

3/21/2022

Dear Members of the Massachusetts Legislature,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of over 55 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. Our members, who comprise providers, advocates, and regulators of services, know first-hand the struggles that children and their families face. Across Massachusetts, we strive to ensure the availability of services and accessibility of support for all families in need.

We write today to highlight key priorities for our members in the FY2023 state budget. We are very grateful to the Legislature for prioritizing our children and their families and ensuring that basic needs are met as residents of the Commonwealth recover from the pandemic together. We also appreciate the temporary wage enhancements made by the legislature to support the essential human services workforce who provided continual in-person, in-depth care to children and adults in need of high levels of service during the darkest days of the pandemic.

We hope you agree that continued investment in the health, safety, and wellbeing of children, youth, and families will further address gaps and lead to improvements in the system that will better protect the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children.

Combating Child Abuse and Neglect is a Multi-Faceted Issue

Child abuse and neglect stems from a myriad of issues faced by families, and each family is different. Trauma, housing and food insecurity, unstable employment, mental and behavioral health challenges, substance use disorders, and numerous additional stressors all undermine family stability and threaten child safety. The pandemic has exponentially increased the challenges our families are facing and has also threatened progress made over the previous years in improving the child welfare system and decreasing negative outcomes.

The Commonwealth has made commitments to serve these families, but the providers contracted to deliver these services are at a breaking point. Without the ability to recruit and retain direct care staff and clinicians, it is not possible to support families effectively with prevention services, to treat children in need of care, nor to safely return children home in a timely fashion. Negative outcomes worsen while families sit on waiting lists, all for lack of adequate human services staff.

Providers need to attract a workforce that *wants* to care for people long term. It is a challenging but rewarding job – how do we make it a career? State rates for these contracted staff positions must reflect current market rates in the short term, and support to a career ladder for staff to move up as they stay in the sector long-term. This stability not only benefits staff and providers, but the children and families with whom they build relationships – a key driver of positive outcomes.

With these needs and challenges in mind, the Children’s League respectfully asks the Legislature to prioritize investments that improve short- and long-term outcomes for children and families.

Budget Priorities

- **Chapter 257 Rate Reserve (#1599-6903) Requesting \$581.6 million**

The Chapter 257 rate reserve is a sustainable, long-term methodology for setting reasonable salary benchmarks for delivering state-contracted services. However, rates must reflect current labor and economic conditions in order for the state to effectively partner with programs to deliver high-quality services as contracted. Our request, made together with our Collaborative partners the Association for Behavioral Health (ABH), the Provider’s Council, and the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers (ADDP), recommends a funding level for these positions at the 75th percentile of the most current MA Bureau of Labor Statistics benchmark. Only by increasing this rate can we sustain a competitive wage for contracted human services roles in Massachusetts, and approach salary adequacy for these essential workers.

- **Family Support and Stabilization (#4800-0040) Requesting \$76.8 million**

The Department of Children and Families funds “*family preservation, reunification, and service coordination*” (known as Support and Stabilization) through this line item, including services purchased with dollars drawn from the federal Family First Prevention Services Act. All services purchased through this line item are for non-placement programs: they are preventative programs that keep families together, pre-empting the need to remove a child from home to ensure their safety. This investment will allow for approximately 500 more DCF involved families to keep children safe and families together.

Research demonstrates that investing in Family Support and Stabilization is a cost-effective means to reducing child abuse and neglect cases by preventing the need to remove children from their home. Furthermore, family support and stabilization services are more affordable than out-of-placement such as group care. The DCF FY2021 annual report shows that since FY2017, significant increases to Support and Stabilization services have come with a concurrent decrease in out-of-home placement, demonstrating that prevention investments are paying off for families and for the state.¹

- **Family Resource Centers (#4800-0200) Requesting \$24.8 million**

The myriad of services 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” place for resources to address basic needs, access to a variety of treatment services, 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. Centers also play an important role in local disaster recovery and humanitarian crisis support. This investment will continue the expansion of FRC’s to full service in communities where access has been limited.

