Introduction

New York State has made substantial progress in child welfare services during the past few years, yet we still have a lot to accomplish. Building on the Office of Children & Family Services' strong foundation, "Ten for 2010" outlines 10 areas of the child welfare system that demand more attention. We are seeking feedback from a broad range of child welfare stakeholders from across the state to help us further define the issues and develop a set of actions. We are committed to actions that will set us on a path to make an impact on all 10 initiatives. We expect that some of the ideas will be concrete, some bold and innovative, and some aspirational. Given the economic conditions we currently face, we will not be able to implement immediately all of the ideas that are shared and agreed upon. Still, we believe that together we can identify many promising approaches and want to consider setting some of them in motion in a definable way, even if the steps we take now are modest. As a centerpiece of these efforts, the New York State Council on Children and Families could expand its annual Touchstones data report to incorporate a "State of the Child Report" that includes performance data from all districts and agencies.

Although these are difficult times, we must move forward. We are obligated to our children, families, and communities, and we are obligated to the individuals who work in child welfare services—our strongest resource. Together we will advance a set of viable, realistic, and efficient actions. These efforts will enable us to make progress, however modest, and gain a foothold on each of the 10 initiatives.

We ask for your help to identify and prioritize actions. Help us consider the burdens and the benefits associated with each idea. Help us consider questions such as:

- How urgent is the need for action?
- What are the risks if no action is taken?
- Do we have the capacity to do the work effectively?
- What is the initiative's capacity to leverage future gains?
- Is the work financially and politically feasible?
- Is the effort sustainable?

Together we can accomplish more than we would by acting alone and we will set an ambitious and dynamic agenda for moving forward.

Participants in the child welfare system (e.g., local departments of social services, voluntary agencies, private providers, advocates, the legal community, parent associations, and community-based and faith-based organizations) have the skills and capacity to make unique contributions. We value our diversity and our differences. We would like to hear your thoughts on how each stakeholder can contribute. This information will help us set expectations about the role specific people and agencies will play. Together we can accomplish more than we would by acting alone, and we will set an ambitious and dynamic agenda for moving forward.

New York State Office of Children & Family Services

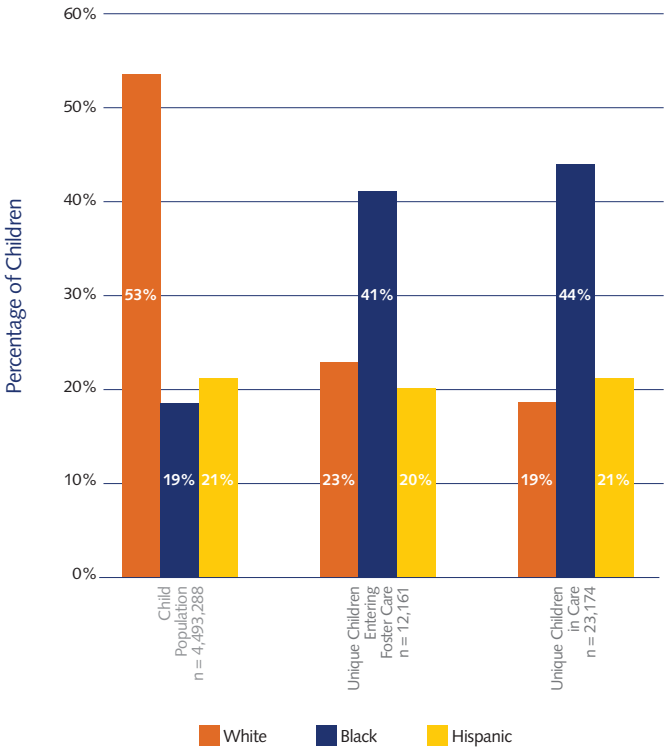
INITIATIVE 1 **PRACTICE**

Tailoring Effective Responses to Families Through Targeted Services

ISSUE

Too many New York State children and families enter and remain involved in the child welfare system when another intervention may more effectively meet their needs. Families of teenagers who are not attending school regularly and are reported to the State Central Register for educational neglect are one example. Children who stay in foster care for a brief time only to return home are another. In addition, throughout the state's child welfare system, children of color are represented disproportionately, raising important questions about the role of bias in reporting and how the system responds. It is critical that we do a better job of targeting services for families who come to the attention of the child welfare system and responding to them in ways that are consistent with good practice, free of bias, and sensitive to families' strengths and needs. We must avoid interventions that are intrusive and unnecessary when other responses would be more appropriate and more effective.

Race/Ethnicity and the Path Through the Child Welfare System in New York State, 2008



Data sources: Population data is from Woods and Poole Economics Inc. Foster care data is from the OCFS Child Care Review Service database.

