



**TESTIMONY OF
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**PRESENTED TO THE
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY HEARING ON HUMAN SERVICES**

**REGARDING
Children and Families involved in the NYS Child Welfare System**

FEBRUARY 2, 2022

My name is Sarah Chiles and I have been the executive director of the Redlich Horwitz Foundation (RHF) for ten years. We are a philanthropic foundation that works in partnership with government, providers, community groups, advocates, families and youth to accelerate transformation of the child welfare system in NY so that children, youth and families are intact, supported and can thrive.

We grant over \$5 million a year across 15 counties and NYC, reaching approximately 12,000 children in care and even more families in our work to prevent foster care removals.

Our three main goals include:

1. **Narrowing the front door to foster care & enhancing family resiliency without surveillance and separation.**
2. **Partnering with communities to design the supports families say they need and want.**
3. **Supporting youth who experience foster care to connect, heal, lead and thrive.**

We are grateful to the Legislature for its past support of the Family First Transition Fund, which assists counties in placing more children in foster care with kinship relatives rather than in unnecessary congregate placements. **This funding coupled with RHF's technical assistance has led to a 30% reduction in congregate care and an increase of 28% in kinship foster care.**

Even so, New York continues to place far too many children in facilities simply due to a lack of kinship and foster parent recruitment. Even very young children are placed unnecessarily in these sterile shelter-like institutions; in fact, 601 children under thirteen years old reside in these facilities, 74% of whom are children of color. We urge the legislature to take action to eliminate the use of these placements, except when an independent assessment shows it to be medically necessary.

But the area of greatest concern for the Foundation is the extreme rates of racial disparities across our child welfare system. **Black families are seven times more likely to be reported to Child Protective Services and eleven times more likely to be placed in foster care.** We know that over 80% of foster care cases are due to a finding of neglect, the vast majority of which are tied to issues of poverty and racism.

These children and families would be far better served by government meeting their concrete needs related to food insecurity, unstable housing, and childcare rather than allocating the majority of child welfare funding to the most traumatic and highest-cost, deep-end intervention of foster care. For these reasons, RHF believes additional support for housing subsidies and childcare are necessary so that families can stabilize and thrive. Similarly, families would benefit from an expansion of the State's support of preventive services, especially those provided by trusted community-based organizations that provide supports that families say they need and want.

To this end, we are pleased to partner with the Office of Children and Family Services to pilot a universal basic income model for families involved in child welfare. RHF is funding the research through the University of Pennsylvania in an effort to show that a small upfront cash investment for families

can prevent future expensive foster care placements. It is our hope that the State will expand cash transfer programs to other vulnerable populations, including young people aging out of care. Additionally, NY needs to provide an income-eligibility waiver so that these families can continue to access other public benefits in addition to the cash payments.

Additionally, the state of New York must work to reduce calls to the SCR hotline by all types of mandated reporters, particularly those from education settings, health care, and by anonymous callers. On the latter, we know that often calls are made on an anonymous basis as a form of threat and harassment. The vast majority of these calls lack the evidence for an investigation: only 35 of 10,000 anonymous calls in 2020 were even deemed sufficient to investigate. What a waste of public resources that could otherwise be reallocated to services and support for families truly in need.

Further, mandated reporters in medical settings resort to calling the SCR hotline on immorally obtained drug tests of pregnant people, rather than pursuing healthcare interventions. Basic tenets of human rights and transparency make it a moral imperative that medical professionals be required to receive informed consent before drug testing pregnant people. Given our country's history of racist practices in medical sciences, it is even more concerning that this is not statewide policy already. Similarly, parents' rights are being abused by government overreach during a CPS investigation; parents must be informed of their rights when CPS seeks to enter their home and inspect their children and themselves.

These front-end system issues are just some of the reasons the families and children of New York need more accountability from the child welfare system. As a state-run, county-administered system, child welfare as experienced by children and families in New York is a complicated bureaucracy with few places to go when they have experienced challenges and injustices. As in 36 other states, parents and young people would benefit from a neutral, impartial advocacy office that could mediate issues and provide information and navigation support. Child welfare leaders and the public would also benefit from the data collected about recurring issues that could lead to better policy and programs.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. I'm grateful to the committees for your leadership, time and dedication to these critical issues facing children and families in NY.