

PLEDGE YOUR SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN



The Children's League of Massachusetts is a statewide non-profit association of 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 comprise service providers, advocates, and agency partners – we know first-hand the struggles faced by children and their families every day. Throughout Massachusetts, we strive to ensure availability and accessibility of quality services and supports that keep families strong and keep children safe, healthy, and thriving.

Most importantly, we represent children, all of whom deserve safety, respect, care, and well-being. We urge the next Administration to make sure the most vulnerable children in the Commonwealth are not forgotten.

The welfare and wellbeing of children has many facets

- It starts with family preservation – meeting the basic needs of families through housing, food security, access to health care, employment, and cash assistance to keep families out of poverty.
- People who fall under the large umbrella of “child welfare” represent varied and nuanced situations – there is not one typical child welfare case. A child and their family may need access to basic resources or benefits or health care. The child's needs may require in-home or out-of-home treatment services. Child welfare also encompasses longer term fostering, adoption, and kinship care. Regardless, doing right by children must remain our primary focus.
- Transition-age youth are youth aging out of state care without permanency. The state took responsibility for them and needs to see that commitment through, to ensure these youth enter adulthood with concrete plans and supports for housing, education, employment, health care, and other basic needs in place.
- Children may encounter many state systems when difficulty arises. We need our education, juvenile justice, child welfare, health care systems to be coordinated in their responses to children in need.
- These myriad services are provided by state agencies, contracted providers, and nonprofit agencies. We need to invest in this service system to maintain timely access to quality supports in every community in the Commonwealth where children have the strongest and most culturally relevant support systems

We are building on positive trends

- Over 47,000 children and youth age 0-23 were served by the Department of Children and Families in FY2021[1]. The vast majority of children (81% of youth aged 0-17) received services, treatment, care, and protection while staying at home with their family. Between FY2017 and FY2021, the number of children (0-17) in out-of-home placement decreased by 11.8%[2].
- During the pandemic, anti-poverty investments like the Child Tax Credit, the eviction moratorium, enhanced unemployment assistance, and increased sick leave worked to keep families stable and kids safe. Contrary to fears that children unseen by mandated reporters during the pandemic would be at greater risk, we saw a reduction in the number of child welfare fatalities from FY2018 - FY2021[3].
- We have expanded statewide Family Resources Centers that serve as hubs for finding support directly in communities, before a family gets to crisis level.
- We have improved training and support for services providers to deliver trauma-informed care with the new state Center on Child Well-Being and Trauma.
- We have passed reforms and launched programs to divert youth from the criminal justice system whenever possible.

We are facing persistent challenges

- Continued understanding of and strategic response to **disproportionality** must be a cornerstone of our work going forward. The child welfare sector has greatly improved data analysis to understand how we treat children and families of color compared to their white counterparts. Unfortunately this analysis reveals persistent disproportionality in child welfare case counts, modes of treatment and access to services. At the most basic level, children of color are 2.5 to 3 times more likely to be involved in the child welfare system than white children.⁴ We must do better to remove racism from our systems, policies, and practices.
- **Workforce shortages lead to greater risk for children and families**, with lower quality of services, longer wait times for programs, and heightened acuity of needs. These result in families spending more time involved with state systems and problems that are more costly and complicated to solve. DCF cases related to domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health have increased – areas where prevention services work, but only if available in a timely fashion[5]. A recent survey showed that children and adolescents are waiting an average of 15 weeks for access to ongoing behavioral health therapy[6]. And once children are removed from their homes, the time to reunify with family has increased by a median average of 1 month, and average length of stay in out-of-home placement is at a 5-year high as they wait for services – undermining policies and progress we have made to keep families together[7].
- Youth continue to **transition out of state care without robust plans** for housing, education, employment, and health care – despite these being required by law. To break the cycles of multi-generational child welfare involvement, we must ensure that youth who are exiting state care to adulthood without permanency have the same support networks in places as we would want for any young adult.

[1] DCF FY2021 Annual Report Table 3 – Consumer Counts Fiscal Year End

[2] DCF FY2021 Annual Report Table 10 – Children/Young Adults in Placement

[3] DCF FY2021 Annual Report Table 39a - Child/Youth Fatalities by Family History with DCF

[4] DCF FY2021 Annual Report Figure 7 - Consumer Children (0-17) Open with DCF by Race/Ethnicity FY2021

[5] DCF FY2021 Annual Report p. ix

[6] Association for Behavioral Health Issue Brief: Outpatient Mental Health Access and Workforce Crisis

[7] DCF FY2021 Annual Report Table 32 – Children Reunified in 12 Months

How your Administration can support children:

- Prioritize the best interests of children as the central tenet of child welfare policymaking.
- Support inclusive conversations on child welfare reform that include input from youth, families, providers, advocates, researchers and others with relevant knowledge and expertise.
- Take a multisystem and data-driven view of child services.
- Adequately fund services to meet our responsibility to these youth and their families and ensure programs can remain open in local communities across the Commonwealth, where people can most easily access them.
- Support the human services workforce talent pipeline, including recruitment initiatives, competitive wages and fair pay, retention strategies, and career pathways.

Child and family well-being is a good investment for the Commonwealth

Extensive research has demonstrated that families experiencing poverty are significantly more likely to be involved in the child welfare system. This is because the majority of reported child maltreatment cases are for “neglect,” meaning that families are reported to the system for challenges that could be solved by meeting basic financial needs such as rent, food security, child care, and health care [8]. An underlying systemic racist view of poor families is the primary driver of disproportionality in the child welfare system.

Research has also shown that “even modest financial supports reduce child abuse and neglect by enabling families to better access resources and address their own basic needs.”[9] Investments in child care programs, Medicaid expansion, and rental assistance have all been correlated with decreases in rates of child neglect and removal of children to foster care [10]. While some cases need more intensive therapeutic support or protection for a child, anti-poverty measures and programs that keep families intact are a cost-effective approach to improving child safety and well-being.

Will you partner with us in prioritizing children? Contact the Children's League of Massachusetts to:

- Learn more about our field and how programs work with families and state agencies to protect children;
- Meet our members and learn about their work in communities;
- Discuss policy solutions that will cost-effectively keep more children safe, healthy, and thriving; and
- Pledge your support to the children, youth, and families of the Commonwealth and the human services community.

Contact us at:

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[8] Weiner, D. A., Anderson, C., & Thomas, K. (2021). System transformation to support child and family well-being: The central role of economic and concrete supports. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.