What Children and Families Need Now: Child Welfare and Family Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ARE VULNERABLE

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York, children, older youth and families involved in the child welfare system struggled with economic stress, reliance on safety net services, and, in some cases, family separation and uncertain paths to permanency. COVID-19 has exacerbated many of these stressors, caused delays in permanency, and diminished timely access to essential services and supports.

Meanwhile, child protective services continue to field and investigate reports, older youth continue to age out of foster care, children are removed and come into care, families still need supports to help prevent entry into foster care, and foster parents, direct care staff and kinship caregivers continue to care for children. Many of the people and organizations that are a part of the child welfare system, from service providers to attorneys and the family courts, are adapting how they operate in response to the public health crisis. This is resulting in an increased reliance on technology for contacts and communication, support and service delivery, and evolving expectations for all stakeholders, most importantly, families and caregivers.

There is a need now for targeted investments and policy responses to promote child and family well-being. In partnership with over 30 New York state child welfare advocates, we have requested that forthcoming federal legislation include a number of child welfare priorities. The proposals below, many of which were developed by the CHAMPS-NY Campaign, of which CDF-NY is a member, are concrete State and local policy responses that children and families urgently require as we navigate the COVID-19 crisis.

PRESERVING AND SUPPORTING FAMILIES

All families are under stress due to school closures and day care, shelter in place orders, suspension of community activities like congregate religious services, after-school programs, and the threat of illness in our communities. We must promote family resilience and stability by investing in access to primary prevention, targeted child welfare prevention, respite, child care and anti-poverty programs such as cash supports, food/nutritional programs and affordable housing.

FAMILY COURTS

Family courts state wide have reduced their workloads to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, which has limited children’s and parents’ access. As family courts have moved to virtual appearances over the last few weeks, delays in hearings and lengthy adjournments continue to delay some children’s reunification with family and their exit from foster care through other forms of permanency like adoption. In the absence of hearings, some children face delays in services, visitation and contact with siblings, which are essential to child well-being and longer-term family stability. Hearings pertaining to reunification and permanency must be prioritized, and family court dockets must ensure timely opportunities for children and families to be heard on these pressing concerns. In addition, family court judges and local child welfare departments must consider tolling timelines under the Adoption and Safe Families Act to ensure that disruptions in services for parents during the pandemic do not result in unnecessary termination of parental rights.
IMPROVING SUPPORT FOR OLDER YOUTH
Moratorium on Aging Out of Foster Care

Children who leave foster care at 21 face enormous challenges under typical circumstances, including disconnection from family and supportive adults, housing instability and homelessness, extreme poverty and food insecurity, and significant barriers to employment and higher education following their experience in the child welfare system. During the COVID-19 crisis, these young people are even more vulnerable to pre-existing risks like criminal justice involvement and trafficking, but also illness. In response, we call on New York to temporarily place a moratorium on aging out for at least 180 days following the lifting of the Governor’s PAUSE Executive Order.

Streamlining Reentry and Prioritizing Adolescents and Emerging Adults in COVID-19 Response

Adolescents and young adults in foster care are navigating emerging adulthood with significant disadvantage, and must be prioritized in current and forthcoming COVID-19 economic supports and employment benefits intended to mitigate the harm to families and communities. There were more than 3000 teenagers aged 14-17, and 1500 young adults in foster care in NY as of the last day of 2019. Specifically, we request that:

- The state issue guidance to streamline reentry into foster care for youth between the ages of 18 to 21, including waiving all educational or training/employment requirements that might pose a barrier to youth re-entering care and obtaining foster care supports. The federal Children’s Bureau is encouraging states to permit re-entry “as quickly as possible” to provide older youth with a safe place to stay, subsidies and Medicaid health care coverage.
- State and local government prioritize adolescents and young adults being served by the child welfare system for programs, including employment, housing, education/workforce training, and food/nutrition.
- The State issue guidance necessary to ensure that adolescents and young adults are able to immediately access financial and in-kind supports during the pandemic (including cash assistance, transportation, allowances and stipends), without requiring formal program participation or in-person check-ins.
- The state issue guidance to screen all young adults being served by the child welfare system to determine their eligibility for all stimulus and unemployment benefits.

PUTTING TECHNOLOGY IN THE HANDS OF YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Children and families involved in the foster care system need access to technology tools (including phones, laptops and tablets) and internet access to help children stay connected to their families, social workers, teachers, and essential health and mental health services. As the summer approaches, and youth have few opportunities for outdoor or community-based activities, participating in virtual programming and education/employment training will be essential. While private funding has recently helped to meet some of the needs, there are many children, youth and families who still, and will, require ongoing technology access and support during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

KINSHIP FOSTER HOME SUPPORT

Kinship caregivers are more critical than ever to the care and well-being of children in foster care, providing homes and family supports often without financial resources. Shockingly, state funding for kinship caregiver programs was severely cut in the Enacted Budget. The State should restore funding to those programs immediately to support families during the COVID19 crisis. We also urge the State to act to put into place the Kin First Firewall that was included in the State of the State proposals. Doing so will help to ensure that placement with family and those with close ties to children remains a priority for children coming into foster care.