AREAS OF INQUIRY

To make the child welfare system more effective and ensure that its services are used only when necessary and appropriate, we must improve early decision making about which cases could be addressed

safely and effectively without the involvement of child protective services (perhaps with prevention services); which cases are appropriate for referral to CPS; and which children should be placed temporarily in foster care. The Office of Children & Family Services has initiated work on three fronts:

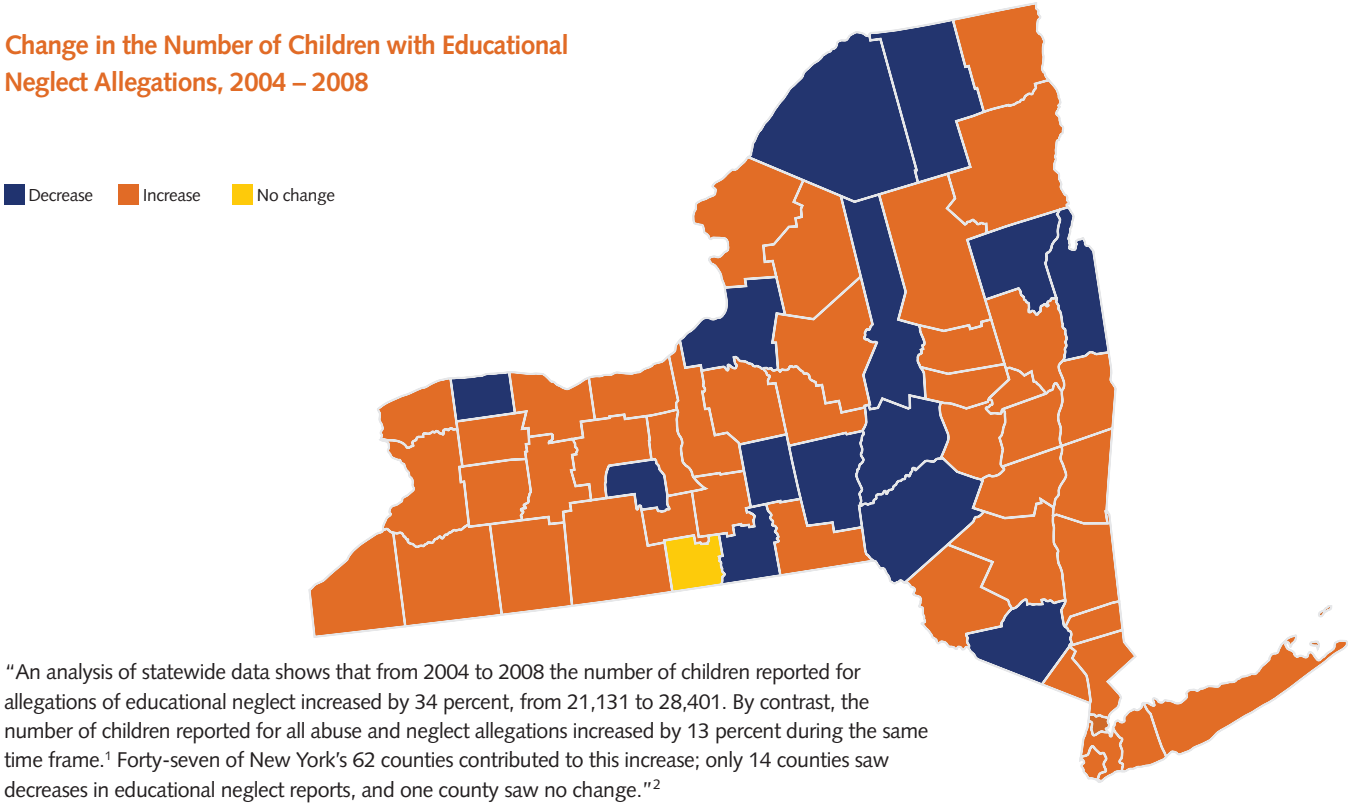
1. **Educational neglect:** We are implementing recommendations to promote a differentiated and more suitable response to reports of educational neglect.

2. **Equity:** We will continue to address service disparity and disproportionality in the populations we serve.

3. **Differential response:** Family Assessment Response, the state's "dual track" program, provides a way to divert lower risk CPS reports to less intrusive interventions.

In addressing these three areas, we must answer questions about the urgency for taking action, the capacity to do work effectively and leverage future gains, how financially and politically feasible the work is, and whether it is sustainable.

Change in the Number of Children with Educational Neglect Allegations, 2004 – 2008



"An analysis of statewide data shows that from 2004 to 2008 the number of children reported for allegations of educational neglect increased by 34 percent, from 21,131 to 28,401. By contrast, the number of children reported for all abuse and neglect allegations increased by 13 percent during the same time frame.[1] Forty-seven of New York's 62 counties contributed to this increase; only 14 counties saw decreases in educational neglect reports, and one county saw no change."[2]

Source: *Rethinking Educational Neglect for Teenagers,* Vera Institute of Justice, November 2009

