empowers and strengthens families every day.

In Fiscal Year 2010, we served 4,000 families through the home visiting programs alone.

We have also continued to achieve remarkable progress in maintaining manageable caseloads for caseworkers serving our most vulnerable children and families.

Finally, we have continued training supervisors and staff on the Case Practice Model- the cornerstone of our work, and the state's guide as to "how to" engage families in the process. Our university partnerships have also allowed us to meet our need yielding an improved workforce that has begun to integrate case practice throughout DCF.

I hope that you are as encouraged- as I am -by what we have accomplished together so far. Our achievements demonstrate that we are on the right path. New Jersey is continuing to make sustained progress toward creating an effective, integrated child welfare system.

While we recognize our successes, we must also be clear -that much work lies ahead. I am confident- however, that with the State's continued support, DCF's dedicated staff, and our partners in the community- we will be able to achieve much more.

Moving forward, one important aspect of the child welfare reform is our ability to establish an effective self-monitoring system that will not only ensure improved outcomes for children and families in New Jersey, but ultimately- represent the catalyst for our successful exit out of the Modified Settlement Agreement lawsuit and the Federal Monitor's oversight.

That being said, I would like to take a moment to share with you some of the steps we have taken in the last several months in our continued practice change efforts and toward our goal of becoming a learning organization.

One critically important step has been the establishment of a brand new Office of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) that will be the centralized lead relating to all of our “managing by data” initiatives.

We have also developed a number of “managing by data” initiatives with the goal of building and supporting a robust internal review process that will help us produce positive outcomes across all areas of our work.

For example, we recently implemented Quality Reviews – QRs – which other states, like Utah, have used effectively to improve outcomes. The Quality Reviews enable us to identify the practices that are working in certain areas in order to replicate those same effective practices across all of our offices. An important feature of these reviews is that the review teams are composed of DCF staff and our community stakeholders.

In January, we launched the DCF Fellows program. The DCF Fellows Program, developed under the aegis of the federally funded Northeast and Caribbean Implementation Center (NCIC), is designed to give a group of DCF experienced staff in-depth exposure to a wide range of tools and help them become our internal experts on utilizing that information to improve case practice and outcomes for children and families. Fellows will learn about best practices with respect to measuring safety, well-being and permanency, including an in-depth understanding of the internal and external measures utilized to assess our agency’s performance.

Today-thanks to the support of the state legislature- New Jersey has a statewide automated child welfare information system SACWIS, also known as NJ SPIRIT. As you may know, NJ SPIRIT is DCF’s case management and financial system designed to support the daily work of caseworkers and supervisors. With NJ SPIRIT now being fully operational, we have access to a wide range of information and reports. The system helps us identify where gaps exist in our daily work so that we may shift focus and adapt new strategies to help better inform policy decisions as reflected in the Fiscal Year 2012 proposed budget.

The better we are at collecting and documenting reliable data, the better we are able to serve children and families. Our integration of NJ SPIRIT into the daily work of caseworkers as well as our work around data has already transformed New Jersey into one of the nations’ leading go-to-states for technical assistance. Finally, I just need to add that surprisingly this is yet another area of strength for the state and as a result we are now providing technical assistance to other states struggling with full implementation.

DCF is committed to being one of the most effective and efficient child welfare organizations in the country. We trust that our successes, structural changes, as well as

our managing by data initiatives will result in even greater improvements for the children and families we serve. With your support of the FY'12 proposed budget, you are ensuring that the state's child welfare system has the vital tools necessary to successfully meet the needs of New Jersey's most vulnerable children and families.

Thank you again for this opportunity, and I would be happy to answer any of your questions.