



Proposal: Supporting Families First Transition Fund

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), signed into law in early 2018, shifts the national focus in the area of child welfare to strengthening family-based foster care and preventive services. Recognizing the importance of family in child development, federal law now emphasizes the importance of both keeping children safely with their families whenever possible, and ensuring that children are in family-based care when foster care becomes necessary.

The new law allows federal foster care funding to be used to support preventive services to keep families together and includes new funding opportunities for kinship navigator programs. It also reforms federal financing to prioritize family-based foster care over residential care by limiting federal reimbursement for certain residential placements.

In order to ensure that FFPSA implementation is effective, New York State and its counties must be proactive: the state should prepare now by improving policies and practices to recruit, retain and strengthen foster and kinship families and evaluate its current use of residential care.

Background

Research has shown that loving, supportive families – whether birth, kin, foster or adoptive – are critical to the healthy development of all children.¹ This is especially true for children who enter foster care – an experience that is preceded by the trauma of separation from family and followed by the uncertainty of new surroundings, new faces and new expectations. In these circumstances, it is well established that most children do better when placed with a relative or close family friend, or, if none are appropriate, in a supportive family-based setting.

Despite this, across New York State family-based care, including relative foster care, continues to be underutilized. In fact, when New York City is excluded, New York has some of the highest non-family placement rates in the country² with counties outside of NYC placing, on average, 24% of children in residential care compared to the national average of 12%.^{3,4} And the practice of engaging relatives as foster parents also varies greatly around the state – while 30.5% of children in foster care in New York City live with relatives, only 12.7% of children in foster care in upstate New York live with relatives.^{5,6}

Family-based settings are not only important for a child's development and well-being, but are also the more cost-effective option for counties. High usage of residential care versus family-based care comes at a significant cost to counties, with typical non-family placements costing hundreds of dollars a day per child.⁷ With some strategic support, New York's counties can begin to shift their practice, to recruit, support and retain more dedicated foster families, including relatives, and ensure that more children who enter foster care are well-supported in families.

Supporting Counties to Meet the Challenge Ahead

To prepare for implementation of FFPSA, New York State should partner with the private sector to create a transition fund to support county-led efforts to improve their use of family-based and relative foster care and support innovation in recruitment, support and retention of these families. New York counties that have received similar

New York can contribute to better outcomes for children in foster care *AND* prepare to meet new federal requirements by creating a fund that would help counties transition their practice to support more children in family-based foster care, while appropriately reducing the percentage of children in congregate care.

- New York State should invest in a transition fund, through a public-private partnership.
- Counties would use this funding to support children in care and strengthen foster families.
- Resulting savings would be reinvested in child welfare to support practice changes and help to prevent more children from entering foster care.

transition funding are already seeing success. Onondaga County, for instance, utilized a modest amount of transition funding to access technical assistance and powerful evaluation tools to inform practice change that proved financially sustainable in the long-term. With a focus toward less costly family-based placements, over a two year period, Onondaga County was able to increase the percentage of children in family-based and relative foster homes from 55% to 73%, while simultaneously decreasing the percentage of children in congregate care.⁸ This transition resulted in significant savings that could be reinvested toward permanency-oriented services.

In addition to technical assistance and decision-making tools, funding could be used to cover expenses such as:

- Targeted recruitment of kin and foster families
- Expenses related to supporting new relative foster parents in meeting the requirements and expectations of the foster care system
- Transportation of children to court, visitation appointments
- Respite care for foster and kin families
- Financial assistance to support normalcy activities
- The development and implementation of innovative practices to better support foster families.

