Testimony of Kara Wood, Acting Commissioner
Before the Assembly Budget Committee
April 28, 2010

Good Morning Chairman Greenwald and members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss today the FY 2011 proposed budget for the Department of Children and Families. I am Kara Wood and I am honored to serve as Acting Commissioner during this period of transition at DCF.

I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce the DCF staff here at the table with me today: Robert Sabreen, DCF's Chief Administrator, and Doris Windle, DCF's Budget Director.

I would also like to thank the Legislature for its historic and continued support for DCF, and for giving this Department the resources critically necessary to truly improve our state's child welfare system.

With your support, DCF has remained focused on its core mission of promoting safety, permanency and well-being for New Jersey's most vulnerable children and their families. While our proposed FY 2011 budget includes some reductions, I am pleased to say Governor Christie's budget for DCF maintains services for children who have been the victims of abuse or neglect, behavioral health services for children and their families, and prevention services to strengthen families before a crisis occurs.

Further, I am pleased to report that our progress in reforming New Jersey's child welfare system continues to be successful. The independent federal monitor appointed to oversee our reform effort has issued six consecutive positive reports. And, based on the work we have accomplished during the last monitoring period, we expect yet another favorable review of our work for children and families across this state.

While we are encouraged and confident that our progress will continue successfully, we know we have more work to do in continuing to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of New Jersey's most vulnerable children. But I believe we are on the path to success.
One area of our reform work that we are particularly proud of is the continued implementation of our new Case Practice Model. Through this case practice, caseworkers are focusing on every family’s strengths rather than just their challenges. We are helping families identify and build their own natural support systems, which include relatives, friends and other community supports.

Because of enhanced case work throughout the entire department, not just the Division of Youth and Family Services, but also Child Behavioral Health Services and Prevention and Community Partnerships, there has been a significant reduction in the number of children requiring shelter and foster care placements.

With the DYFS case practice, we are working hand in hand with families to provide support and stabilization services and, as a result, reducing the number of children removed from their homes and increasing the number of children who can be safely reunified with their families.

This successful shift in how we are serving children and families is reflected in part of our budget reduction. As we successfully serve and stabilize children in their own homes, fewer resources are needed for the more intensive services related to out of home placement and foster care board payments.

I would like to take a moment to share that none of our achievements in this critical area would be possible without the commitment of our caseworkers and supervisors in the field. They are the backbone of our reform success.

Another area of significant achievement is the impressive number of foster and adoptive homes we have recruited. We currently have 7,900 children in out of home placement; however we have a total capacity to serve 17,463 children in out of home placement. The number and diversity of available foster home placements help to ensure that a child can be matched with a family that can provide the most supportive and stable environment where they can recover from a trauma and receive the appropriate support while we work towards reunification with their family. We try to keep children close to home, in familiar surroundings, and make a child’s first placement, the best and final placement.

Reunifying children in foster care with their parents is our first goal. However, when reunification is not in the best interest of a child, we work to provide permanency through a permanent placement with family members or through adoption.
I want to point out that approximately 90 percent of our children who are adopted are adopted by their foster parents. This is why having a robust pool of licensed and available foster homes is so important. I am proud of the fact that in 2009, 1418 children were adopted. This is the second highest number on record of children adopted in one year.

Through the work of our Division of Child Behavioral Health Services, we have made significant progress in bringing home New Jersey children who were receiving behavioral health services out-of-state. We reduced the number of children receiving these services outside New Jersey from 327 in March 2006 to 31 today. That is a decrease of approximately 90 percent. This is another key example of how we are achieving real and improved outcomes for children and their families. We remain focused on ensuring that our ongoing case management and successes in this area continues by accessing behavioral health services for children in and close to their own homes.

As a Department, we have been more focused than ever on preventative efforts to keep families strong and children safe before a crisis occurs, and more intensive services are needed.

We have worked diligently to establish a statewide network of prevention services to reach out to, identify and work with families who may be at risk. We strive to make a connection before abuse or neglect occurs.

For example, in our Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships, we have established a statewide network of 37 neighborhood-based Family Success Centers, which served just under 23 thousand families in FY 2009. These same centers have served just under 24 thousand families in the first six months of FY 2010 – this is essentially a doubling of the number of families served in just one year. This increase comes from families who are struggling and have received support referring other families because of the positive help they obtained at these centers.

In these tough financial times, we must all do our part. DCF's proposed budget for 2011 includes a total reduction of $37.5 million state dollars, which is supported in large part by our projected increase of federal revenue. Our ability to claim additional Title IV-E funds accounts for about one third of DCF's reductions in state dollars.
The Department’s success in enhancing our federal revenues is the result of the dedicated efforts of DCF revenue staff and would not have been possible without New Jersey’s Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System, which most of you know as SACWIS or NJ SPIRIT. NJ SPIRIT is DCF’s case management and financial system designed to support the daily work of caseworkers and supervisors.

Since DCF launched this system in 2007, we have come a long way. We now are able to capture and report much more accurate, up to date and complete information, which enables us to maximize our reimbursement claims to the federal government.

In fact, 80 percent of the documentation we use to produce our Title IV-E determination claim now comes directly from NJ SPIRIT. This more accurate and complete documentation enables us to claim more federal dollars.

What we have been able to achieve so far in this ongoing reform is a child welfare system that other states look to emulate. This would not be possible without the continued support of the Legislature.

Much work still lies ahead, but I am confident that together we can meet these challenges and provide New Jersey’s most vulnerable children and families with the continued support they need and deserve.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.