New York State
Office of
Children & Family
Services

INITIATIVE 2 **PRACTICE**

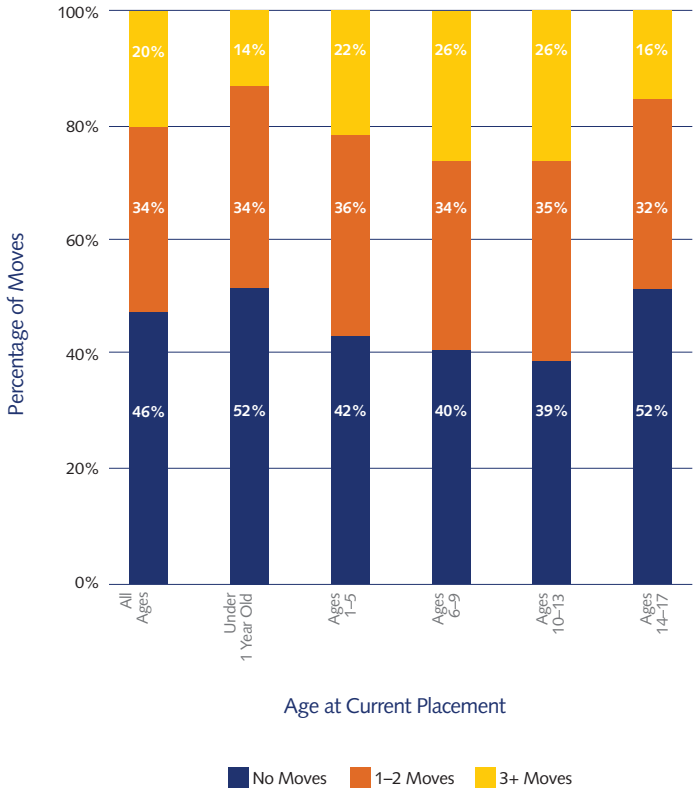
Permanency: Fulfilling the Promise of Stable, Secure, and Nurtured Lives

ISSUE

Permanency is a critical outcome in child welfare services, though in practice it is often considered merely a discharge destination, such as "return to parent" or "discharge to adoption," instead of a state of stability that results from a lasting connection to an adult. This skewed perspective often results in a focus on children's future residence and detracts attention from their immediate developmental needs.

Considered from a child's viewpoint, however, permanency is about relationships with and connections to family. It is about attachment and a sense of belonging. Foster care is meant to be temporary. The Office of Children & Family Services' current data on length of stay suggests that it is not temporary enough. Young people who are discharged from foster care to "independent living" too often lack the continuity of relationships and stability essential for growth and healthy development. Also, while children are in care, movement is too frequent (see chart at right).

New York State Placement Stability in Care as of June 30, 2009, by Number of Moves and Age at Current Placement



An analysis of the experiences of children who were in care on June 30, 2009, reveals that 54.5 percent moved at least once and 20.4 percent moved three or more times during their current foster care stay.

Source: CCRS data as of 7/31/09, accessed through Chapin Hall permanency outcome data

AREAS OF INQUIRY

Stakeholders generally agree that we need policy and practice changes that result in a permanent family for every child. These practices must begin on day one and continue throughout the child's stay, from entrance to foster care through the transition into the child's next setting. For older children, the focus must be on achieving permanency. To promote young people's well-being, changes must also include developing emotional supports for them and effective tools that help them build skills and successfully transition to adulthood.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the best practices in permanency that New York State could promote?
- How can child welfare practitioners engage youth, families, and communities in this dialogue?

