

November 15, 2022

TO: Transition Team for Governor-Elect Maura Healey and Lt. Governor-Elect Kim Driscoll

FROM: Children's League of Massachusetts

RE: Recommendations to advance the well-being of vulnerable children and their families

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of 58 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 in the Commonwealth.

Most importantly, we represent children, all of whom deserve safety, respect, care, and well-being.

Together, our League presents these recommendations for the next Administration to reimagine our "child welfare" system as one that:

1. Leads with child and family well-being, and listens to these voices;
2. Takes a systems-level, coordinated, and data-driven approach to delivering child and family services and combatting systemic racism; and
3. Respects the state's partnership with community-based providers who deliver this work on behalf of the Commonwealth.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Lead with child and family well-being.

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.¹ 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."*² Investments in child care programs...and rental assistance have been correlated with decreases in rates of child neglect and removal of children to foster care.³

These investments have a double payoff when we account for youth who transition out of state care without robust plans for housing, education, employment, and health care – many ending up in the same dire circumstances that separated them from their families as children. To break the cycle of multi-generational child welfare involvement, we must prioritize services for youth who are exiting state care to adulthood

¹ 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.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

without permanency, flooding them with the support and resources we would want for any young person making their journey to adulthood.

To combat child abuse and neglect at its source and disrupt the multigenerational cycle of child welfare, we ask the Administration to:

- Expand direct cash assistance with efforts such as creating a permanent state Child Tax Credit, increasing the floor for the Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (line item #4403-2000), and bringing to scale successful pilot programs for universal basic income.
- Review the report to the Legislature expected by December 15 examining use and cost of services for youth transitioning out of state care who continue to receive voluntary services after age 18; and consult with experts in the field on whether such services should be funded through a separate and unique line item beginning in fiscal year 2024; (see language contained within line item #4800-0015 ([DCF Clinical Support Services and Operations](#)) of the FY2023 budget.)
- Utilize the proposed Secretary of Housing position to prioritize timely access to affordable housing for families experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, as well as for youth aging out of state care without permanency.
- Implement the recommendations of the [Special Legislative Early Education and Care Economic Review Commission](#), to ensure a sustainable, affordable, equitable, and high-quality system of early education and care across the Commonwealth.
- Equip Family Resource Centers and other community-based assistance programs with flexible funds to help families overcome smaller point-in-time crises that threaten stability.

RECOMMENDATION #2: Take a systems-level, coordinated, and data-driven approach to delivering child and family services and combatting systemic racism.

Reimagine coordinated services to take a child-centered approach to child welfare

While many existing programs across agencies support and protect children and families in need, they are not coordinated in a way that allows us to start with the child's needs and find the right placement setting or care service, at the right time, for the right duration. Reorganizing children's services under a Children's Cabinet will allow the Administration to right-size and redistribute investments in currently siloed programs like mental health, Family Support and Stabilization, residential care, foster care, and juvenile diversion in way that meet the actual needs of youth and support their journey through and out of care.

To reframe child welfare services as child-centered, we ask the Administration to:

- Create a Children's Cabinet or Secretarial-level position that leads coordination of all child services across Department of Children and Families, the Department of Mental Health, the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Department of Youth Services, the Department of Public Health, the Department of Transitional Assistance, the Department of Early Education and Care, MassHealth, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Trial Court, and the Massachusetts Probation Service.

