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## **Kin-First Firewall and Blind Removal Policies Launched: New York State Takes Crucial Steps Toward Family First Readiness and Racial Equity in Child Welfare**

CHAMPS NY, a statewide coalition of advocates and providers working for policy and practice change to support children, families and caregivers in child welfare, Lawyers For Children, and Children's Defense Fund-NY applaud Governor Cuomo and Commissioner Poole for taking crucial steps in realigning child welfare towards a more family-based, anti-racist system that listens to impacted communities and takes responsive action with evidence-based practice. In implementing Kin-First Firewall and Blind Removal policies, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services has also advanced in its preparation for Family First in the next year. New York must sustain this progress by reinvesting in our children and families in the upcoming budget.

COVID-19 has placed immense strain on New York's children and families, especially those of color. Now more than ever, child welfare policies need to be evidence-based, family-focused, and community-informed. The Blind Removal Process creates Blind Removal meetings where a caseworker removes identifying information about the child and family from the case to facilitate unbiased decision-making. The Kin-First Firewall practice requires a higher level of review to verify that all viable relatives and adults with positive relationships to the child have been explored to achieve a kinship placement when children are removed from the home or moved between placements.

"With the release of Kin-First Firewall and Blind Removal policies in child welfare, New York State is taking welcome steps that prioritize connecting children with their communities and taking action toward racial justice when considering removing children from their families," said **Kate Breslin, President and CEO of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, Co-Chair of CHAMPS NY**. "Both policies are evidence-based and designed to strengthen families. We celebrate this progress while acknowledging they are steps along a path and there is more work to be done. The Kin-First Firewall and Blind Removal policies also rely upon child welfare preventive services, which New York must keep whole in the coming budget."

"As a network of New York's families and youth involved in the child welfare system, Families Together in New York State welcomes these well-considered policy directives from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. Despite decades of awareness, racial disparities in the removal of children from black and brown families have persisted. We applaud New York for embracing this sensible blind removal policy that takes implicit bias head on," added **Paige Pierce, CEO of Families Together in New York State and Co-Chair of CHAMPS NY**. "Coupled with ensuring more resources are directed toward families at-risk of

separation, we will move closer to fairer and more equitable outcomes. Further, the Kin-first policies like the Kin Firewall and the Kinship Champions program ensures that children who are separated remain with well-supported relatives and close family friends until they can return home or otherwise exit the system.”

“The Kinship Navigator commends OCFS for following the research and ensuring that children, when not able to live safely with their parents, find safe and stable homes with loved ones. This important step toward keeping children with families makes it clear that OCFS continues to prioritize kinship placements and is willing to build policy around this priority,” said **Ryan Johnson, Associate Director of the New York State Kinship Navigator**. “While kinship foster care offers a high level of support for children and caregivers, many of these future placements will likely end up without the benefits of foster care and will need ongoing assistance. OCFS has shown their commitment to funding kinship services for families who are not in foster care, and with the inevitable rise in non-foster care cases to come, we hope that they will build upon that investment. In addition, we implore OCFS to ensure the firewall does not permit the use of safety plans to facilitate children living with family members in lieu of court action, in order to protect due process for families, and to secure safeguards for caregivers who so often lack the supports needed to successfully care for children who've experienced trauma.”

“We commend the Office of Children and Family Services for committing to new state-wide policies that will help to address the severe racial disparities in our child welfare system. Implementing the ‘blind removal’ process, and building a ‘kinship firewall’ to ensure more children who are separated from their parents are placed with family, are two concrete steps we are proud to support. However, to address the roots of the over-representation of Black and Latinx children in the foster care system, we must also continue to ensure that communities have what they need to be healthy and thrive. Preventive services are an essential part of those critical resources,” explained **Julia L. Davis, Director of Youth Justice & Child Welfare of Children’s Defense Fund-New York**.

“We are encouraged by both Kin First Firewall and Blind Removal Process policies; significant steps in the right direction in addressing racial inequities and overrepresentation of Black and brown families in the child welfare system. We look forward to continued partnership with the Office of Children and Family Services, local social services districts, and fellow child welfare advocates to build on these efforts to ensure child and family stability and well-being,” said **Jennifer March, Executive Director of Citizens’ Committee for Children**.

“The Blind Removal Process and the Kin First Firewall are critical new OCFS policies aimed at alleviating the insidious overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system. As we applaud OCFS on the dissemination of these important policies we must also remember that reporters of suspected abuse and neglect also fall victim to the biases that lead to disproportionate minority representation in the child welfare system,” stated **Karen Freedman, the Executive Director of Lawyers For Children**, which represents a coalition of attorneys for youth in foster care across New York. “We must look at the front door to the child welfare system, as well as what happens to children and families once they enter the system. Educators, medical personnel, and law enforcement officers are responsible for the majority of child protective reports and they must receive training, through a race equity lens, on the necessity of becoming anti-racist reporters.”