Good afternoon Chairman Prieto and members of the Assembly Budget Committee. I am pleased to join you today, along with my DCF colleagues, to discuss the Fiscal Year 2013 Proposed Budget. Accompanying me are my Chief of Staff, Barbara Rusen, my Deputy Commissioner Robert Sabreen, and my Budget Director, Doris Windle.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Governor Christie and the State Legislature for the ongoing commitment to New Jersey’s most vulnerable children and families.

The proposed FY’13 budget allows the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to remain focused on its core mission while strengthening its capacity to help the children and families we work with achieve success in their own homes, their own communities and their own schools. I think you would all agree that much has been achieved since the Legislature created the Department of Children and Families. Perhaps most importantly, we have emerged from the days when we were a crisis driven system to one where we planfully work with children, youth, and families across our state to determine service needs and the best approach to strengthen families and communities. Today, this work is accomplished through strong partnerships with service providers, community stakeholders, our sister agencies, AND some new corporate and foundation partners who have become an integral part of the DCF success story! Although our child welfare reform is a work in progress, there are several milestones which have been achieved that I would like to focus on today – particularly as they have helped catapult New Jersey from a system in need of repair to one that helps set an example for other public systems to emulate and learn from.

Specifically, New Jersey continues to lead the way in best practices by reducing the number of out-of-home placements for children – last year I believe I shared that we have achieved and now maintained a forty-four percent reduction in the use of out-of-home care for our most vulnerable children. Unlike other states, we maintain a robust and diverse pool of licensed resource homes available to children and youth (currently with the capacity to serve almost twice as many youth). We have reduced, by ninety-seven percent, the number of out-of-state placements (in other words, serving youth with behavioral health challenges close to home and close to their families); and finally, this past summer we began providing older youth with “Health Passports” so that they are able to make good decisions in managing their healthcare as they transition into adulthood.

In fact, our efforts in supporting youth in the foster care system was further demonstrated in our most recent Title IV-E Review period under review - transforming New Jersey into a national model for its administration of this program. In our last review, New Jersey was not only found to be in substantial compliance with federal regulations, but had the extraordinary distinction of having a perfect review with absolutely “zero” errors for programmatic determinations.

This is a great accomplishment. This achievement demonstrates the team effort in DCF’s case practice, licensing, financial reporting, program review, information technology, and our very important
partnership with the courts, and serves as validation that we continue to achieve positive outcomes for the children and families we serve.

Since my appointment as Commissioner of DCF, we have made a commitment to further support youth aging out of the system. To date our successes include: Establishing the Office of Adolescent Services (OAS) in order to bring to the forefront the unique needs of our youth; engaging youth in the department’s policy and decision-making process through the expansion of our Youth Advisory Boards (YAB); and developing the Adolescent Strategic Plan that charts our work with youth during the next several years with the goal of improving outcomes.

Needless to say, by ensuring that our youth voice is being heard loud and clear on many levels, we are making strides at normalizing their experiences in our service delivery system, and assuring the experiences of youth in the future will be positive. In fact, as a result of their advocacy last year, they inspired Wal-Mart Corporation to donate 7,000 wheeled duffle bags for children to use when they enter out-of-home placement. Just as important, their work in this area laid a foundation for major policy changes within DCF that assure positive results for children and youth who will access our services in the future.

Just last week I had the pleasure of attending the Youth Advisory Board Summit and Empowerment Seminar where these amazing youth participated in a discussion of other policy and practice issues with myself and other DCF Executive Staff. I expect that this will serve as the model for future meetings that will allow an invaluable opportunity for youth and DCF staff to engage in quality face-to-face conversations about ways we can improve the lives of the youth we serve. Earlier that same day, in partnership with the Verizon Foundation, we also hosted a Digital Awareness and Internet Safety Seminar in an effort to promote safe and responsible use of social networking among their peers.

Another very important example of our efforts to incorporate the youth voice into our work, and in honor of National Foster Care Awareness Month, this May DCF in collaboration with the Youth Advisory Board, will release a YouTube Video produced by a young man who aged out of our foster care system who wishes to stress the importance of keeping youth cases open to assure they are receiving the support and assistance they need as they transition to adulthood. As you can see, the youth voice is not only making a tremendous impact on our daily work here in New Jersey, but also on a national level.

New Jersey is also leading the way through its robust prevention network. Through our Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships, we are one of the only states in the nation fortunate to have a network of Family Success Centers across the state.