- Reimagine the system of how we intake children and families and connect them to services, including out-of-home placements and wraparound services, to ensure we best meet their care needs. The Administration can leverage existing systems that are designed with this approach in mind, including:
 - The [Roadmap for Behavioral Health Reform](#).
 - Lead Agencies as they are intended to coordinate services at the area level (line item #4800-0030).
 - Family Resource Centers (line item # 4800-0200) – using the re-procurement of FRC's scheduled for 2025 to reimagine their role in supporting families with Children Requiring Assistance, as recommended by the [Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board](#) (report forthcoming Dec. 2022).
- Redefine permanency beyond a point-in-time goal.
 - Immediately issue the Family Support & Stabilization Request for Responses (line item 4800-0040) in order to prevent gaps in service and maintain the momentum toward implementing the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, with new investments in evidence-based practices.
 - Remove time-bound limits for stabilization resources that move families towards long-term permanency and stability, such as respite services and peer mentors, and take an outcomes-based view of these resources.
 - Ensure ongoing support for families post-adoption to reduce disruptions and dissolutions.
- Prioritize and support kinship placements and keep siblings together.
 - Ensure kinship caregivers can access the same resources and training as formal foster families.
 - Foster connections to siblings through placement decisions and visitation.
- Prioritize the reduction of child trauma.
 - Continue and expand the recommendations of the [Childhood Trauma Task Force](#), including the work of the [Center for Child Wellbeing and Trauma](#) and implementation of [Resources for Trauma-Informed and Responsive Organizations](#) across all child-serving agencies, in coordination with the Children's Cabinet.
 - Set a goal to decrease the number of out-of-home placement moves.

Confront systemic racism in child welfare

Decades of research have demonstrated that an underlying systemically racist view of poor and minority families is the primary driver of disproportionality in the child welfare system. Therefore, a data-driven strategic response to racial disproportionality in every agency must be a cornerstone of our work going forward. The Department of Children and Families and Office of the Child Advocate have made significant progress in the state's use of data 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.

To strategically combat disproportionality in the system, we ask the Administration to:

- Utilize the Children's Cabinet/Executive Office of Health and Human Services to oversee data collection and analysis of disproportionality and inequity in services provided by child-serving state entities, to include race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, transgender status, disability status, economic class, and intersectionality of these categories.
- Require the Cabinet to engage with experts, including agency heads, providers of services, impacted families, and advocates from the field of child welfare, to create and implement corrective action plans that directly combat disproportionality in the sector.
- Create a "family voices" advisory committee and require family representation and/or persons with lived experience as foster youth on state commissions and boards.

RECOMMENDATION #3: Respect the state's partnership with community-based providers.

The work of child welfare and family wellbeing is carried out through partnership between the state agencies and community-based providers who are contracted to supply parallel or specialized services, delivered close to home and bringing cultural connections and helping to preserve community. This public/private partnership also creates an opportunity to lift up innovative practices developed locally to meet diverse geographic needs and cultural challenges.

The engine of this partnership is the human services workforce. Unfortunately the labor market doesn't meet the needs for services, today or in the future. 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. Families spend more time involved with state systems, where problems fester and become even more costly and complicated to solve.

To make this partnership a success, we ask the Administration to:

Short term

- Commit to setting [Chapter 257 human service provider rates](#) at the 75th percentile or higher of the Bureau of Labor Standards index.
- Implement the recommendations of the [Human Services and Home Health Workers Student Loan Repayment Board](#) (forthcoming).
- Make new funds available through existing contracts to account for additional rising operational costs being impacted by inflation such as costs related to food, gas, rent, and utilities.

Long term

- Take steps to develop the pipeline and professionalize the direct care workforce which could include:

⁴ DCF FY2021 Annual Report Figure 7 - Consumer Children (0-17) Open with DCF by Race/Ethnicity FY2021
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- primary and secondary school education programs to build interest;
- post-secondary pathways that include community colleges for certificate and professional licensing, scholarships for higher education, paid internship and apprenticeship models; and
- adult career pathways that value the personal/lived experience that people bring to this work.

Please also refer to additional workforce recommendations made by *The Collaborative* to build a resilient human services workforce, which will be transmitted separately.

Across Massachusetts, members of the Children's League work in close partnership with the Administration and agencies to ensure availability and accessibility of quality services and supports that keep families strong and keep children safe, healthy, and thriving, in every corner of the Commonwealth.

Please feel free to reach out to us at any time! We greatly look forward to a productive partnership with your Administration and bringing the expertise of our members to help you advance your goals.

Sincerely,

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