



**TESTIMONY PRESENTED BY COMMISSIONER DR. ALLISON BLAKE, PHD, LSW  
SENATE FY'14 BUDGET HEARING  
APRIL 22, 2013**

Good morning Chairman Sarlo and all members of the Senate Budget Committee. I am pleased to join you today, along with my DCF colleagues, to discuss the Fiscal Year 2014 Proposed Budget. Joining me today are my Chief of Staff Barbara Rusen; Deputy Commissioner Robert Sabreen; Budget Director Doris Windle; and Deputy Commissioner Jeffrey Guenzel.

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to thank Governor Christie and the State Legislature for their ongoing commitment to the children and families of New Jersey.

Since I last came before you – only one year ago – many important and exciting developments have taken place within the Department of Children and Families. I'd like to focus on just a few of them here today.

Please allow me, if you will, a moment to highlight New Jersey's performance in a federal report issued last year by The Foundation for Government Accountability. This organization's Right for Kids Ranking is a comprehensive and holistic look at the child welfare systems in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and outlines just how successfully states are serving vulnerable children.

I am particularly proud to report that New Jersey was ranked the **fifth best state in the country** for helping children who are abused and neglected. In 2006, New Jersey ranked 26<sup>th</sup> in this very same category. This is a composite, overall ranking of all criteria evaluated in this report. In six years, New Jersey has improved from being in the bottom half of the nation to the fifth best. This is the type of news that rarely gets reported about our department, but that is significant and noteworthy to say the least.

In another measure highlighted in this report, New Jersey ranks **NUMBER ONE** nationwide for Permanent Families and Safe Homes, meaning that we ensure children live in family-like settings while in foster care, as opposed to a group home or other institution.

New Jersey ranks **NUMBER THREE** nationwide for fostering a good education by providing stable homes for children in foster care ensuring they have the best chance to succeed academically.

And we rank **SIXTH** in the country for providing rapid response – less than 24 hours – to investigate a report of child abuse or neglect.

I think these numbers speak for themselves. But I hope you would agree that these significant rankings, combined with our sustained progress, is indicative of the fact that DCF is a dynamic organization, committed to change, and our reform and performance has dramatically improved over the course of time.

As we continue to mature as a Department, I believe it is essential for you to know that DCF launched its 2012 – 2014 Strategic Plan last summer, essentially charting the course of our work, purpose and desired outcomes for the next two years. The Strategic Plan acts as our blueprint – or roadmap if you will – that sets our priorities,

goals and actions. It makes it clear to all of our staff and stakeholders where we desire to go and how we plan to get there.

What's most important about our Strategic Plan is that it incorporates and then builds on the existing work currently underway within DCF, assuring that we do not lose sight of our primary mission, and that is to work in partnership with New Jersey's communities to assure children and families are safe, supported and successful.

Our Strategic Plan also identified a new Vision and Mission Statement for DCF. I can assure you that much thought, discussion and collaboration went into the development of these statements, and I am confident their message is a true reflection of what DCF is, who we serve, and how we illustrate the good work we do each and every day.

Speaking of that good work, I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to acknowledge Superstorm Sandy and the devastating effect it had on the children and families of our state. We all witnessed the devastation – the likes of which were unimaginable – in the aftermath of the storm. But despite all of the challenges our state faced, I was overwhelmingly impressed by the commitment and dedication shown by the entire DCF workforce to ensure the safety and well-being of ALL of New Jersey's children and families, not just those who were previously known to us.

I am also proud to say that despite the fact that power was out across the state for days on end, travel was difficult with downed trees and live wires, and communication by phone and email was a challenge, the State Central Registry – or the Child Abuse Hotline – remained fully operational and staffed with committed individuals 24 hours a day before, during and after the storm. We never once experienced any disruption in service at the Hotline, as our dedicated staff rode out the storm in the call center to assure their important work would continue to get done.

In the days immediately after the storm, our staff left the safety and security of their own homes to make family visits, check on our children, and get our offices open and operational around the state. One thing I am most proud of and I want to share with you is the fact that within just a few days of the storm, we reached out to every resource parent in the state to assess their well-being, and to assist with any emergent needs.

I think these examples are largely indicative of the overall culture that exists at DCF. We are a maturing organization – from our earliest days as a new state department known essentially as the state's child welfare division – to an evolving and wide-ranging organization that is focused on the comprehensive needs of children, families and women.

Speaking of women, the Department of Children and Families has been delighted to have had the Division on Women transferred to our auspices this past year. This move has allowed for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to women's services, allowing us to sharpen our focus on the occurrence of child abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault.