INITIATIVE 3 **PRACTICE**

Supporting Community Partnerships

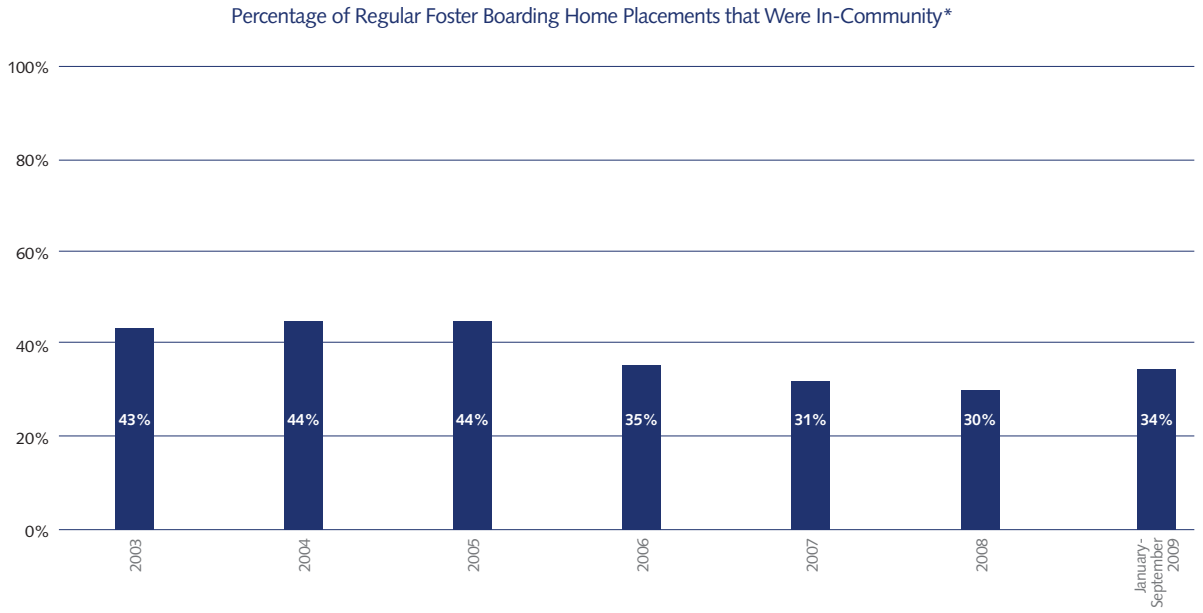
ISSUE

Children do best when they grow up in nurturing families and supportive communities. In recent years, numerous government agencies have supported community and neighborhood development, recognizing that doing so is not just valuable, but necessary to improve the long-term well-being of children and families. New York State has some notable examples of such initiatives.[3]

AREAS OF INQUIRY

The Office of Children & Family Services has employed multiple strategies to support a more community-based, integrated service continuum.

Foster Care: Family Permanency and Stability



The New York City Administration for Children's Services tracks proximity of foster boarding home placements by community district.

* A placement is considered to be in the child's community if the foster home is in the child's community district (CD) of origin or in a CD adjacent to his or her CD of origin.
Note: The percentage of children placed in community foster boarding homes remained steady at approximately 44 percent from 2003 to 2005, then decreased yearly to 29.6 percent in 2008, and increased to 33.5 percent during the first nine months of 2009.

However, OCFS does not currently have a well-constructed strategy for engaging local departments of social services and voluntary agencies to identify, support, and partner with community coalitions. These coalitions are an underutilized asset, and their work coincides with OCFS's commitment to providing an enhanced role for communities so that their voices influence decisions at all levels, from policy development to day-to-day operations. The coalitions are critical partners in OCFS's pursuits of improving proximity of placement to community of origin and maintaining stability of a child's education when foster care is necessary. In addition, they are a likely nexus for development of future practice improvements such as the expanded use of parent advocates and community-based family teams.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How are community coalitions currently integrated into counties' service delivery systems?
- How can child welfare services support these coalitions and their partnerships with local departments and other agencies to help improve outcomes for children and families?
- What specific contributions to this process can OCFS and other child-serving agencies make?

INITIATIVE 4 **PRACTICE**

The Foster Care Continuum: Addressing Complex Needs and Expectations

ISSUE

Over the past 120 years, out-of-home care for children in New York State has largely been progressive in design and practice, well intended, but not always well reasoned. The child welfare system is now in a state of flux. Fewer children are in residential care and far fewer are being placed in foster care. One major factor contributing to these changes is an approach that values and enhances the role and contribution of families and communities in service planning. State and local investments in foster care prevention and diversion from placement have had a significant impact on the number of children entering care. Another factor is local and state investments in preventive services and diversion programs and, most recently, specialized waiver programs (such as Bridges to Health) that provide intensive wraparound services designed to keep at-risk families together. The New York State Office of Mental Health and Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities have also implemented similar waiver programs. These changes and the early results associated with them have generated optimism for the future.

The consequence of strengthening prevention and community-based programs is that our systems are not fully prepared for the resulting changes in bed utilization and service needs of a changing population. Demands on community-based services and family-based care have grown, and although fewer children are being referred to residential care, those who enter residential care have very complex needs.

AREAS OF INQUIRY

We need to systematically identify current trends in the system and analyze their impact. We also need to anticipate future trends and potential consequences, as well as develop appropriate state and local responses. We must determine and articulate how to achieve optimal balance of the sometimes

