



Leadership, voice and vision for child welfare in New York State

## Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies

Written Testimony of: Michelle Newman, Associate Executive Director, Upstate, COFCCA

Submitted to: Assembly Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on:

Higher Education

Thursday, February 8, 2024

The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) is the principal representative for nearly all the not-for-profit organizations providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, and juvenile justice services in New York State. COFCCA is comprised of over 100-member organizations, ranging in size from small community-based programs to the nation's largest multi-services agencies — all of which share the mission of serving children and families. COFCCA works with its members and government to ensure quality services for children and their families.

As we engage in a dialogue about the investments needed in our state budget this year, I urge careful consideration of the needs of the thousands of children and families our programs serve through the child welfare system.

### COFCCA Budget Request Summary

The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) Supports:

- Creating and enhancing meaningful career pathways in child welfare through:
  - Increasing funding for the Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Programs (ATL, HESC)
  - The Governor's Executive Budget proposal to establish a \$4 million loan forgiveness program for Mental Health Clinicians Serving Children (ATL- OMH)
- Supporting youth as they transition out of care, by Increasing funding for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative to \$10 million (ATL, SED)

### Creating and Enhancing Meaningful Career Pathways in Child Welfare

[COFCCA's 2022 Child Welfare Workforce Report](#) consists of data from 58 child welfare agencies across New York State. This workforce is comprised of professionally trained and deeply committed individuals, often largely comprised of women of color. These staff support children, youth, and their families in prevention services designed to prevent entry into foster care, as well as children and youth in foster care across New York State.

Key findings from the report include:

- A significant reduction in the number of master's level social workers at our member agencies from 2 years ago, indicating that they have been increasingly difficult to find and hire
  - This reduction shows an urgent need for creating a pipeline for this workforce.
- A significant increase in workforce turnover across all positions:

Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies

254 West 31 Street, New York, NY 10001 212.929.2626 | The Blake Annex, 1 Steuben Place, Albany, NY 12207

[www.cofcca.org](http://www.cofcca.org)

- Most concerning, average turnover in 2022 was about **57%** among residential child care workers and close to **50%** among family foster care caseworkers.
- Overall caseworker average turnover across all child welfare programs was about **42%** - nearly twice as high as in 2020 (when turnover was at 24%).

These troubling turnover rates show the continued need for investing in the child welfare workforce. Every time a worker turns over, it adds time in foster care unnecessarily for a child and impacts outcomes for families as families continually need to tell their story and to come to trust a new worker. A stable and well-trained workforce is crucial for ensuring quality services, positive outcomes for our children and families, and reduced lengths of stay in foster care.

Our child welfare staff tell us that in addition to salary increases, they need more support in achieving their higher education goals. We consistently hear from our child welfare workers that although they find the work very challenging, they enjoy what they do and want to continue to grow with our agencies. Many staff in our programs desire to become supervisors or even aspire to be in a senior leadership position such as a program director or a CEO someday; however, they need advanced education degrees to pursue those positions.

We also often hear that they begin to look for other jobs when they cannot afford to pay their student loan monthly repayments (given the growing student debt crisis in our country, staff have student loan payments ranging from several hundred dollars per month to payments even in excess of \$1000 per month). While we appreciate ongoing efforts at the federal level to address this issue, we seek a long-term option for supporting New York State's child welfare workforce in their educational goals so we can begin to build a true career pathway for our state's child welfare professionals.

- **COFFCA requests a significant expansion of the impact of the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Programs by increasing the funding for these programs to \$1 million each.**
- **COFFCA strongly supports the Executive Budget proposal to establish a \$4 million Loan Forgiveness Program for Mental Health Clinicians Serving Children.** This program would specifically support licensed mental health clinicians serving children and families in Office of Mental Health and Office of Children and Family Services licensed settings. (ATL, OMH)

These programs would provide an incentive to current and prospective employees to work in the critical field of child welfare, and support the education and training needed to provide quality care.

### **Support Youth as they Transition Out of Care**

New York State has committed funding in the budget for several years to assist youth in foster care as they pursue higher education. We have watched with great joy each year as our young people in foster care enter college or university through the support of the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI). In the last several years, this initiative has supported more than 2,000 young people in our state during their college journeys. These young people have attended more than 100 NYS colleges and universities and they are achieving success through post-secondary education. The FYCSI program uniquely provides necessary social, academic, and financial supports to ensure that

barriers to opportunity for the foster care population are mitigated.

- **COFCCA supports increasing investment in the Foster Youth College Success Initiative to \$10 million** to continue to assist foster youth in achieving their goals.

In closing, we must ensure that the final state budget includes investments in our child welfare workforce- quality in the workforce supporting children and youth in care is directly tied to the quality of care and overall experience children and families have. Additionally, we must ensure we continue to support the future success of youth as they transition out of care.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.