Cost and Eligibility: In order to achieve the goals of the fund, a maximum award per applicant of \$150,000 annually for three years should be open for all 57 DSS districts to apply. Multiple counties may apply together as a region. Overall costs would be split among the State, county, and private funders, with the proposed shares:

- State portion: \$5 million total over 3 years
- Private match: \$2.5 million total over 3 years
- County match: \$2.5 million total over 3 years (per county cost will depend upon award amount)

For counties to be eligible for this funding, they should present a plan that includes:

- Setting clear, measurable objectives that demonstrate improvements in relative and non-relative foster care utilization and overall permanency outcomes for children.
- Commitments that any savings generated through this investment are reinvested in services that
 - help to sustain the new practice model
 - support recruitment/retention of foster families,
 - strengthen families and prevent entry into foster care and/or
 - provide aftercare services that support families and children post-permanency.
- Establishing a practice standard that prioritizes the placement of children and young people with relatives and/or in family-based settings. Counties may consider employing:
 - a practice standard that requires approval by a senior child welfare director for all non-kin placements to ensure front line staff have exhausted all options for kinship care;
 - a practice standard that requires senior child welfare staff to review the therapeutic necessity for placing a child in a residential care facility.
- Plans should also reflect that counties have reviewed existing policies related to kin and/or foster families in order to identify areas of need.
- Priority should be given to counties that are able to demonstrate that they allow or will allow relatives/kin to become foster parents 6 months after the child left their parents' home.

¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015, May). Every kid needs a family: Giving children in the child welfare system the best chance for success. Baltimore, MD: Author. www.aecf.org/resources/everykid-needs-a-family

² <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6247-children-in-foster-care-by-placement-type#ranking/2/any/true/870/2623/12995>

³ NYS Office of Children & Family Services. (2017). Monitoring & Analysis Reports: Upstate. <https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/reports/maps/counties/Upstate.pdf>

⁴ <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6247-children-in-foster-care-by-placement-type>

⁵ NYS Office of Children & Family Services. (2017). Monitoring & Analysis Reports: New York City. <https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/reports/maps/counties/New%20York%20City.pdf>

⁶ NYS Office of Children and Family Services. (2017). Monitoring and Analysis Reports: Upstate. <https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/reports/maps/counties/Upstate.pdf>

⁷ https://www.ocfs.ny.gov/main/policies/external/OCFS_2017/ADFs/17-OCFS-ADM-11.pdf

⁸ <https://www.onfostercare.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Executive-Leadership-Session.pdf>



Kin First: Policies to Support Children in Families and Prepare to Meet the Requirements of Family First Prevention Services Act

We know that children do better when they live in families, and particularly in families with relatives whom they know and trust. New York can do more to ensure that, when foster care becomes necessary, children are nurtured by families who are supported to be the best possible caregivers.

The federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), which was signed into law in early 2018, renews the national focus on supporting children in family-based settings. The new law reforms federal financing to prioritize family-based foster care over residential care by limiting federal reimbursement for certain residential placements. New York can prepare to meet these requirements by ensuring that more children in foster care are, when appropriate, placed with relatives.

This **Kin First** package would help to promote better outcomes for children in foster care and support counties in preparing to meet the requirements of FFPSA, by:

- ▶ **Identifying and engaging relatives and kin early on.** Update policy to integrate the identification of kinship resources, including fathers, into preventive and protective casework, before a child has been removed to foster care. Doing so strengthens preventive work by building a supportive network around the family, and also helps to prepare placement options in the event that entry into foster care becomes necessary.
- ▶ **Making it easier for relatives to become foster parents.** Review and update existing policies to include expedited licensing for kin, removing unnecessary barriers that may prevent kin from becoming foster parents, and utilizing model licensing standards for foster parents.
- ▶ **Maintaining and utilizing a robust Foster Parent Census.** Support local districts in collecting, analyzing and reporting to the state data on their existing pool of foster parents. Foster parent census information should be used to compare the location and skills of foster parents with the location and needs of foster children (as captured in the foster children census). Foster parent data should also be used to better understand trends in foster parent retention and satisfaction.
- ▶ **Strengthening supports for kinship caregivers.**
 - Require that kinship caregivers are fully informed about the range of services and financial supports available to them within the first week of placement, and on an on-going basis throughout their time as a caregiver.
 - Require that all local districts understand and advise relative caregivers that caregivers remain eligible to become foster parents even after a child has lived with them for 6 months or more, notwithstanding that this could mean that the local district will not be eligible to receive IV-E funding for that placement.

To learn more about CHAMPS-NY, contact Kari Siddiqui KSiddiqui@scaany.org, Brad Hansen bhansen@ftnys.org or visit www.fosteringchamps.org/states/new-york