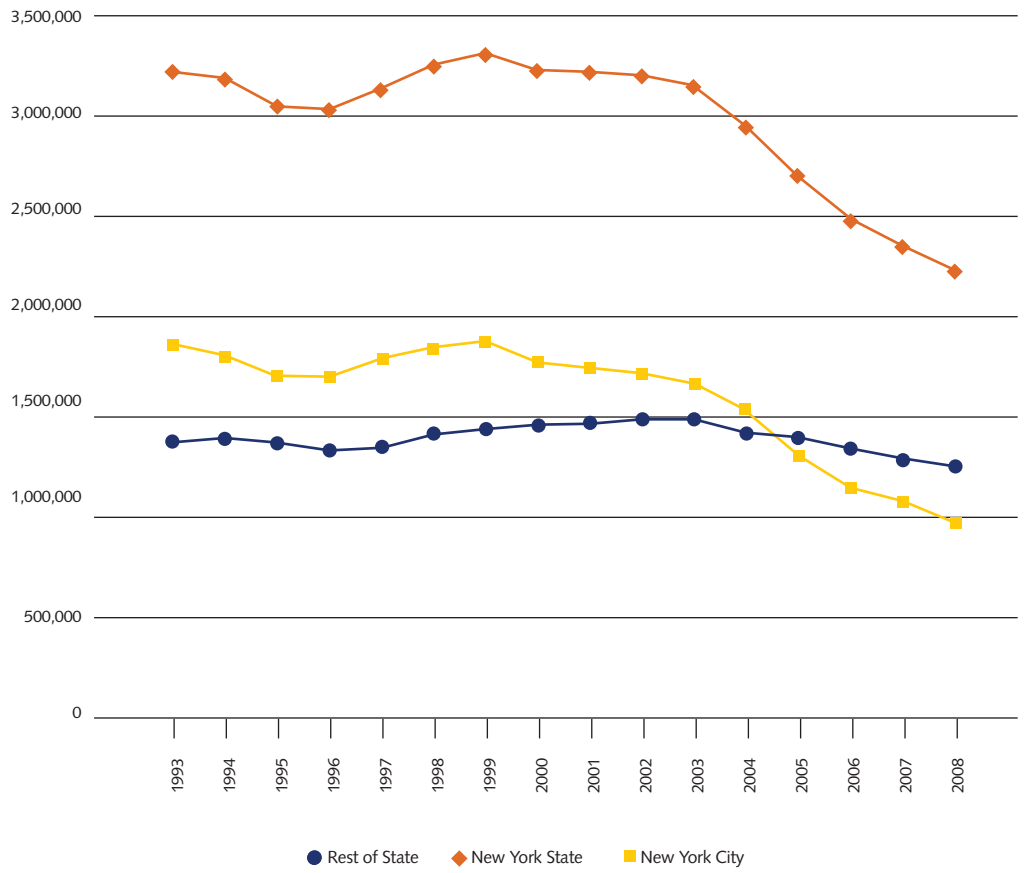
conflicting values (e.g., school continuity may clash with geographic proximity in placement or the goal of avoiding sibling separation) regarding placement decision making, develop new practice guidelines, and take actions that build on lessons learned.

The Office of Children & Family Services, along with stakeholders and consumers, should more clearly define appropriate and effective services that constitute the foster care continuum. The process should include an in-depth discussion of roles, expectations, and contributions from three critical areas of the system—family foster care, group and residential care, and community-based care and services—and a clear description of the supports needed to meet these expectations.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How can OCFS promote short-term, evidence-based treatment approaches in congregate care and residential facilities?
- How can OCFS encourage more family and community engagement for children in congregate care and residential placement?

Congregate Care Days 1993–2008



Source: CCRS

New York State Office of Children & Family Services

INITIATIVE 5 **PRACTICE**

Service Integration: Meeting Families' Needs Through Cross-System Collaboration

ISSUE

To achieve positive long-term outcomes for children and their families, cooperation among disciplines and systems is critical. This is most obvious when considering children and families that have complex needs and are served by multiple systems. As any child welfare worker could tell us, families present with a wide range of needs, including mental health diagnoses, cognitive impairments, physical disabilities, substance addictions, domestic violence, and poverty. The child welfare system is often the system of last resort and is responsible for assisting families through a maze of agencies—each with different protocols, eligibility rules, and practices. The chronicity and complexity of multiple issues may contribute to a less than comprehensive understanding of a family's strengths and needs. Families often end up bouncing from one system to another or not receiving necessary and timely services.

A Case for Coordinated Services

Approximately 199,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are "disconnected"—out of school and out of the workforce, neither employed nor looking for work.[4] The disconnected rate for New York City males (16.2 percent) stands at more than twice the national rate (7.7 percent).[5] These youth are disproportionately persons of color: 43 percent are Latino and 30 percent are black.[6]

The Children's Cabinet is committed to addressing the issues confronting disconnected youth and considers them to be in need of comprehensive and coordinated services that support them throughout their transition from adolescence to adulthood.

AREAS OF INQUIRY

A holistic response to a family is easy to describe and difficult to achieve. Many local collaboratives have developed effective methods for meeting families' needs. State government does not always hear about them, and when we do, we do not always listen or learn from their successes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How can we at the state and local levels strengthen and expand on solutions that have already been tried and tested at the community level in various parts of the state?
- What is the role of the Office of Children & Family Services in putting successful solutions into practice in every district statewide?
- What unique contribution can the OCFS regional offices make?
- Which action would make a substantial difference in this area and should be the highest priority?

