



TESTIMONY OF
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PRESENTED TO THE
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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NORTHERNRIVERS

Summary of Recommendations

- **Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience**
- **Northern Rivers Family of Services recommends that the state increase reimbursement to counties for prevention programs**
- **Provide funding to startup the expansion of new and added primary prevention programs and convert to mainstream funding**
- **Support mental health education and services in school settings**

Good morning, I am William Gettman, and I am the CEO of Northern Rivers Family of Services headquartered in the Capital Region with offices throughout New York.

I would like to thank Chair Hevesi and members of the Assembly here today. Northern Rivers Family of Services is strongly committed to assisting in the development and implementation of system transformation efforts that support the goals and objectives of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), and ultimately families and children across New York state.

Primary Prevention is defined as preventing child abuse and maltreatment before it starts by implementing programs and services designed to promote the general welfare of children and families. The Family First Prevention Services Act, passed in the 2018 federal budget, provides a three-tier framework of services for providing aid and ensuring the safety of children across New York state. Distinguished from the other levels of this framework, primary prevention focuses on preventing abuse and neglect before it occurs. FFPSA encourages investment and reinvestment in culturally responsive and accessible primary prevention services in New York state, well before contact with or entry into the child welfare system occurs.

While Northern Rivers Family of Services is grateful for many of the measures the Governor and the Legislature have taken over the past few years to develop plans and strategies, we believe we can accelerate the progress through meaningful investments to adequately support the human services sector and the children, adults, and families we serve each day.

Values for Investing in Family Preservation

As we undertake a system reform that places an importance and priority on family stability, culturally competent actions, and community services, we must instill the following values and implementation assumptions into our efforts:

1. Existing services cannot take a single day off. Therefore, as we “rebuild the plane as we fly it,” we need to be careful not to destabilize existing programs and providers. We must ensure a full continuum of services that has capacity for different and changing needs, ensuring a continuity of care for all and a smooth, transitions, multifaceted evolution to even more impactful services.
2. We need transparent communication with families, stakeholders, providers, and the general public. Change is often difficult, and openness and transparency will reduce anxiety, promote support, and alleviate fears.
3. We need to ensure that the family voice is vital to system changes. Too often, families cannot access services until they encounter the CPS or the foster care system, meaning that these interventions can feel like an indictment of these parents. In that regard we need nonjudgmental options for community services without a rigorous eligibility and weakness driven intake system.
4. We need to work to eliminate system racism and overrepresentation in the reform efforts. It is well-documented that racial disparities exist within the child welfare system. Children of color are also at greater risk of substantiation of reports of child abuse or neglect and out-of-home placement, and spend more time in foster care.

5. We need to ensure we have a well-trained, available workforce to implement new initiatives and strategies. Our child welfare and mental health workforces need substantial investments to increase the number of individuals to carry out the vital work. These investments need to not only support the addition of new staff, but also the retention of current staff and providers.
6. We need stable funding that encourages innovation, fiscal viability, and incentives for performance and reform. Innovation cannot occur if the threat of cuts or reductions lingers annually. There is no innovation without bold new ideas, and these ideas need to be tested in real time; we need to ensure an adequate period of funding to validate impacts.

Based on the state's effort to date and the above-cited values, we recommend the following:

1. ***Prioritize workforce support, including fair compensation, opportunity for training and development, and a high-quality work experience.***

In addition to the pandemic, New York's families have faced many additional challenges in past years: the down economy, joblessness, homelessness, opiate/substance abuse, and violence in already plagued communities; for these forgotten New Yorkers, times are still hard. When families are in crisis and children are at risk, New York's not-for-profit network of human services providers are both the first line of defense and the safety net. **The agencies and the women and men in the not-for-profit human services sector are the first responders for at-risk and vulnerable families, children, and individuals.** Throughout the state, not-for-

profit human services welfare agencies respond to critical family situations 24/7/365, and our fiscal viability is at risk.

Workforce Support Is a Social Justice Issue

Women make up an astonishing 81% of the human services and direct care workforce in New York. This equates to more than 268,900 skilled, well-educated workers who are paid significantly less than women in New York's private sector, leading to increased staff turnover and jeopardizing the quality-of-service delivery.

Non-for-Profit Organizations Are an Economic Engine

New York's not-for-profit workforce is not only hard working, but also an economic engine. Across New York state, nearly 1 in 7 workers are employed by a not-for-profit organization. These workers contribute billions to the state's economic health; including the payment of income, sales, and property tax. Beyond the direct economic impact, the not-for-profit workforce allows all New Yorkers to stay employed, avert costly medical costs, and educate our young persons. A strong non-for-profit sector, with a viable direct-care staff, creates additional economic growth and allows New York state to attract new business investments and companies.