We have been able to incorporate the work of this division into the existing work at DCF, and acknowledge their significance in many ways. For example, we were able to highlight Domestic Violence Awareness Month last October through different events, messages, and even by wearing purple department-wide in recognition of this issue. We recently celebrated Women's History Month, and soon we will recognize Displaced Homemakers Awareness Month – all the while working to emphasize and raise awareness of many issues important to all of us and the work we do to support women, children and families across the state.

This past year we also transferred the provision of services to children with intellectual and developmental disabilities up to age 21 from the Department of Human Services to DCF.

As you may recall, the transition occurred in two phases.

In October 2012, approximately 500 children receiving out-of-home placement and intensive in-home services were transitioned to DCF's Children's System of Care. In an effort to ensure a smoother transition, at the same time this first phase of children were transferred to DCF, several developmental disability case managers were also transitioned over to the Department so that they continued to manage the care for these children.

Also, in preparation for that transition, several new services were developed and implemented. This included additional out-of-home treatment beds for children dually diagnosed with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities and mental illness. Additionally, every child has access to the statewide network of Mobile Response and Stabilization programs. Over the past three years, DCF has developed additional trainings for the Mobile Response programs that are focused on assisting children with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families.

On January 1, 2013, the second phase of the transition was implemented. This second phase represented the transfer of Developmental Disability (DD) Family Support Services to DCF. DD Family Support Services include such things as respite, camp, assistive technology and home and vehicle modifications that help support the family of a child with developmental disabilities care for their child at home. Unlike the first phase of the transition, this second phase was much more substantial as it represented an increase of more than 15,000 children and youth to our system of care. Similar to the first phase, care coordination is provided by our system partner, PerformCare and children that need services like Mobile Response and CMO have these services readily available.

In preparation for and throughout both phases of these transitions, we worked closely with families, stakeholders and service providers. We continue to be engaged with these individuals and groups to assure we continue to develop our expertise, and receive feedback about the strengths of the system and the opportunities for improvement.

I believe the transition of these services is a clear example of our ongoing evolution in the maturation of DCF as we bring another vital service into our realm for the benefit of those we serve.

Before I close, I want to mention the important progress DCF continues to make in regards to our ongoing child welfare reform and Modified Settlement Agreement.

As you are keenly aware, there are many "ebbs and flows" in our work at DCF, and the reality is, there are always going to be fluctuations in numbers like number of children in care, and caseloads. But despite these variations, DCF continues to make progress on many of our MSA performance measures thanks to having an adaptable workforce and a strong infrastructure that allows our child welfare system to adjust to changing circumstances. Today, we are a system that has the ability to maintain and continue progress in the face of challenges – of which clearly illustrates that our system is in a very different place today than it once was.

I believe we are at a place in our reform process where we are using a laser focus to guide us and drill down on the core issues we must still continue to improve upon. Allow me to provide you with an example.

Since 2006, the number of children placed out-of-state for treatment has continued to decline. As of last year, all but one of the five youth placed out-of-state were in a specialized program for the deaf or hard of hearing. Just recently, DCF awarded a contract to create a program for these children with hearing impairments right here in New Jersey so that these children may come back home and be closer to their families, while still receiving the vital services they need to grow and thrive. This is a major milestone in our reform, and indicative of the fact that although major reform and change takes time, ultimately success is being achieved.

While this may be just one small program for a finite number of children, the resulting impact is enormous, not just in meeting the requirements of this MSA, but doing what we truly believe is in the best interests of the children we serve.

I could share many more positive examples of our work around reform and progress with you, such as our success in developing a national model for providing sustained access to healthcare for children in out-of-home-placement. Or the incredible work we are undertaking with our adolescent population and children aging out of the system. These – and many other areas of performance for which we are exceptionally proud – reflect who DCF is today.

In fact, according to the Federal Monitor's report last year, "There have been significant accomplishments since 2006 in improving child welfare system performance and meeting many of the requirements and outcomes of the MSA... and DCF remains on course towards meaningful practice change in New Jersey.

I am cognizant of the fact that DCF's journey from its infancy to where we are today is not one we have traveled alone. We are fortunate to have been joined on this path by DCF staff, resource families, service providers, child welfare advocates, concerned citizens, the legislature and the Christie Administration. It is that spirit of partnership that we can acknowledge what DCF has accomplished to date and look forward to our future success, growth and progress and advancement that still lies ahead.