INITIATIVE 6 **INNOVATION**

Best Practices: Promoting What Works

ISSUE

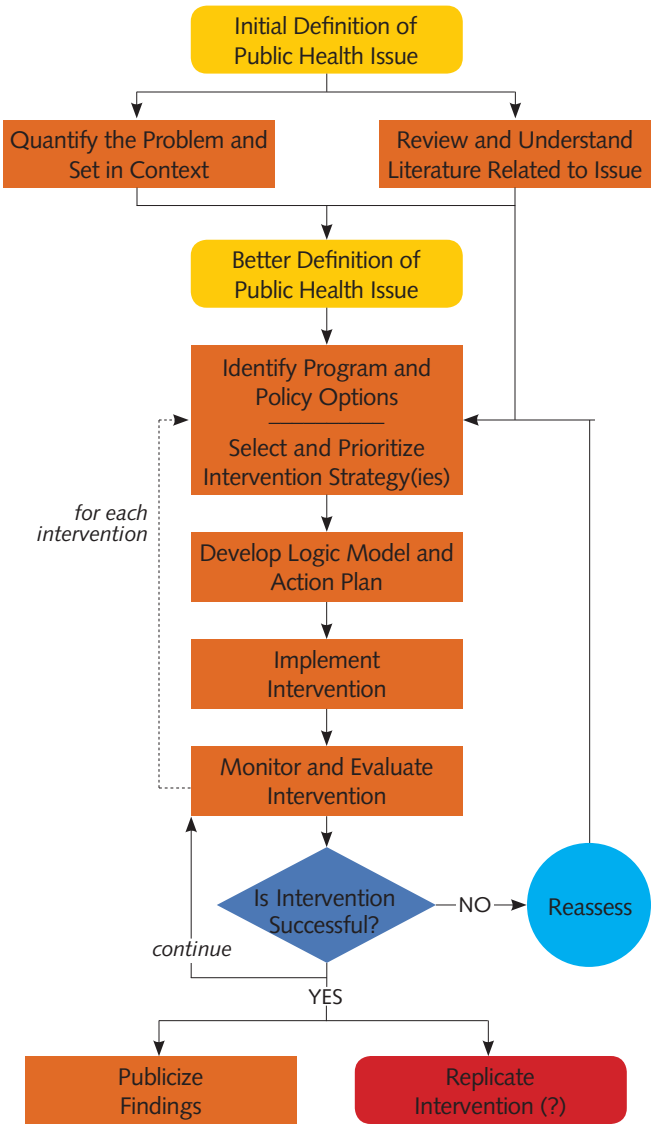
Some child welfare programs in New York State and elsewhere perform in an exemplary way; evidence supports their effectiveness and they have a demonstrated capacity to improve outcomes for children and families. Yet many professionals in the field know little about them, and, as a result, the programs have little likelihood of growth or replication. Meanwhile, many programs that are less effective continue to operate.

AREAS OF INQUIRY

The Office of Children & Family Services will work with counties and providers to support effective, innovative programming and eliminate ineffective programs and practices.

One promising practice is ChildStat, an accountability process that assesses and strengthens child welfare case practice and safety decision making. The ChildStat process involves a weekly session in which child protective services leaders from each of New York City's 14 geographic zones meet on a rotating basis with top officials from the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to conduct an extensive

Evidence-Based Public Health Conceptual Model



Source: Decision-making model presented in RC Brownson, EA Baker, TL Leet, and KN Gillespie, *Evidence-Based Public Health,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), referenced in the New York State Touchstones/KIDS COUNT 2009 Data Book.

data and active case review. Participants at ChildStat meetings address practice and performance issues that ACS senior managers monitor afterward to ensure improvement and accountability. (OCFS facilitated a demonstration of the ChildStat model at a New York Public Welfare Association conference in January 2010.)

Another promising program is Elmcrest Family Support Center, a collaboration between Onondaga County and Elmcrest Children's Center that changes the foster care placement experience for children and their loved ones by involving the family fully in the process and results in shorter lengths of stay and higher rates of reunification.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the potential mechanisms for sharing information about promising and successful programs and practices?
- How does OCFS develop data and evaluation practices on the local level?

INITIATIVE 7 **INNOVATION**

Finance: Investing in Better Outcomes for Children, Stronger Families, and Healthier Communities

ISSUE

Many state and federal funding processes, rules, and requirements that affect New York State's child welfare system are based on past practices and inconsistently revised to reflect current service delivery practices, changes in population, and client service needs.

AREAS OF INQUIRY

Changes in the current approach to financing are essential to support innovation, systems change, and improvements in local service delivery and collaboration. Such innovations should:

- Emphasize desired outcomes over process and align resources to promote these outcomes;
- Build support for a concurrent reinvestment strategy, allowing dollars saved in one area to be redirected to another and spent more effectively; and
- Provide flexibility and support for using innovative finance strategies, such as geographic targeting, master/platform/pooled-funding contracts, and case or budget-based rate setting.

Annual Cost Per Type of Care/Service

$210,000
Division of Juvenile Justice and Opportunities for Youth residential facilities

$205,000
Institutions for hard-to-place youth

$123,000
Regular residential treatment centers

$66,000
Specialized foster boarding homes (therapeutic foster boarding homes and special needs)

$29,000
Regular foster boarding homes

$11,000*
Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST): highly structured intensive community-based prevention programs

$6,000-8,000**
Other community-based prevention programs

* per youth for a four-month service period
** estimated range per family per year for community-based preventive services

Source: OCFS budget estimates

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Over the next 12 months, how can OCFS test its capacity to support innovation?
- How can OCFS take best practices as described in Initiative 6 ("Best Practices: Promoting What Works") and use them to inform policy that will help support the goals of this initiative?
- Without increases in current funding, how could OCFS use existing dollars differently to achieve desired and measurable outcomes?

