

Assembly Budget Committee – FY 2019 Budget Testimony
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Good afternoon, Chairwoman Pintor Marin, Vice Chairman Burzichelli and members of the Assembly Budget Committee, and thank you for inviting me and members of my leadership team here today to discuss Governor Murphy's Fiscal Year 2019 Budget, particularly as it relates to the protection of New Jersey's children and the strengthening of families in the Garden State.

President John F. Kennedy once said, "Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future."

We at the New Jersey Department of Children and Families agree.

And I'm here today to tell you that New Jersey continues to make a critical investment in our most valuable resource, ensuring that New Jersey's children have the opportunity for a safe and happy childhood, with the ability to grow into happy, healthy, and productive adults.

Governor Murphy's proposed FY 2019 Budget provides the means and the resources we need as a department to safeguard children and to support the success of New Jersey's children and families.

And let me just point out that while the work that we do, through the Division of Child Protection and Permanency, to safeguard New Jersey's nearly 2 million children is vital, the scope of our work as New Jersey's primary child-serving department is not limited to just CP&P. We do, and we are, so much more.

The Governor's proposed budget allocates nearly \$1.15 billion for DCF.

New Jersey's investment in DCF supports our efforts in the areas of child abuse prevention, mental health and substance abuse treatment, domestic violence and sexual assault prevention, adolescent services, programs for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities, family and community partnerships, and many other important programs.

And as we look to maximize your investment in services and programs supporting New Jersey's children and families, we have some new initiatives taking place within the Department that will make a difference for the people we serve.

We have begun to study issues around Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, and Trauma-Informed Care, to enhance outcomes for our children and their families and to promote protective factors that will serve them well as they transition from DCP&P supervision.

The original study on ACEs from the CDC and Kaiser Permanente indicated that nearly 2/3 of study participants had experienced at least one adverse episode in their childhood.

And as the number of ACEs increased, so too did the risk of depression, alcohol and substance abuse, heart disease, sexual violence, suicide attempts and early death among study participants.

We need to develop a strategy to effectively address ACEs in New Jersey and give our children the formative foundation they need to be successful and to avoid risky behaviors later in life.

We also need to move to a new paradigm of trauma-informed care – one in which we move away from asking questions like “What’s wrong with you?” to questions like “What happened to you?” – to truly understand and empathize with the individuals we serve.

Some of you may have seen the Oprah Winfrey special report on 60 Minutes on March 11 of this year, detailing the impact of trauma on childhood development.

I believe that in short order, we’ll see a shift in child welfare, in which trauma-informed care isn’t just viewed as a leading practice, but as the most sensible practice to ending the sometimes-generational cycle of abuse and neglect we see in families with multi-generational involvement within our offices.

In order to make all of this happen, we need to continue to invest in programs that promote a “prevention-first” approach, allowing us to prevent child abuse and neglect before they happen, rather than just responding to abuse and neglect after they happen.

In the Governor’s proposed FY 2019 Budget, we maintain funding for the successful home visitation program, which facilitates parent-child bonding, promotes school readiness, and imparts successful parenting strategies in a familiar setting – the family home.

We continue to fund our Family Success Center programs as a critical link between the community and the family unit.

Our 56 Family Success Centers are operating in your communities – teaching parenting skills, connecting families to health care services, preparing individuals for the workforce and facilitating access to other governmental and non-profit assistance.

They offer language learning classes, citizenship education, community activities and other services important to the stability of the family.

And Assemblyman Mukherji, you’ll be happy to know that we are planning to open our 57th Family Success Center in Jersey City very, very soon – or as soon as we can locate affordable space within the city.

Recently, members of my leadership team and I had the opportunity to visit successful Family Success Centers in Newark and Kearny, and the work that they’re doing there is nothing short of transformative.

They are an integral part of the community, and we’re proud to work with our FSC providers to enhance preventive services for New Jersey’s children and bolster New Jersey’s families.

We continue to support programs for the victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, and we remain committed to the Displaced Homemaker program, which provides needed training to women who are reentering the workforce after years of absence.

In the FY 2019 Budget, the Governor proposed increased funding for the Displaced Homemaker program by \$750,000, which will give us the ability to implement 5 new programs and expand this initiative Statewide.

We are continuing the trend in funding and utilization increases in our Mobile Response and Stabilization Services program within the Children's System of Care.

