

Good afternoon Chairman Schaer and members of the General Assembly Budget Committee. I'm pleased to join you today, along with my Department of Children and Families colleagues, to discuss our fiscal year 2018 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.

Mr. Chairman, I also want to share the thanks of U.S. District Court Judge Stanley R. Chesler. For fourteen years, Judge Chesler has been the presiding judge in the case that has guided our reform work.

From the bench, Judge Chesler expressed the federal court's gratitude for the governor's and legislature's continued support of our department, acknowledging this support has enabled us to execute and sustain our successful reform work.

But on that Wednesday morning two weeks ago, there was even more on the judge's mind.

Looking at our department's progress, and especially our most recent achievements, Judge Chesler said New Jersey is – and I quote – “on the threshold of what very well might be the model child welfare system in this country.”

After fourteen years, Judge Chesler has seen and heard just about everything there is see and hear about New Jersey's child welfare system.

Judge Chesler views our work, and our future, in high regard. We are grateful to Judge Chesler, and we intend to live up to his expectations.

At that hearing the federal monitor's report was released on our progress complying with the Sustainability and Exit Plan.

We're pleased to report we fulfilled six more of the Exit Plan's requirements.

Seventy-three percent of the plan's fifty-nine requirements are now categorized as fulfilled.

Our staff has done, and continues to do, an outstanding job serving our children and families. Thanks to their work and commitment we are closer to when there will be no further requirements to fulfill and the state can exit federal monitoring.

Mr. Chairman, the monitor's report contains several milestones that I'd like to point out.

Four of the six requirements we fulfilled – and one with which we have substantially complied – pertain to our work at the earliest stages of a family's involvement with the child welfare system.

The four requirements are completing investigations within sixty days, completing initial case plans within thirty days, average intake worker caseload per local office, and individual intake worker caseload.

The fifth and substantially fulfilled requirement is investigation quality.

This means the twelve requirements measuring our work at the earliest stages of a family's involvement with the child welfare system are now essentially fulfilled.

By itself, this is a significant milestone. But what is important is how “getting it right early” – achieving all the measures at the early stage of a family's involvement with us – will influence performance at later stages. It builds a strong foundation for our families' strength and resilience.

Another milestone is this is first time we have met the requirement for either average intake worker caseload per local office or individual intake worker caseload.

The monitor noted, "The Department has "targeted stabilizing intake caseloads as a high priority for a long time and the achievement of this milestone demonstrates solid management and practices at the intake level."

Yet another milestone is this is the first time we fulfilled the requirement for timeliness of investigation completion.

Investigating child abuse and neglect is challenging. Many families struggle with co-occurring issues such as domestic violence, substance use disorder, and mental illness. Sometimes families are evasive or uncooperative with our investigators. Getting medical reports is another challenge. These things complicate and delay investigations.

Our intake staff has overcome these obstacles, reaching a new level of performance.

Initial case plans establish the goal of a child's involvement with the child welfare system. These plans outline the role of every individual helping the child and the services our department will provide the child and family.

Developing the plans can be difficult. It requires the active participation of a child's parents, and some are not ready to engage. Many parents with substance use disorder or mental health issues don't recognize how their struggles impair their ability to parent.

Once more, our staff prevailed in the face of obstacles. And for the first time since our reform effort began, we have now met the requirement for initial case plans.

Like investigation timeliness, investigation quality has also improved. It improved significantly and is now within the margin of error, marking our substantial compliance with this measure.

We also met two other requirements this period: the requirements for subsequent Family Team Meetings after 12 months and for adoption caseload.

By meeting the adoption caseload requirement, we reached another milestone: we have now fulfilled every caseload measure in the Exit Plan.

For caseworkers, this means the days of morale deflating caseloads are over. For children and families, it means they receive the attention and services they need to overcome their struggles and chart a course toward successful and happy lives.

Mr. Chairman, I want to acknowledge our intake workers, their supervisors, and our adoption and permanency staff. Without them, reaching these milestones would not have been possible. They work face-to-face with families and ensure children are safe and protected. They are vital to our child welfare system. We are thankful for their work and proud of what they've accomplished.

Beyond the federal monitor's report, there are other areas that point to our continued progress. These areas include our kinship caregivers, our adoption work, the New Jersey Child Welfare Data Hub, our dedicated workforce, and our website about safe sleep for infants.

While a large majority of the children we serve live in their own homes and with their families, some children need to live elsewhere, either temporarily or, if necessary, permanently through adoption. Removing a child from their home is done for their safety, but it's traumatic for them. Thankfully, we've made great progress lessening the severity of trauma by embracing kinship caregivers.

Kinship caregivers are grandparents, relatives, and family friends. They offer children a safe, reassuring, and comforting environment during a difficult time.

And research suggests children placed with a kinship caregiver are less likely to experience repeat maltreatment when reunited with their family.

Nearly half of children living in resource homes benefit from kinship care, helping ensure the first placement we make for a child is the best placement for that child.

Kinship care not only provides children a temporary home, but a permanent and stable home when reunification is not possible.

Our Office of Adoption Operations and our local offices strive to make each child's transition to adoption as smooth as possible. This means ensuring children are in a committed home before parental rights are terminated. Our adoption team has excelled at this.

A study we conducted revealed eighty-eight percent of children with an adoption goal were already with a family that wanted to adopt them by the time parental rights were terminated. This is an important achievement that provides children a stable and loving environment from the moment they enter foster care.

To make child welfare system data more available to the public, the department and the Rutgers School of Social Work together launched phase two of the New Jersey Child Welfare Data Hub in November.

Site users can produce custom charts, graphs, and other visuals of child welfare data.

The Data Hub furthers our commitment to accountability and transparency. Combined with our previous efforts, the Data Hub achieves an unheard of level of child welfare data disclosure. Future updates will raise that level even higher.

The Rutgers School of Social Work last year issued a report showing our caseload-carrying staff turnover rate was seven and a quarter percent, far below the national figures, which range between twenty and forty percent.

This year the rate was even lower, moving to below seven percent.

Rutgers noted our "child welfare educational programs for both Bachelor's and Master's degree students," that the race and ethnicity of child welfare staff generally reflect the children we serve, and that our staff continues "to report high levels of satisfaction" with our training program.

Mr. Chairman, I spent sixteen years in the field. Workers in the field see many things. Few things are more heartbreaking than seeing well-meaning and caring parents in anguish; grieving because the infant child they placed to sleep has died.

Some sleep-related deaths simply cannot be explained. But some can be prevented.

We recently launched njsafesleep.com, a website with information about how to place a child to sleep safely. It offers tips, a downloadable brochure in English and Spanish, videos in English and Spanish, and links to other resources.

By educating the public about safe sleep, we can avoid more needless child deaths.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.