INITIATIVE 8 **MANAGEMENT**

Caseloads and Workloads: Setting Reasonable Expectations

ISSUE

Just as classroom size correlates to improved outcomes in education, a manageable caseload is a prerequisite for success in the child welfare field. Counties and voluntary agencies that do not dedicate adequate resources to the work of child welfare—whatever the reason—are likely to exacerbate existing organizational problems such as attrition and poor morale. Improving practice may be challenging when workers have large caseloads and workloads. Addressing this issue is difficult in the face of significant fiscal constraints. We recognize that localities and their stakeholders play an important role in setting standards for their communities. Although fiscal limitations may make it impossible to implement and enforce caseload standards today, we still need to make progress and engage stakeholders to take steps toward addressing this issue.

> "Based on the time-log data… on average, district offices and voluntary agencies are spending between 0.6 and 1.5 hours (approximately 35 to 90 minutes) of face-to-face contact with children and their families per case per month."
>
> *New York State Child Welfare Workload Study*, 2006, Walter R. McDonald & Associates

AREAS OF INQUIRY

The 2006 *New York State Child Welfare Workload Study* analyzed time-log data from more than 2,200 caseworkers and made recommendations about decreasing and better managing their

caseloads.[7] These recommendations (from the study by Walter R. McDonald & Associates, in collaboration with the American Humane Association), as well as those made in similar studies, can provide a framework that will help the Office of Children & Family Services and its stakeholders craft a vision and strategy for addressing caseload levels over time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How can we move the agenda forward on workload and caseload standards, given political, social, and fiscal concerns?
- What conditions must exist to begin this conversation?
- What are the unions' potential roles and contributions?

INITIATIVE 9 **MANAGEMENT**

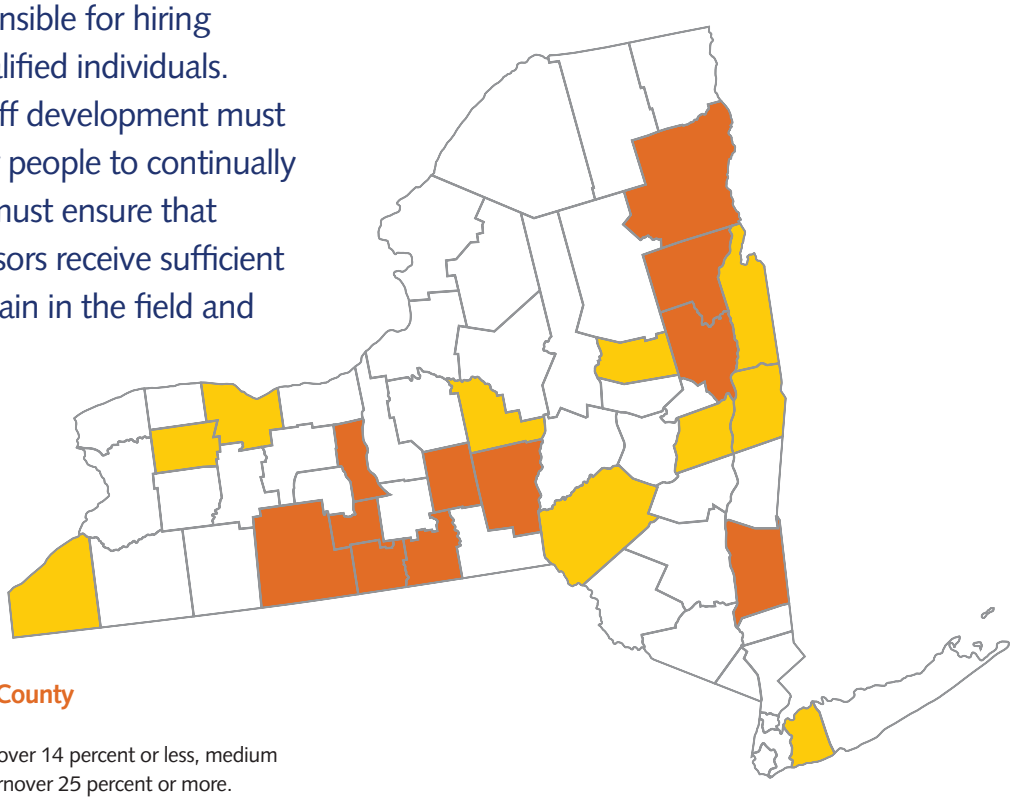
Human Resources: Fostering a Stronger Workforce

ISSUE

To achieve positive outcomes with families, local districts and voluntary agencies must support a highly functioning and well-trained workforce. The child welfare system must attract a wider pool of diverse, solid candidates. People responsible for hiring must select the most qualified individuals. Those responsible for staff development must provide opportunities for people to continually enhance their skills and must ensure that caseworkers and supervisors receive sufficient support so that they remain in the field and do an effective job.

