

New York State Office of Children and Family Services

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Press Contact:

New York State Office of Children & Family Services
Public Information Office
(518) 473-7793

SAFE MENTORING ACT TAKES EFFECT APRIL 1, 2007

Law Allows for Criminal Background Checks on Mentors, More Information for Parents

New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) Commissioner Gladys Carrión joined today with Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City and the National Mentoring Partnership to announce the implementation of the Safe Mentoring Act, a new law that becomes effective April 1, 2007.

Under the Safe Mentoring Act, mentoring programs have the opportunity to conduct criminal background checks on prospective employees and mentors through the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and OCFS. Additionally, the act requires mentoring programs to give parents of participants a description of the kind of criminal background checks conducted by the mentoring program on its prospective employees and mentors. It also requires mentoring programs to provide information on whether or not prospective employees and mentors may be hired or used despite the existence of a criminal conviction history.

"Each day, all across New York State mentors are making a huge difference in the lives of children and families by providing their time, support, guidance and friendship. This new law is an important tool that will help to safeguard and protect New York's children. I encourage all New Yorkers to consider volunteering to mentor a young person for as little as four hours a month," says Commissioner Carrión.

This new law will help to provide parents and caregivers peace of mind. Effective April 1, 2007, the Safe Mentoring Act will:

- permit certain mentoring programs to perform a criminal history check through DCJS on all prospective employees and mentors who may engage in activities with youth in a setting without constant agency or parental oversight;
- require OCFS to provide the mentoring program with the individual's criminal history record, if any, or a statement that the individual has no criminal history record;
- require DCJS to retain the fingerprints of mentoring program employees and mentors on "search and retain" status so that DCJS may continue to actively monitor the individuals' criminal histories and notify OCFS of any new arrests subsequent to the initial screenings. OCFS, in turn, will send the program the arrest record for its use.

"The Safe Mentoring Act will protect the State's boys and girls. Our State is to be commended for taking this unprecedented action on behalf of children," said Allan Luks, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City, which coordinated the 140-agency coalition that advocated for four years to get the legislation passed.

"This new law provides parents with a means to discover how the individuals who will mentor their children are screened. It is important because of the intimacy of these relationships; parents involved need at least some way to find out how to judge a program. At a minimum, they should know whether the program does background checks, and what kind, since mentoring allows the closest relationship between children and strangers," Luks added.

Since 1904, when Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City created the first formalized mentoring

program in the United States, its mission has been to provide adult mentors to children who need caring role models in their lives—a caring adult friend, guide and supporter who can help expand their horizons and envision a brighter future.

"Mentoring has been shown to be extremely successful in helping young people reach their full potential – especially when they have many obstacles to overcome," said Jean Lahage Cohen of the Mentoring Partnerships of New York and Long Island. "We work to ensure that mentoring programs follow best practices in keeping young people safe and on the right track. Improving screening for potential mentors is a terrific step towards those goals."

For more than a decade, the Mentoring Partnerships of New York and Long Island have been working to expand the world of quality mentoring in New York. They are affiliates of Mentor/National Mentoring Partnership, an organization that works to promote and increase mentoring across the country.

Information on the Safe Mentoring Act and on how organizations with mentoring programs can obtain criminal history record checks is available online at www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/mentor/.

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New York State Office of Children and Family Services · 52 Washington Street · Rensselaer, New York
12144-2834