¹ [Department of Children and Families Annual report FY2021](#) (Table 43)

- **Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) program (#4403-2000) Requesting approx. \$72 million**

The TAFDC provides eligible families or individuals with temporary cash assistance and services depending on their gross income. In partnership with the campaign to Lift Kids out of Deep Poverty, we are asking that the Legislature take the first steps to right-sizing this financial aid by raising cash assistance grants by 20%, and including an outside section raising grants by 20% a year until they reach half the federal poverty level.

Direct assistance is one of the strongest prevention tools in our child safety toolbox. Research is showing that contrary to fears, the pandemic saw a *reduction* in child abuse and neglect, and not simply because children were out of view of mandated reporters.² Rather, by providing direct assistance to vulnerable families through the boosted Child Tax Credit and unemployment benefits, halting evictions, and temporarily alleviating the costs and challenges of child care faced by low-income working parents, *child safety and welfare improved*. Ensuring families can meet basic needs like housing, food security, health care, and child care has proven time and again to be the keystone of child safety and well-being.

- **Local & Regional Administration and Coordination of Services (#4800-0030) Requesting \$16 million in account 4800-0030 with continued transfer language in account 4800-0038: total funding \$21 million**

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.

- **Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) (#0930-0100) Details below**

- Continuation of the **Transition Age Youth (TAY) Initiative**, targeted toward youth aging out of foster care who are facing homelessness. In FY2021, DCF served 2,766 TAY youth aged 18-23 who chose to remain in care to access services. This population's vulnerability has significantly increased during the pandemic, and the percentage of TAY who voluntarily stayed care increased 16.1% compared to FY2018.³ Youth aging out 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.

- **Requesting \$300,000**

- Expansion of the state **Center on Child Wellness & Trauma**. The Center is providing invaluable assessment, coaching, training, and ongoing professional learning for child-serving providers across the Commonwealth, directly addressing the high levels of trauma impacting children, families, and staff that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. **Requesting \$3,500,000**

- Continuation and expansion of the **Diversion Learning Lab** project, to provide high-quality, evidence-based youth programming that can serve as an alternative to arresting youth or prosecuting them

² U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2022). [Child Maltreatment 2020](#).

³ [Department of Children and Families Annual report FY2021](#) (Table 37)

through the Juvenile Court. The Diversion Learning Lab was a 2019 recommendation from the state Juvenile Justice Policy and Data (JJPAD) Board, of which CLM is a member. [Requesting \\$760,000](#)

- **Request to create a “Children and Adolescents with Intensive Behavioral Health Needs Commission”**
[\(outside section\)](#)

The Children’s League deeply appreciates the significant investments the Legislature has made in supporting children’s behavioral health. In order to ensure these investments are used effectively, we support the request made by our partner the Association of Behavioral Health (ABH) for an outside section to create a Commission to study and make recommendations regarding children and adolescents whose behavioral health needs, such as acute aggressive, assaultive or otherwise unsafe behaviors, are not adequately addressed through inpatient psychiatric hospitalizations, Community Based Acute Treatment (CBAT) services, or existing residential or community treatment models contracted by the Department of Children and Families.

[Additional items we support](#)

In addition to these priority items, CLM supports the budget requests made by the coalitions of which we are members.

- Investment in the **Special Education Circuit Breaker** (#7061-0012): \$460,675,120 (per claims from DESE)
- Requests from the Children’s Mental Health Campaign
 - **Children’s Medical Security Plan** (#4000-0990): \$17,017,088
 - Multiple lines items supporting **Children’s Mental Health**, including the **Emergency Department Boarding Innovation Fund**
 - **Early Intervention** (4513-1020): \$48,300,000 for Early Intervention (EI) services with \$17.8 million designated for workforce and staffing capacity to support access to critical EI services.

[Conclusion](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief the key priorities that are critical to ensuring safety, permanency and well-being of children, youth and families in the Commonwealth. Further, it is imperative that we act now to 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,



Rachel Gwaltney
Interim Executive Director
Children’s League of Massachusetts