



Office of Children and Family Services

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

SHEILA J. POOLE
Commissioner

Memorandum

To: Commissioners of Social Services

From: Lisa Ghartey Ogundimu, Deputy Commissioner of
Child Welfare and Community Services

Date: October 14, 2020

Re: [The Blind Removal Process](#) and [Kin-First Firewall](#)

“Much has been written and said about racism in our country, yet this crippling process permeates all elements of our society. Unlike racial segregation which can be at least partially dealt with by direct government intervention, racism is far from being uprooted from the hearts of the American people. It is a social disease that most of us carry. The tragedy is that we are unaware of our subconscious feelings of superiority and inferiority. To rid this nation of racism, we must bring to the attention of our people the gravity and scope of this disease, explaining how it is manifested and how it is dangerously vitiating the strength of our nation and dividing it against itself.” – 1970 White House Conference on Children¹

It has been more than 50 years after the 1970 White House Conference on Children called for “The Development of Program to Eliminate the Racism Which Cripples All Children”², yet sadly, our national racial crisis has highlighted we still have work to do. As calls for police reform rang out from every corner of the globe, a less publicized, but equally urgent cry has been heard for child welfare reform. Think tanks, advocacy groups, and the media have called on child welfare agencies to examine existing policies and practices through a race equity lens, highlighting the glaring overrepresentation of children and families of color involved in the child welfare system.

The time is now to move from conversation to action! The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) is committed to a more just and equitable child welfare system and is currently examining existing policies and practices with a race equity lens. Over the past several months, we have been working on two new policies that will improve practice at key decision-

¹ *Report to the President. White House Conference on Children.* (1970). United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 428, retrieved from https://www.google.com/books/edition/Report_to_the_President/55gau-jNEREC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%E2%80%9CTo+rid+this+nation+of+racism,+we+must+bring+to+the+attention+of+ou+r+people+the+gravity+and+scope+of+this+disease,+explaining+how+it+is+manifested+and+how+it+is+dangerousl+y+vitiating+the+strength+of+our+nation+and+dividing+it+against+itself.%E2%80%9D&pg=PA428&printsec=frontcover#spf=1601571900731.

² Ibid.

making points in the child welfare continuum – investigations and placements. These policies – the [Blind Removal Process](#) and [Kin-First Firewall](#) – align with the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) of keeping children safely at home, and when that is not possible, placing children with relatives.

Racial bias has no place in our child welfare system, and yet, despite the best efforts, intentions, and desires of our child welfare professionals to help children and families, implicit bias can easily and unconsciously seep into decisions of removal and reunification within the child welfare system.

The [Blind Removal Process](#) has been shown to be an effective strategy in reducing racial disparity and disproportionality in child welfare. In 2011, the Nassau County Department of Social Services began blind removal meetings (BRM), which are a key feature of the larger Blind Removal Process. Blind Removal meetings were created to facilitate an unbiased decision-making process in which a caseworker does not disclose any personal and demographic information about a child/family when information about the case is being presented to directors, assistant directors, and others before a removal is initiated. In this way, the discussion is focused on the factors related to safety, risk, and family strengths. The goal of the Blind Removal Process is to have unbiased decision-making in the removal process while still maintaining child safety and reducing the risk of harm, “decrease the overall number of children removed, and resolve disproportionality of race in removals.”³

Unfortunately, removing children from their homes is sometimes necessary to keep them safe. Placing children with relatives or adults with a positive relationship to the child or child’s family (kinship caregivers) is preferred over a non-kinship placement for many reasons – they maintain family and cultural connections, preserve cultural identity, reduce trauma, and provide a more stable placement for children who must be placed in out-of-home placement.⁴

To further promote kinship placements, OCFS is requiring a [Kin-First Firewall](#). This practice is intended to increase safe and appropriate kinship placements. It requires a higher level of review to verify that all viable relatives and adults with a positive relationship to the child have been explored to achieve a kinship placement before making a non-kinship placement. This secondary-level review will play an integral role in expanding kinship care for our children who must be placed out of home. It will also preserve recruited foster homes for children who do not have kin resources, as well as for children who can be stepped down from congregate care placements. Each district’s kinship policy must include how it will implement a [Kin-First Firewall](#) process.

Additionally, OCFS is developing a Kinship Champion Training to develop dedicated “Kinship Champions” within local departments of social services (LDSS) who will search for, engage, notify, and assess potential kin caregivers and provide support to those families. Kinship Champions will be a repository of information about the options, processes, and supports necessary to place children with kinship caregivers and safely sustain those placements. Kinship Champions will serve as advocates within LDSS to maximize kin placements and as liaisons to the community to continue to expand awareness of the need for kin resources to support children who are removed into foster care.

³ Pryce, J., Lee, W., Daejun Park, S., McCarthy, M. (2016). *Race Equity: Nassau and Onondaga County Report*

⁴ *Working With Kinship Caregivers*, Child Welfare Information Gateway (2018), <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/kinship/>.

The Kinship Champion Training, coupled with training, ongoing support, guidance, and an evaluation from OCFS around the [Blind Removal Process](#) and [Kin-First Firewall](#), will position New York State to move from conversation to action as we transform our child welfare system to one that is more just and equitable.

[20-OCFS-ADM-18 Kin-First Firewall Practice](#) with ([Kin-First Firewall FAQ](#)) and [20-OCFS-ADM-19 The Blind Removal Process](#) are included with this memo and will provide you with more information and guidance about how to implement the Blind Removal Process and Kin-First Firewall. During these uncertain times, one thing is certain – our children and families deserve a fair and equitable child welfare system that keeps children safe and supports families in crisis.