As you know, these centers are neighborhood places where families can go to receive a wide range of support services. What really makes the Family Success Centers special is that parents represent the governing bodies for these centers, determining the unique service needs of their respective communities, and become advocates for their fellow parents. Many engage in the centers’ work not only to build strong families, but also to build strong communities. As of January, we had at least one Family Success Center in every county. This movement is another example of innovative efforts to support families in partnership with foundations and other community agencies. We are joined in this important work by the Nicholson Foundation and several United Ways across the state.
I am excited to share that this spring, the federal government will join this partnership as they help bring the Asset Building Initiative to our Family Success Centers. The Asset Building Initiative will be piloted at six FSCs. It is an approach to overcoming poverty that emphasizes the value of enabling individuals and families to learn about sound family budgeting and money management practices, to address financial issues and to plan for long-term success.

I am certain that you would agree that the State’s commitment to empowering parents as advocates of not only their communities’ needs, but also of their personal economic status is quite progressive and something that was virtually unheard of until now.

At the risk of being redundant, I would like to one more time call your attention to the federal grant award we will soon be receiving. This additional $9.4 M will position New Jersey to become a leader in providing a statewide array of home visitation services – supporting women and their children in their early parenting years, and preventing them from requiring the intervention of the formal child protection system.

Today, New Jersey is also leading the way through its commitment to both “manage by data”, and its use of technology. Our “Managing by Data” initiative, also known as the DCF “Fellows” program has gained considerable national attention in the child welfare realm from the federal government, and other states, as well as foundations, for its ground-breaking use of data in a child welfare agency setting. As you may recall, the Fellows program, the first and only program of its kind in the nation, is an eighteen month program in which close to one hundred of DCF’s middle management staff learn how to better utilize data to support improved case practice and outcomes for children and families.

This winter we were joined by representatives from several states, national foundations, and federal agencies as we marked the 12 month milestone of this initiative during which time our Fellows presented the early results of their data investigations – helping to model the use of data in policy and practice across DCF.

Due to the success of this program, New Jersey has already been invited to participate in a number of national conferences and the Children’s Bureau has a strong interest in New Jersey continuing our work in this area and doing more to transfer this knowledge to other states. In fact, on May 2, DCF Fellows will be showcasing the Department’s emerging quality improvement efforts, using both quantitative and qualitative data, on the ground, on the front lines, and throughout the organization, in a special Webinar hosted by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI).

As mentioned earlier, we are continuously looking at ways in which we can use technology to be more responsive to families, but also to our service provider community. As an example of this, and at the request of service providers, we are modifying Departmental contracts to a two-year cycle and have converted all of the Department’s RFPs to an electronic format. We believe that these changes will better facilitate submissions and DCF’s overall RFP process.

This is a pivotal and exciting time for New Jersey. Our role with families and communities are more robust than ever before. The voice of youth, parents and families are an integral part of every aspect of our work. And it is the addition of those voices which will help us achieve the successes necessary for the women and families who will be impacted by the proposed realignment of social services.

With the proposed realignment of social services to DCF, the Department’s role will expand, and appropriately so. It is a natural next step toward building a more family-centered system of care able
to treat the whole child and the whole family — together — in one place — and not as separate pieces of a whole.

But let me be clear.

In terms of the Division of Women services currently under the Department of Community Affairs absolutely nothing will change. There will be no reduction in funding, services, personnel, or scope. The full funding for the Division on Women’s programs currently within DCA’s budget will be completely transferred over to DCF’s FY’13 budget.

There will, however, be a benefit to the women served. The move will help augment the domestic violence services already provided by our Department, strengthen our ability to support an at risk group of children and women—and improve our focus to better serve families where child abuse and domestic violence co-occur.

By integrating the domestic violence, sexual assault, and displaced homemaker services currently administered by DCA into our robust support network, we will be able to work closely with service providers and advocates in a more proactive and cohesive manner and improve the coordination of services to better inform, educate and deliver services.

Women will be served in a more comprehensive and holistic manner and will begin to realize better and more natural access to the wide array of support services DCF already offers—through one umbrella agency.

I think it’s important to note that two of the State’s leading women’s advocacy groups, the Coalition for Battered Women and the NJ Coalition Against Sexual Assault are both very much in support of the DOW transition to DCF.

The benefits of the realignment of children and youth services from DHS, will also allow DCF—through an expanded and integrated system of care to better support children and youth with behavioral health challenges, developmental disabilities, those needing addiction services, and those with co-occurring disorders through a single point of entry. Families we serve will be able to access a more comprehensive array of services and navigate through a seamless system of care, finally ending fragmentation and obstacles to accessing much needed services.

In closing, I am confident—and hope that you are as well—that the proposed realignment of social services will strengthen DCF’s ability to meet the needs of the children, youth, women and families of New Jersey.

Thank you for your time and consideration.