

July 20, 2021

The Honorable Representative Michael J. Finn,
House Chair
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and
Persons with Disabilities

The Honorable Senator Adam Gomez, Senate
Chair
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and
Persons with Disabilities

Dear Chair Finn, Chair Gomez, and Committee members,

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 needed services. Our members, who comprise providers, advocates, and regulators of services, know first-hand the struggles that children and their families face in the Commonwealth.

We are writing to testify **in support of An act establishing a stakeholders' committee on family first prevention services and racial equity** (H.247). The Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), signed into law on February 9, 2018, provides an historic opportunity for child welfare agencies and their partners to improve the lives of children and families touched by the child welfare system. By expanding critical federal resources, Family First takes bold steps to keep families together, prevent unnecessary foster care removals and ensure that children grow up in safe and loving families. The law also offers important tools to help States and Tribes improve the quality of services and supports, including new requirements for placement assessments, evidence-based programs, residential treatment, and common-sense licensing.

As the Department of Children and Families (DCF) plans and prepares to implement this complex legislation, we believe a collaborative approach with a robust representation of various stakeholders is critical, including the other government agencies and community-based providers who are partners in implementation, and individual citizens who are affected by these services, especially families of

color who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. The design of the law requires strong and sustained partnerships among multiple stakeholders. The new prevention provisions require child welfare agencies to work with other public agencies with a track record of implementing evidence-based programs. Similarly, the provisions for non-family settings depend on strong partnerships between child welfare agencies, the courts and residential treatment centers. A stakeholders committee would ensure that this collaboration is accounted for in the initial planning as well as ongoing implementation of Family First.

The national Family First Clearinghouse is tasked with analyzing efficacy and establishing a rating of Well-supported, Supported, or Promising practices. To date, the clearinghouse has verified 10 well-supported practices, 8 supported practices, and 16 promising practices. However, there are concerns that the evidenced-based models that have made the list have not all been examined through an equity lens. GPS Consulting Group conducted a brief survey of child welfare professionals – including some with lived experience – and learned they were unaware of approved evidence-based practices that have been developed to be culturally responsive or by programs or organizations that center (or are rooted) in race equity. In addition, the clearinghouse does not apply or require a racial equity lens for approval. As a result, they are too often implemented through white normative standards, and rarely evaluated for efficacy in non-white populations.

We are fortunate that there are programs here in Massachusetts who have adapted evidenced-based models and qualified residential treatment models through an equity lens and are implementing these in local communities with great outcomes. We believe their expertise is critical to informing a statewide implementation of Family First that respects not only racial equity but also encompasses the needs of other marginalized populations such as LGBTQ youth and those with disabilities. We can be a proving ground for effective, responsive models that also address racial impact and equity on many fronts.



The establishment of a Family First Stakeholders' Committee presents an opportunity to maximize federal dollars. The widest possible variety of stakeholder input is critical to ensure the state's plan includes creative and flexible solutions, meets the real needs of families and providers, places particular emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion. Massachusetts has invested in serving families as whole units and especially in prevention services – we want to build on this success and the knowledge that keeping families together results in better outcomes for children: health, education, well-being.

We respectfully urge the Committee to report out this bill favorably and work diligently for its passage.

Sincerely,

Tammy Mello

Executive Director

Children's League of Massachusetts