

**APRIL 22, 2015 - NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**  
**COMMISSIONER ALLISON BLAKE TESTIMONY ON FISCAL YEAR 2016**  
**PROPOSED BUDGET BEFORE THE NEW JERSEY GENERAL ASSEMBLY BUDGET**  
**COMMITTEE**

Good afternoon Chairman Schaer and members of the Assembly Budget Committee. I'm pleased to join you today, along with my colleagues from the Department of Children and Families, to discuss our Fiscal Year 2016 Proposed Budget. With me are Deputy Commissioner Joseph Ribsam, Chief of Staff Barbara Rusen, and Chief Administrator Doris Windle.

I want to thank Governor Christie and the State Legislature for their ongoing commitment to the women, children, youth, and families we serve and support for our department. Our approximately 6,600 employees serve more than 100,000 women, children, youth, and families in any given month with an annual budget of \$1.6 billion.

My testimony today will focus on four areas: workplace safety, how data has transformed our work, recognition of our success and leadership, and our commitment to transparency and accountability.

**Workplace Safety**

I'd like to brief the committee on how we responded – and continue to respond – to the November attack on our colleague at our Camden Central Local Office.

Members of DCF's leadership and I visited Cooper University Hospital that evening and met with our colleague's family. This family showed remarkable strength and responded to this horrific event with grace and courage.

The next morning we met with our four Camden County child protection offices to support them and hear their concerns and ideas. We also provided on-site trauma support for our Camden Central and Camden North employees.

We quickly took steps to enhance security at all child protection offices. Immediately after the attack armed security was on-site and protecting all four Camden offices. By December 12th armed guards with metal detecting wands were in place at every child protection office.

We also created an internal workgroup to review safety training and field safety protocols and practices. This diverse workgroup included not only department leadership, but also field staff throughout the state. The workgroup made several recommendations, including offering voluntary self-defense courses designed for social workers and emergency alert devices.

The Department of Human Services has assured us that their centralized police officer deployment plan will maintain service levels, including accompanying our staff in the field or in the office when meeting with individuals who may pose a risk. In addition, this new deployment plan makes Human Services Police available – for the first time – beyond standard business hours to include weekend, holiday, and after hours support.

Our department is committed to providing a safe work environment for our staff. As a social worker who has worked in the field and been in difficult situations, I understand the concerns we all share about safety.

### **Data-Informed System**

The Federal Monitor overseeing our department issued a report in January that shows we are improving performance, reaching Modified Settlement Agreement benchmarks, and sustaining achievements from previous reporting periods.

Federal Judge Stanley Chesler noted that “the Department of Children and Families has demonstrated it is a system that is continually trying to improve itself” and is “light years from the system I saw 11, 12 or 13 years ago.”

Our success is due in part to the adoption of data-driven and evidence-informed strategies and services.

By collecting and analyzing data, we are more closely monitoring performance and using what we learn to adjust and enhance services.

Few things better demonstrate how we have learned to use data than our Data Fellows program.

Data Fellows are staff members who, in addition to their work, study how to interpret and use data to inform system improvements.

Looking at data from more than twenty-five thousand cases, our Fellows found nine percent of families who become involved in the child welfare system fall into a category of frequently encountered families. These families are referred to the system three or more times within a twelve month period.

And a common characteristic among these families is substance use disorder.

In response, we’re expanding the Mommy and Me program. This program enables parents to live with their children during substance use disorder treatment. By living with their child, parents are more likely to complete treatment, abstain from substance use, and have fewer problems with depression. The expansion will be into South Jersey, where our Data Fellow found the need for the program is currently greatest.

Our Fellows also found housing instability is another common characteristic among these families.

As a result we partnered with the Department of Human Services, the Department of Community Affairs, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing to create a Keeping Families Together program. First piloted in Essex County, and soon rolling out in our southern counties, this program provides supportive housing and high quality wraparound services for child welfare

involved families that are confronting housing instability and other co-occurring challenges, including mental illness and substance use disorders.

The data used in our decision-making isn't strictly numbers. We solicit qualitative input from our constituents and conduct assessments to determine if we're adequately addressing the needs of our children and families. One such assessment identified a need among older youth for financial literacy education.

Therefore, we sought and received a \$350,000 grant from the US Department of Treasury to develop and evaluate a mobile app to help older youth with budgeting and financial decisions.

Thanks to input from our Youth Advisory Boards and data from our adolescent housing hub, we identified a need for housing for youth who age out of the child welfare system and do not have long-term and sustainable housing.

We worked closely with the Department of Community Affairs to help these youth find a place to live. Thanks to our joint efforts, we'll soon be able to provide many of these youth with housing vouchers. This will help them maintain a place of their own beyond DCF's involvement.

### **DCF Leadership and Success Acknowledged by Governments and Organizations**

As Judge Chesler recognized, we are nothing like the department that existed years ago. Expressed in various ways, others have acknowledged this, too, and we're grateful for the faith they have in our work.

We shared an \$11.5 million federal grant to not just continue but expand the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting program, which we operate in partnership with the Department of Health.

We received a half million dollar federal grant to help youth waiting the longest for adoption find a welcoming and supportive family.

We have also been sought out by other countries, territories, and states for our advice and guidance.

Officials from Colorado and South Africa visited New Jersey to learn about our Children's System of Care. They hope to learn from our operation and possibly replicate aspects of it for their citizens.

Officials from the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services sought our guidance on developing a child welfare information management system. They also visited our Professional Center in New Brunswick to learn about our training program.

Government officials from Puerto Rico visited to also learn about our child welfare information management system. They also sought information about our Family Success Centers and plan to tour our centers this spring.

The Northern Ireland-based Family and Community Engagement project is also interested in our Family Success Centers. This grassroots project is working with the British Services community to integrate families within larger society. We met with group officials in New York and several months later they visited one of our Family Success Centers where they met with families and staff members.

Our Family Success Centers also attracted the attention of the Global Peace Foundation, an international nonprofit organization that promotes peacebuilding. The group believes our Family Success Center model is consistent with their mission and principles and hopes to work with us in the future.

These are some of many examples of foreign governments and other states acknowledging our leadership and success.

### **Commitment to Transparency and Accountability**

We've made considerable progress to improve our practice. As part of our efforts, we embarked on a plan to not only be more accountable as an organization, but more transparent, too. In many ways, this has allowed us to tell our story of commitment, change, and success.

As we continue our journey, we have made more data available to the public via our website. This data shows both our strengths and our opportunities for improvement.

The Commissioner's Dashboard is a monthly report of data points that helps us understand who we are serving and how we are doing. It reflects our work across the department and helps guide our efforts.

The County Inter-agency Coordinating Council Dashboard provides a point-in-time snap shot of the work of our Children's System of Care and their partners.

Other regular reports, such as the monthly Screening and Investigation Report and our annual Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care report, focus attention to specific practice areas of interest.

This and other data helps us track and adjust our work to better serve New Jersey women, children, youth, and families. We believe sharing this information benefits all New Jerseyans, creating understanding and instilling confidence in how we work to ensure a better today and an even greater tomorrow for every individual we serve.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, members of this committee, thank you for your time.