Mobile Response provides 24/7 assistance when a child's emotional or behavioral health challenges threaten their own wellbeing or the stability of their current living arrangements.

Our Mobile Response specialists provide face-to-face crisis intervention within one hour of being notified.

This service has helped to save foster care placements and to prevent disruption for the child.

And I'm happy to report that our New Jersey's Mobile Response is a model for the rest of the nation. Recently, we were visited by the Los Angeles County leadership who were interested in learning more about our model, and we've been notified that California is looking to implement a Mobile Response program based on New Jersey's program.

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families stands at the ready to work with our sister agencies and organizations in State government to respond to the opioid epidemic that has ravaged so many other states throughout the nation.

Through our partnerships with the Department of Health and the Department of Community Affairs, we remain committed to the Keeping Families Together program, an evidence-based model of supportive housing and wraparound services for substance-involved families working with our Department to maintain the family bond or achieve reunification while pursuing treatment.

We are also continuing our promising Peer Support Recovery Specialists program, through which parents seeking treatment are connected with trained peer recovery specialists to help build support capacity where it may not currently exist, and to create a sustained pathway to recovery from substance abuse.

These programs, which are a component of the Governor's \$100 million investment throughout State government in services and programs that work for New Jerseyans battling addiction, will result in better recovery outcomes for the individual and better outcomes for the families served.

While the proposed FY 2019 Budget funds the programs and services that have and that will make a difference in the lives of New Jersey's children, the State's investment in programs and services pales in comparison to what the employees of the Department dedicate of themselves – their time, their talents, their compassion and strength in the face of adversity and sometimes tragedy.

The men and women who work for DCF do so because they've been called to this kind of work. It takes special people to work with vulnerable or abused children and struggling families, and it can sometimes feel like a thankless job.

On behalf of those we serve, and to those public servants who I'm lucky to have as colleagues, I would like to say a resounding "Thank You."

Studies have shown that among those who work on the front lines of child welfare and protection, incidence of secondary trauma is significant – the National Child Traumatic Stress Network notes that up to 50% of child welfare workers are at a high risk of secondary trauma, PTSD or vicarious trauma.

DCP&P's caseworkers, in many cases, are first responders who are first on the scene in the event of a tragedy or crisis. They need to be supported as first responders.

This isn't just a matter of fairness to our employees – it's about reinforcing the safety net for our most vulnerable youth, to ensure that they are served by field staff who aren't themselves dealing with trauma and stress.

I've spoken internally within the Department about the need to create and foster a Culture of Safety in DCF – one that supports employees' physical, mental and emotional well-being.

And whether it's training our local office leadership to be aware of the signs of vicarious trauma, or conducting an internal review of our policies to ensure that they're trauma-informed, or continuing wellness initiatives and employee supports like our Worker-to-Worker hotline, many of these Culture of Safety strategies can be employed at no added cost to New Jersey's taxpayers.

The Culture of Safety will make for a safer, healthier working environment for the men and women who contribute so much to the safety, health and wellbeing of New Jersey's children and families.

We owe our public employees as much, and we owe New Jersey's children our absolute best. We need to make sure we have people in the field who are equipped with the resilience, the compassion, the fortitude and the cultural competency that child welfare work demands.

As we look ahead, we're keeping an eye on changes in federal law which will allow us to continue to support our current prevention efforts and to potentially expand those efforts.

The federal Families First Act will allow us to obtain federal dollars for services provided on an in-home basis, rather than in an out-of-home placement.

And when you consider that DCP&P currently provides in-home services to more than 86% of the children we serve – more than 41,000 children according to the last published data available, making New Jersey a national leader in providing in-home services – the Families First Act could potentially be a game-changer, not just for New Jersey, but for the provision of children's protective services nationwide.

Madame Chairwoman and members of the Budget Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today about New Jersey's child- and family-serving programs.

Thank you also for your continued partnership and commitment to keeping children safe and strengthening families in the Garden State.

The work of child welfare cannot be done alone, and it does not happen in a vacuum. It takes all of us – caseworkers, administrators, advocates and policy makers – working together to be successful.

I know that when we read about tragedies in the newspaper or see reports in the media, it can become discouraging.

But if we can make a difference in the life of one child, our investment in time, energy and funds will have been worth it.

I look forward to working with you, today and always, to safeguard our most valuable resource – New Jersey’s children.

Thank you.