AREAS OF INQUIRY

The Office of Children & Family Services can help strengthen the child welfare workforce by identifying the reasons for the unacceptably high rates of



Caseworker Turnover Rates by County

In this report, OCFS considers low turnover 14 percent or less, medium turnover 15 to 24 percent, and high turnover 25 percent or more.

Low turnover Medium turnover High turnover

Source: 2008 Caseworker Staffing and Turnover Survey Results, OCFS, 2008

attrition across the state, understanding local variations in those rates, and creating responsive remedies. OCFS is committed to designing trainings and courses that promote workers' professional growth and development and using high-impact systemic interventions to improve recruitment and retention. Our work will be informed by the 2005 report from the New York State Social Work Education Consortium on reducing workforce turnover in the state's public child welfare systems.[8]

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the best practices in recruitment and hiring?
- How do counties interact with local civil service agencies?

INITIATIVE 10 **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Accountability: Getting Results

ISSUE

Accountability has been referred to as making "the reasonable request that social services be effective and efficient in whatever they do."[9] Current accountability systems in child welfare are unwieldy, overly burdensome, and inefficient. The child welfare system should be accountable for its results not by focusing on controlling workers' behavior, but on achieving positive, measurable outcomes. These outcomes could be better achieved by emphasizing learning and program improvement, and doing so as inclusively and transparently as possible.

> "The new accountability system must offer basic protections to those who depend on us. It must promote practice improvements and it must help us answer the question 'What works?' "
>
> *—Commissioner Gladys Carrión*

AREAS OF INQUIRY

An article in the *Journal of Public Child Welfare* Welfare persuasively argues that the time has come to "focus on measures that actually bolster the capacity of child welfare agencies and the courts to serve vulnerable children and families, rather than continuing to rely on multiple watchers to try and ensure accountability."[10] Noting that there is "little empirical support for the effectiveness of external watchers," the authors recommend a new approach to accountability. This approach should ensure basic protections for children and families, engage stakeholders and consumers to improve services, share relevant information about the child welfare system broadly, and help agencies monitor their own performance and reward excellence. The Office of Children & Family Services is building a new approach to accountability anchored in a process of continual improvement.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In the interest of transparency, can the New York State Council on Children and Families expand its annual Touchstones data report to incorporate a "State of the Child Report" that includes performance data from all districts and agencies?
- What do good accountability practices look like locally and how does OCFS support good local practices?

ENDNOTES

1. OCFS Data Warehouse as of November 11, 2009.

2. Jessica Gunderson, Megan Golden, and Lizzie Elston, *Rethinking Educational Neglect for Teenagers: New Strategies for New York State* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, November 2009). Data sources: For 2004, OCFS Data Warehouse as of August 12, 2009; for 2008, OCFS Data Warehouse as of July 29, 2009.

3. In the early 1990s as part of the Decade of the Child, Mario Cuomo, then governor of New York, promoted and funded Neighborhood Based Alliances. Agenda for Children Tomorrow was a private initiative forged in partnership with the New York City Mayor's Office around the same time, with similar purposes. In 2002, One City/One Community focused on local government players and city commissioners in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Community Mobilization initiative of the 1980s had a national stage. Annie E. Casey's Family to Family (FTF) initiative stressed connecting foster families with family rehabilitation more than "rescuing" just the children. With a child welfare focus, ACS created service-area networks in 1996 and has used those networks in support of an RFP employing a geographic targeting approach. ACS also supported the Bridge Builders project, which merged a coalition initiative in the Bronx supported through philanthropy with the ACS service planning area initiative.

4. Jenn O'Connor and Tom Hilliard, *Back on Track: Re-Connecting New York's Disconnected Youth to Education and Employment*, (Albany, NY: Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, June 2009).

5. *Out of Focus: City Is Failing Disconnected Youth,* Community Services Society of New York, July 2008.

6. Mark Levitan, *Out of School, Out of Work…Out of Luck? New York City's Disconnected Youth*, (New York: Community Services Society of New York, January 2005).

7. *New York State Child Welfare Workload Study,* Walter R. McDonald & Associates, 2006.

8. Hal A. Lawson, Nancy Claiborne, et al., *Retention Planning to Reduce Workforce Turnover in New York State's Public Child Welfare Systems: Developing Knowledge, Lessons Learned, and Emergent Priorities* (Albany, NY: New York State Social Work Education Consortium, September 2005).

9. Alan A. Zox, *A Critique of Accountability in Child Welfare,* Social and Rehabilitation Service (DHEW), Washington, DC. Paper presented at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Chicago, September 5–9, 1977).

10. Wendy Whiting Blome and Sue Steib, "An Examination of Oversight and Review in the Child Welfare System: The Many Watch the Few Serve the Many" *Journal of Public Child Welfare* (2008): p. 20.

New York State
Office of
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Services

Ten for 2010

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