



June 10, 2021

Senator Michael Rodrigues
Senator Cindy Friedman
Senator Patrick O'Connor

Representative Aaron Michlewitz
Representative Anne Ferrante
Representative Todd Smola

Members of the FY2022 Budget Conference Committee,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of over 60 private and public organizations and individuals that collectively advocate for public policies and quality services that are in the best interest of the Commonwealth's children, youth and families. It is through public education and advocacy that CLM promotes the availability, accessibility, and quality of these services. Our members, who are comprised of providers, advocates, and regulators of services, know first-hand the struggles that children and their families face. Throughout Massachusetts, we strive to ensure the availability of services and accessibility of support for all families in need.

We write today to weigh in on the FY22 State Budget currently under review by the Conference Committee. We are very grateful to the legislature for prioritizing our children and their families and ensuring that their basic needs are met as residents of the Commonwealth recover from the pandemic together. We hope you agree that continued investment in child welfare will address gaps and lead to improvements in the system that will better protect the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children.

Combating Child Abuse & Neglect is a Multi-Faceted and Multi-Generational Issue

Child abuse and neglect stems from a myriad of issues faced by families, and each family is different. Trauma, unstable employment and housing, behavioral health, substance use disorders, and numerous additional stressors can be contributing factors. This pandemic has exponentially increased the challenges our families are facing. At the same time, the tragic death of David Almond and the resulting report from the Office of Child Advocate has revealed gaps in the system and opportunities for us to do better by children and families with better data and more targeted services that get at the key barriers to successful outcomes.

Budget Priorities: Summary

We are asking the Commonwealth to invest in critical strategies that tackle core issues in child welfare:

- **Family Resource Centers (#4800-0200).** Family Resource Centers (FRC's) help families address basic needs and prevent cases from rising to the level of abuse and neglect. **Requesting \$23 million.**
- **The Office of the Child Advocate (#0930-0100):**

- **Transition Age Youth Initiative.** The OCA, working in partnership with EOHHS, is piloting a program targeted toward youth aging out of foster care who are facing homelessness. This program helps older youth transition successfully out of the foster care system and sets them on a stable path of employment, housing, health care, and other services – helping to break the cycle of poverty. This project launched in early February and is anticipated to continue into FY22. **Requesting \$300 thousand.**
- **State Center on Child Wellness & Trauma.** Creating a state Center on Child Wellness and Trauma was a recommendation of the state Childhood Trauma Task Force. This center would work in partnership with other state agencies and/or universities to provide support to state and local government agencies that interact with children as well as community organizations that provide services to children and families, focusing initially on the following sectors: child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and health care. **Requesting \$1 million.**
- **Local & Regional Administration and Coordination of Services (#4800-0030 with continued transfer language in account #4800-0038).** Lead Agencies serve as DCF’s local partners to assist youth and families in navigating the complexities of the child welfare system, coordinate with families and DCF social workers to facilitate Family Team Meetings, arrange for and monitor services, advocate for enhanced interagency collaboration, and provide resources to remove barriers to successful implementation of treatment plans. **Requesting \$9 million for #4800-0030.**

Budget Priorities: Details

1. Family Resource Centers (Line item #4800-0200) Requesting \$23 million.

The myriad of supports provided by Family Resource Centers (FRC’s) are a critical factor in child welfare, by offering basic supports to families that alleviate the stressors contributing to child abuse and neglect and prevent cases from ever occurring. Data shows that the system is the “go to” resource in communities providing needed resources to address basic needs, emotional support and child abuse and prevention education. The need for FRC’s was brought into sharp relief throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as Centers served as a hub and a provider of a wide variety of basic assistance, including housing help, food, baby supplies, transportation assistance and access to emergency shelters. That being said, existing FRCs and their staff are stretched to capacity. Every center is focused on meeting the basic food and housing needs of these families - yet those needs remain severe as families struggle with pandemic recovery.

The requested level of \$23 million is a significant increase over FY21 enacted level, but this additional \$5.55 million will support important enhancements to FRCs that better enable them to meet these needs including continuation of the mental health action project, and additional staffing that supports the increased demand and responsibilities for FRC’s, with the flexibility to address specific local needs; including but not limited to the following:

- Formalizing emergency service response capacity
- Deepening capacity to provide housing assistance
- Deepening capacity for educational support to families and collaboration with school systems
- Increasing all Micro FRC's to full service
- Identifying service deserts and gaps

Additionally, these funds will support an assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on FRC's, and the feasibility of extending FRC services to address intergenerational needs.

2. Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) (Line item #0930-0100)

- Transition Age Youth Initiative. [Requesting \\$300 thousand.](#)
- State Center on Child Wellness & Trauma. [Requesting \\$1 million.](#)

The OCA is in a unique position to implement projects that directly support our most vulnerable children, and families who have experienced increased stress and trauma as a result of the pandemic.

- Transition Age Youth Initiative.** We are requesting that the Office of the Child Advocate receive \$300,000 to support an interagency council to better serve the youth between the age of 18-24, who exit out of state care and need appropriate housing. Transition Age Youth who are served by EOHHS agencies live in an out-of-home settings receiving little support once they leave state supervision. Of the 11,000-youth served by EOHHS each quarter, approximately 12 percent “age-out” of care or disengage from state services. This population’s vulnerability has significantly increased during the current public health crisis. Youth who have already aged out of care and those who left the system during the COVID-19 crisis are already at a high risk of homelessness, lack of income, stability and illness. These young people need appropriate housing, tailored services and caring adults to ensure a successful transition to adulthood. It is critical for cross agency and secretariat coordination that includes leveraging state and federal dollars to ensure equitable access to well-being for these young people.
- State Center on Child Wellness & Trauma:** CLM is a member of the Childhood Trauma Task Force (CTTF), created by An Act Relative to Criminal Justice Reform (Chapter 69 of the Acts of 2018) and is chaired by the OCA. The CTTF is charged with determining how the Commonwealth can better identify and provide services to youth who have experienced trauma, with the goal of preventing future juvenile justice system involvement. In 2020, the CTTF developed a statewide framework for “Trauma-Informed and Responsive” organizations, including a shared definition of “trauma informed and responsive” practice in the Commonwealth as well as principles of a trauma informed

and responsive approach that can apply to any system or organization that encounter children and youth. The group released a full report in December 2020, with a complete Framework as well as detailed recommendations for supports needed to help child-serving organizations adopt the Framework. Investment in the creation of a State Center on Child Wellness and Trauma is the next step in operationalizing the framework and creating opportunities for organizations to receive appropriate training and support in developing trauma responsive policies and practices that improve outcomes for children and families who have experienced trauma.

Additional items we support

In addition to these priority items, CLM supports the budget requests made by the coalitions we support, including:

- The Special Education Circuit Breaker (#7061-0012), at the Senate Ways & Means level of \$372,883,860
- Early Intervention (#4513-1020) at \$45,300,000
- Family Support and Stabilization Services (#4800-0040): We thank the Legislature for the continued support for this line item at \$70.066 million.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief the key priorities that are critical to ensuring safety, permanency and well-being of children and families in the Commonwealth. Further, it is imperative that we mitigate the lasting harm and compounded trauma caused by the pandemic. We know that investing in core supports for children and families before their circumstances become dire will pay dividends in preventing child abuse and neglect, keeping families together, and saving the Commonwealth millions of dollars in the long-run. We are responsible for the future outcomes of all children, and we cannot let them down.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tammy Mello".

Tammy Mello
Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts