Good afternoon Chairman Sarlo and members of the State Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. I’m pleased to join you today, along with my Department of Children and Families colleagues, to discuss our fiscal year 2017 proposed budget. With me are Deputy Commissioner Joseph Ribsam, Chief of Staff Suzanne Alvino, and Chief Financial Officer Heath Bernstein.

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. Our approximately 6,600 employees serve nearly 100,000 women, children, youth, and families in any given month with an annual budget of $1.7 billion.

My testimony will focus on four areas: the department’s successful reforms, ending the cycle of homelessness for families and youth with prior child welfare system involvement, expanding mental health services for children with complex behavioral health challenges, and improving worker safety.

Before going further, I’d like to note the Department of Children and Families is celebrating its tenth anniversary. Formed on July 1, 2006, creating the department was an historic moment for New Jersey, signaling the state’s commitment to fundamentally reforming our child welfare system.

Now, ten years later, we are approaching yet another historic moment.

More than five months ago, Federal Judge Chesler approved an historic plan for our department. Called the Sustainability and Exit Plan, it sets a path to ending ten years of federal court oversight of New Jersey’s child welfare system.

The Exit Plan validates our work and acknowledges the fundamental changes we’ve made serving vulnerable children and their families. It provides a reasonable path to exit.

Over the past 10 years, New Jersey has laid a solid foundation upon which we rebuilt our child welfare system. We reduced caseloads and expanded training for our caseworkers. We’ve implemented a case practice model. We expanded our network of foster families and increased our support of and reliance on kin to provide children loving homes when they cannot remain with their biological families.

And by establishing performance transparency and progress accountability, and building the institutional capacity to deal directly with shortcomings, we’ve shaped a culture that focuses intensely on outcomes for children and families. In fact, on April 15, the Rutgers School of Social Work is launching, with our direct involvement and support, an interactive child welfare data website called the New Jersey Child Welfare Data Hub.

The Exit Plan now guides our work.

It enables us to sharply focus on a few remaining challenges, which we will overcome soon.

The Exit Plan’s measures and targets are ambitious but achievable.
In places, the measures are highly technical. This reflects not only how sophisticated the science behind child welfare has become, but how far our department has come in collecting and interpreting data.

We’re proud of the changes we’ve made that have brought us close to ending federal oversight. But there are three other areas that further show how we’ve become a dynamic, innovative, and stable department. These areas are our commitment to family-based care, our work to help youth who have aged-out of the child welfare system, and our dedicated team of caseworkers.

While celebrating our anniversary, we are also celebrating our state’s role as a national leader in family-based care.

For children in state custody, New Jersey embraced a new model of care – the family-based model of care – ten years ago, and curtailed use of institutions – sometimes called congregate care.

Under the family-based model of care, we either place children with foster families or work intensively with their biological families so children can stay in their home.

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, our approach has produced significant results.

Between 2004 and 2013, the number of children in congregate care in New Jersey fell nearly 78 percent. This is more than double the 37 percent national average and the greatest improvement among the eight states the federal government examined.

The percentage of children in congregate care in New Jersey is 7.7 percent. This is well below the nearly 14 percent national average.

The number of children in foster care in New Jersey fell more than 43 percent. This is the second greatest improvement among the eight states examined and more than double the national average.

There is no question that unless there is a clinical need for residential treatment, children belong with families. We are proud New Jersey has become a national leader in providing family-based care.

Child protection is hard work. It’s reflected in our profession’s 20 to 40 percent turnover rate.

But the picture in New Jersey is very different. Turnover for our department’s caseworkers is under seven and a quarter percent, according to the Rutgers School of Social Work.

Low turnover is important to our success. Children and families benefit from professionals well experienced with complex family dynamics. Young caseworkers benefit by learning from veterans with years of knowledge and wisdom.

To achieve staff stability, we addressed the three things that most influence turnover: caseloads, supervision, and training.

The overwhelming majority of the department’s caseloads meet national standards.
There’s one supervisor for every 4.7 workers.

Caseload-carrying staff and supervisors received nearly 230,000 hours of training in 2014. All caseload-carrying staff and supervisors receive at least 40 hours of training each year.

