

To Whom It May Concern:

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide, non-profit organization of 58 members, comprised of children and family services providers, advocates, and individuals. With our members' first-hand expertise with the challenges children and families are facing, we advocate for public policies and administrative policies and practices that ensure children, youth, and families can access quality services.

**[Below we have highlighted key priorities for children and families in the FY2024 state budget.](#)**

**OVERVIEW: Combating Child Abuse and Neglect is a Multi-Faceted Issue**

Child abuse and neglect stems from a myriad of issues faced by families. While each family is different, these threats to wellbeing include trauma, housing and food insecurity, unstable employment, mental and behavioral health challenges, substance use disorders, and numerous additional stressors that undermine family stability and threaten child safety. The pandemic exponentially increased the challenges our families are facing and stalled progress in improving the child welfare system.

The Commonwealth has made commitments to serve these families, but the providers contracted to deliver these services are at a breaking point. A [recent report published by CLM](#) demonstrates that while the Commonwealth has made steady progress in reducing the number of children removed from their homes for issues of safety, protection, and well-being, the youth who remain in out-of-home care have more acute needs, and fewer options for treatment. These youth frequently end up boarding in hospital emergency departments awaiting placement in service facilities that are equipped to meet their needs; yet these programs have become scarcer in recent years as the pandemic took its toll on the human services workforce. Increased investments in targeted DCF and DMH treatment and care spaces are critical for ensuring that youth get the right services at the right time, and can ultimately heal and return home.

CLM and our members are incredibly grateful to the Legislature for prioritizing children and families to ensure basic needs are met as our state and sector grapple with the current human services workforce crisis and economic pressures like inflation. We deeply appreciate the temporary wage enhancements to the human services sector; these have been a lifeline to our providers and enabled them to continue to deliver high-quality, in-person, in-depth care to children and families during the workforce crisis. But to ensure sustainability, state rates for these contracted staff positions must reflect current market rates in the short term and support a career ladder for staff to retain them in the sector long term. 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 outcomes for children and families.

## BUDGET PRIORITIES

- **Chapter 257 Rate Reserve (#1599-6903) Requesting a minimum of \$173 million**

The Chapter 257 rate reserve is meant to set reasonable salary benchmarks for delivering state-contracted services. For the state to effectively partner with programs to deliver high-quality services, rates must be raised to reflect current labor and economic conditions. The current budget reflects setting wages at the 53<sup>rd</sup> percentile of the most current MA Bureau of Labor Statistics benchmark, which translates to just over \$19.00/hour for direct service front line staff. While this increase marks positive progress, it fails to set fair, livable, and competitive wages needed to attract and retain a quality workforce. We ask the Legislature to continue moving the Chapter 257 funding toward at least the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of the most current MA Bureau of Labor Statistics benchmark. Through this action, the Commonwealth is in a better position to approach salary adequacy for contracted human services roles.

- **Family Support and Stabilization (#4800-0040) Requesting \$88.8 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 that draw funds from the federal Family First Prevention Services Act. Investing in these high-quality, evidence-based preventative services will allow for approximately 500 more DCF-involved families to stay together, pre-empting traumatic removals of children from their homes.

Research demonstrates that investing in Family Support and Stabilization is a cost-effective means to reducing child abuse and neglect cases, allowing children to stay safely in their homes, which not only is less traumatic but also more affordable than out-of-home placements such as group care. With significant increases to Support and Stabilization services, out-of-home placements decrease, demonstrating that prevention investments are paying off for both families and for the state.

- **Family Resource Centers (#4800-0200) Requesting \$26 million**

The myriad of services provided by Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are critical for child welfare. FRC’s were designed and contracted with a narrow focus on supporting families with children requiring assistance, providing a variety of critical treatment services, delivering child abuse and prevention education, and diverting families from more intensive DCF involvement. However, throughout the pandemic the FRC system has become the “go to” place for families to access a wide variety of basic assistance resources they are not staffed or funded to provide. Families rely on FRC’s for basic resources for housing, food, baby supplies, transportation, and emergency shelters. Local disaster recovery and humanitarian crisis support has also been improved by FRCs. Adding flexible funds to the Governor’s requested “maintenance funding” for FRC’s will allow these agencies to be appropriately staffed to meet the needs in their communities, and to deliver locally relevant programming.

- **Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) (#4403-2000) Requesting \$516 million**

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 25% and

including an outside section raising grants by 25% a year until they reach half the federal poverty level and then continuing to set grants at a level that keep pace with inflation.

Direct assistance is one of the strongest prevention tools in our child safety toolbox. 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 childcare faced by at least low-income working parents, *child safety and welfare improved*.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring families can meet basic needs like housing, food security, health care, and childcare 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 \$12.5 million in account 4800-0030 with continued transfer language in account 4800-0038, bringing the total funding to \$16.7 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. In FY 2022, Lead Agencies facilitated over 25,000 Family Team Meetings. An increase of \$3 million over the proposed H1 allocation would restore the Care Manager position and include an increase of 4% from FY23 allocation to cover increased salaries and operations. Each Lead is currently exceeding its contracted caseload size which has resulted in the Program Director and Educational Coordinator carrying cases. The Care Manager role is critical to providing intensive case management to families with significant challenges in order to keep children safely at home and/or reduce time in placement by ensuring all needed community-based supports are in place for reunification. This requires the Care Manager to have smaller caseloads of families of higher need and work directly with the Lead Directors Coordinators, DCF staff and families. This role is also in line with the proposed investment in Support and Stabilization services in the FY24 H1 budget, as it would facilitate the implementation of those programs.

- **Center on Child Wellness & Trauma (#0930-0101) Requesting \$3.5 million**

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.

**Additional items we support include the following measures from the FY24 H1 proposed budget:**

**Dept. of Children and Families**

- Congregate Care Services: \$431,019,785
- Foster Care Recruitment Campaign: \$975,000
- Services for Children and Families: \$354,543,909
- \$6.9 million to improve foster care rates

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<sup>1</sup> 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](#).

### Dept. of Mental Health

- Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services: \$118,014,950
- Full funding for continued implementation of the Behavioral Health Roadmap activities
- Adding 1100 service beds for children and adults, including 65 in-patient beds

### Dept. of Youth Services

- total funding at \$182.6 million, including \$4.5 million to initiatives that include lifting up child and family voices and addressing racial equity and inclusion

### Child & Family Tax Credit: \$458 million

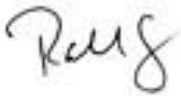
Establishes a \$600 credit per qualifying dependent, including children, disabled adults, and seniors, uncapped regardless of number of dependents, fully refundable, and available at all income levels. This credit would provide relief for over 700,000 taxpayers. An expanded and simplified structure would provide relief for all income levels while getting the neediest families the cash benefit of a fully refundable credit. It would provide support for families without requiring potentially burdensome demonstrations of expenses and assist the most burdened families by uncapping the count of qualifying dependents. The credit would replace two interrelated credits that are more complex and smaller than the proposed credit and are capped at two dependents.

Investment in the **Special Education Circuit Breaker** (#7061-0012): **\$503 million**

### Conclusion

These requests represent important investments in the continuum of support needed for vulnerable children and families, and the providers that serve them across the Commonwealth. These pay dividends in preventing child abuse and neglect, keeping families together, and ensuring all Massachusetts children have the opportunity be safe, be healthy, and to thrive. We are responsible for the future outcomes of all children, and we cannot let them down.

Sincerely,



Rachel Gwaltney  
Executive Director  
Children's League of Massachusetts