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Advocating for Change: The Children's League of Massachusetts Stands Up for Children, Youth, and Families and Celebrates the Children's Services Workforce

Boston, MA - The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) gathered today with more than 130 advocates, staff from direct service provider organizations, and legislators at the Massachusetts State House to amplify legislative priorities and budget investments vital for vulnerable children, youth, and families across the Commonwealth. The program included awards presented to four dedicated children's provider staff members, and to three legislative champions who continue to work for necessary systems change.

CLM Executive Director Rachel Gwaltney shared that while the pandemic years have ended, the "new normal" includes familiar challenges of long wait lists for services, and stressful circumstances that bring too many families into the child welfare system for lack of upstream support and treatment. Gwaltney recognized progress made by the Governor and Legislature this year including ending the practice of seizing social security benefits from children in foster care, and adopting a Child and Dependent Tax Credit that puts more cash directly into the pockets of families most in need – a proven protective factor against child welfare involvement. She highlighted budget investments critical for the sector including Chapter 257 rates that set wages for staff at contracted provider agencies.

CLM presented awards to three legislative champions from across the state who have persistently advocated to dismantle systemic barriers. Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Senator Robyn Kennedy were honored as House and Senate Champions for Children, and Representative Kay Khan received an All-Time Champion for Children Award recognizing her three decades of leadership on children's issues from Beacon Hill and in the community. All three spoke of previous legislative wins but also called attention to the work that remains to be accomplished.

"There is no work more important in the Commonwealth than advocating for the wellbeing and safety of our children. And there is no work more difficult than finding those solutions so that our children are well protected and have what they need to succeed," said **Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier (2nd Berkshire)**. "The work is only getting harder. The challenges are only greater. And that makes our work more important to do."

Senator Robyn Kennedy (First Worcester), co-chair of the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities emphasized the need to center policymaking on the experiences of people with lived experience as well as providers. A former COO of the Worcester YWCA, she shared: “I will never miss the opportunity to say thank you to the providers... that every single day showed up to take care of their community [during the pandemic] and that has to go beyond words...it’s about paying our workforce a livable wage.”

Reflecting on her nearly 30 years of work in the Legislature, **Representative Kay Khan (11th Middlesex)** shared stories of partnering with advocates and fellow legislators to pass important legislation including the end to child marriage, the ban on conversion therapy, and supports for foster children. Working as a psychiatric nurse early in her career she served children whose care setting was “a last resort,” showing her first-hand the need to continually move forward with better solutions and services. Current legislation sponsored by Khan includes an act to establish a Massachusetts Children’s Cabinet, which would promote interdepartmental collaboration on children’s issues.

CLM also honored the exceptional and dedicated workforce from children’s service providers. The **2024 Direct Service Awards** were given to **Jerrid Kenney**, the Assistant Program Supervisor at the Key Program Inc. and **Kristina Russell**, the Specialized Recruitment Coordinator at Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE). The **2024 Program Leader Awards** went to **Raechelle Joyner-Jones**, the Assistant Vice President of Behavioral Health and Outpatient Services at the Home for Little Wanderers and **Victor Griffiths**, the East Regional Director of Community Based Youth Clinical Services at Gándara Center. Said CLM Board Chair **Daurice Cox** upon presenting these awards, “Our dedicated direct service professionals are the lifeline that support children and families in need and in our care, and these awards recognize their compassion and commitment that inspires all of us in our work every day.”

CLM member organizations also met with their legislators in the State House to share their first-hand experiences of working directly with children, youth, and families in the child welfare system, and to advocate for legislative and budget priorities that would create transformative policy changes.

CLM’s comprehensive legislative agenda elevates critical issues impacting the child welfare system, including disproportionality and inequity in children’s services, access to and the quality of children’s mental and behavioral health services, resources for youth “aging out” of the foster care system without permanency, and fair wages for the children’s services workforce. CLM believes that the Commonwealth needs to continue investing in children’s services to produce meaningful change.

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[The Children's League of Massachusetts](#) (CLM) 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 children, youth, and families in the Commonwealth. CLM's Members include nearly 60 direct service provider and advocacy organizations, serving 175,000+ children, youth, and families.