Specifically, we recommend that the annual COLA be provided the humans services sector at the 8.5% level, consistent with the CPI.

We further recommend staff for preventive services, domestic violence, runaway and homeless youth and children, and adult health home be included in the workforce investment.

Frontline staff, regardless of titles or funding stream, must be supported and shown financial respect to promote system reforms, start-up of new models, and avoidance of higher turnover, program closures, and lower levels of service. The importance of our organizations and staff cannot be overstated. **Individuals** rely on us to fulfill their dreams of independence. **Families** rely on us to provide their loved ones with the quality care they need to keep them safe and thriving. **Communities** rely on us as economic engines and employers. **Taxpayers** rely on us to support New Yorkers in their home communities, keeping them off the streets and out of expensive institutional settings and emergency rooms. Every New Yorker is impacted by this ongoing crisis—even those who don't yet realize it.

As part of a comprehensive workforce support and development investment, the issues of training, professional development, and student loan debt must be addressed.

We support the inclusion of funding for the NYS Child Welfare Worker Incentive Scholarship Program, the NYS Child Welfare Worker Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program, and other innovative approaches that tackle the high level of student debt that those who pursue these careers must assume. These efforts will reduce turnover and support the retention of highly trained staff

2. Northern Rivers Family of Services recommends that the state increase reimbursement to counties for prevention programs.

Prevention services are designed to keep children safely in their homes, protected from abuse and neglect. Services are tailored to individual family needs and may

include home-based services and supports when there is a need for housing, food, clothing, and mental health and medical services. Under the Family First Prevention Services Act, counties are required to develop, expand, and create community-based prevention programs for easy access to all families.

Since 2002, the state has supported an open-ended child welfare funding stream that provides an incentive to counties for investing in prevention services, by reimbursing county funds spent on preventive services. And it's working! Investment in prevention services has contributed to a 46% decline in the number of children and youth entering the foster care system statewide. However, for several years, the state budget has reduced the state share for prevention services to 62%, even though there is a statutory requirement of 65%. The continued cost shift from the state to the local governments, first implemented under the Cuomo Administration, puts a strain on the counties' ability to invest in community-based programs for families.

Prevention services are incredibly valuable to families in crisis. We thank the legislature, and the Chair in particular, for championing efforts to accomplish the restoration of state funding in budget conversations and in the legislation to increase the state share to the original level of 75% provided under the Child Welfare Reform Act of 1979. Prevention programs are proven to work, reduce the foster care census, and are the least costly child welfare interventions.

Again, every New Yorker is being impacted by this ongoing crisis—even those who don't yet realize it.

3. *Provide start-up funding to create new and expand existing primary prevention programs and convert to mainstream funding.*

One of the challenges in developing new primary prevention programs is the availability of local county-based funding that allows for the planning and startup of new models of service. The county based contracting structure does not promote regional approaches, local collaboration, or the testing of new models. To offset these challenges, we recommend that New York state allocate a portion of time-limited primary prevention funds for the startup of new regional programs. Upon operation of a new model or program for 18 months, conversion to state-county prevention funding would be the way to institutionalize the services. At the same time, local commitment would be garnered with a modest local share.

Some of the promising models include family enrichment centers, programs that target poverty reduction including child care and income stability, housing support initiative, and home visitation.

4. *Support mental health education and services in school settings.*

We are very proud that New York is the first state in the nation to mandate the teaching of mental health education in schools. Since implementation of the law, many strides have been made. Of greatest importance—and to the credit of schools—we see a much greater emphasis on changing school climates to make them more conducive to good mental health and wellness.

The New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) has been a strong leader, as has the State Education Department, in ensuring that information about mental

health is shared with schools across the state. We also applaud OMH's initiative to encourage school-based mental health services to more than 800 schools across the state.

The impact of the mental health education legislation highlights a growing demand for children's mental services; to meet this growing need and demand, we must:

- Accelerate and simplify the process for establishing mental health clinics.
- Encourage school districts to develop and implement creative approaches for services within the district.
- Share valuable resources.

Conclusion

In closing, we urge the Legislature to promote and help create a vision and spending plan that ensures that New York state remains committed to the programs that produce positive outcomes for children, individuals, and families; one that ultimately saves the state money on more expensive interventions such as foster care, unnecessary medical care, homeless shelters, and the juvenile justice system. We strongly encourage the Legislature to support the needs of the not-for-profit human services sector.

Simply stated, we recommend investments in our vital not-for-profit human services organizations and communities that yield positive outcomes for all New Yorkers. We must make New York state a great place to live, a great place to raise a family, and a great place to operate a business.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.