



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

Tuesday, February 24, 2026

The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) is a strong, statewide network of nonprofit child and family serving organizations that collectively advances practices and policies to secure the wellbeing of children, youth, families, and communities. 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.

COFCCA recommends the following state actions and investments to ensure access to and enhance access to higher education resources for our workforce and youth transitioning out of foster care:

### **COFCCA Budget Request Summary**

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

- Enhancing Career Pathways in Child Welfare through:
  - Continued funding for loan forgiveness: The Executive Budget proposal includes an additional \$4 million for Mental Health Clinicians Serving Children (ATL- OMH); and
  - Increasing funding for the Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program and the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Programs (ATL-HESC).
- Supporting Families and Youth as they transition out of care, by increasing funding for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative to \$10 million (ATL-SED); and

### **COFCCA Budget Request Detail**

#### **Enhancing Career Pathways in Child Welfare**

The Child Welfare sector is a large employer in the state. According to data collected by COFCCA, more than 55,000 people are employed by our member agencies. Ensuring the viability of the sector is vitally important for the economy of the state.

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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)

The Child Welfare workforce is comprised of professionally trained and deeply committed individuals, 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.

Quality in the workforce supporting children and youth in child welfare is directly tied to the quality of care and overall experience children and families have. Young people in foster care come to develop relationships and rely upon their direct care staff and their caseworkers. High worker turnover negatively impacts children and youth in foster care, and it impacts outcomes.

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. Current salaries are not competitive for recruitment and retention of staff. We cannot continue to under-support the professionals who are doing this challenging work.

Our child welfare staff tell us that 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.

- **COFCCA requests a significant expansion of the impact of the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program to \$1 million (ATL- HESC).** We thank the legislature for including an additional \$100,000 in the last 2 enacted budgets for this program. We note that the Governor’s FY 2027 Executive budget proposal eliminated this critical funding—we urge the restoration and expansion of the investment this year.

We also often hear that staff 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). 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.

- **Expand the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program by increasing funding to \$1 million (ATL- HESC).**
- **COFCCA strongly supports the Executive Budget proposal to continue the \$4 million Loan Forgiveness Program for Mental Health Clinicians Serving Children (ATL- OMH).** 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. COFCCA’s workforce compensation report shows that Master’s-level caseworkers have declined by 58% since 2020, with agencies struggling to recruit and retain social workers.

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.

### **Supporting 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). Since inception, this initiative has supported more than 4,000 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 youth in foster care in achieving their goals.**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.