Despite often difficult situations, our caseworkers are dedicated public servants who seek to improve the lives of children and families. I am proud of their tireless work and congratulate them for their commitment to our state.

Our department is committed to ending the cycle of homelessness for families and youth with prior child welfare system involvement.

By analyzing our data, we discovered that among families who repeatedly become involved with the child welfare system, homelessness and housing instability are re-occurring issues and likely contributing factors to their repeated involvement with the department.

So we created, and then expanded, our Keeping Families Together program.

Keeping Families Together provides a housing first approach for child welfare involved families struggling with homelessness and other challenges. These families have close access to supportive services, including case planning and evidence-based and trauma-informed coordinated services.

We piloted the program in 2014 for 10 families in Essex County. We later expanded it to another thirteen families in Hudson, Monmouth, and Passaic counties.

And, in partnership with the Department of Community Affairs, we recently expanded the program further, this time into Atlantic and Gloucester counties, which more doubled the program’s size.

We are monitoring the project closely and I’m optimistic it will make a difference for these families, hopefully breaking the multigenerational cycle of child abuse and neglect.

We’re also working to prevent homelessness among youth currently or previously in foster care.

Thanks to a $2 million federal grant from the Administration for Children and Families, we’re helping youth between 14 and 21 years old in foster care achieve permanency; find safe, affordable, and stable housing; and achieve their academic and career goals.

The money builds on a 2013 grant to assess needs and identify strategies to prevent and address homelessness among youth in foster care.

The program includes family-finding and permanency efforts, re-conceptualized life skills, educational advocacy, near peer and professional mentors, and sustainable housing and supportive services. DCF will also develop a Statewide Youth Housing Learning Collaborative to train DCF’s network of youth housing providers.

The effort will potentially help hundreds of youth and test whether the program can be expanded to help youth throughout the state and nation.
We also received a $12 million grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration for mental health services for youth with complex behavioral health challenges.

Our residential behavioral health treatment providers throughout the state will participate in two transformative programs. One is on the “Nurtured Heart Approach” and the other on the “Seven Core Strategies”. Rutgers University Behavioral Healthcare is working with the national experts who developed these intervention to ensure that our providers can fully transfer the benefit of this education to the youth we serve.

Parents and caregivers also receive training to prevent repeated out-of-home treatment episodes after a youth’s initial treatment.

The goals of the grant are to reduce the percentage of youth who require multiple episodes of out-of-home treatment and eliminate the reliance on restraint of children in behavioral health treatment settings.

This funding will transform the practice of about 4,500 out-of-home treatment staff, 700 care management staff, and at least 9,000 parents and caregivers.

Mr. Chairman, the progress our department has achieved would not have been possible without a dedicated and talented workforce. For them to be effective, they need to feel safe and secure. That’s why we have continued to support our Safety Workgroup to explore ways to make our work and workplaces safer.

The workgroup has presented me with several well-developed and thoughtful recommendations. We are already implementing many of them and others will be implemented soon.

Our security advisor is working with local offices to help them develop drills and protocols guiding their response to threats.

Current and new workers are required to attend a two-day “Safety Awareness for the Child Welfare Professional” training program.

Local offices have signs warning visitors of stiff criminal penalties for assaulting our staff.

We’ve emphasized to our local office leaders that Teamed Response – also known as the Buddy System – is an expected practice and a vital part of our safety program.

For caseworkers meeting families privately in our local offices, we provide emergency notification pendants. While metal detection wands used by each local office armed guard detects and prohibits weapons, the pendants help protect caseworkers from other forms of physical violence. Similar to the Life Alert system advertised on television, caseworkers can easily press the neck-worn pendant to alert the local office armed guard and office staff for immediate help if they feel threatened.

All this is in addition to the steps we’ve taken last year, including creating the security advisor position and placing armed guards in every local office.
Our workers’ safety is personally important to me. Our department will continue to seek and employ sensible and effective ways to provide a safe and secure working environment for every member of our staff.

Our department is proud of the achievements we’ve made in the last ten years. Having reached our tenth anniversary, we are fully committed to yet further advancement and innovation and ensuring the well-being of our state’s children and families, now and well into the future.

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