



CHAMPS-NY 2022 Policy Priorities

CHAMPS-NY is a coalition of more than 15 organizations, providers and advocates, representing children and families involved in New York's child welfare system. CHAMPS is grounded in research that shows that loving, well-supported families—birth, kin, foster and adoptive—are critical to the healthy development of all children.

New York is poised this year to seize opportunities to build a family-centered, supportive child welfare system including New York's implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), which is intended to reduce states' reliance on congregate care and promote family-based foster care and kinship care. Another opportunity is the upcoming reauthorization of state funding for child welfare preventive services in 2022. Our 2022 Policy Priorities outline three urgent recommendations to ensure New York supports the well-being of children and families involved in the child welfare system.

Establish an Office of the Child Welfare Advocate

New York's children and families need a publicly accountable Office of the Child Welfare Advocate that can neutrally and impartially mediate conflict, provide information and protect the interests and rights of youth, biological parents, kinship caregivers and foster parents navigating the child welfare system.

Creating collaborative, problem-solving resources for families facing challenges is a matter of racial justice. Racial disparities follow families through each step of the child welfare process. Black families are disproportionately reported to the SCR every year ([disparity index 1.91](#): moderate disparity), investigated by Child Protective Services (disparity index 2.21: high disparity), and separated, with Black children disproportionately placed in foster care (disparity index 3.34: high disparity). New York must act with urgency to end these disparities and create a just child welfare system by connecting families to resources and supports long before they become formally engaged with the formal child welfare system, among other interventions.

Other challenges include kinship caregivers struggling to access much-needed financial support, and New York's overreliance on congregate care placements. As a county-administered child welfare system, it is particularly challenging for New York to identify trends and systemic issues whether arising across the state, or in specific regions. With an Office of the Child Welfare Advocate, New York will be able to better provide support and accountability to children and families involved in the child welfare system, thus leading to better long-term outcomes.

Establishing an Office of the Child Welfare Advocate would support Family First implementation. This office would help youth and families resolve misunderstandings and problems quickly, before they escalate; connect to resources and supports before problems become crises; and act as a data repository to enable New York to identify trends across counties, recurring challenges, and opportunities to improve the child welfare system to better serve New York families. By establishing an Office of the Child Welfare Advocate, New York would join the 36 other states with similar offices. It would be an indispensable resource in efforts to strengthen families and prevent family separation.

New York establishes an Office of the Child Welfare Advocate to better ensure that youth, biological parents, kinship caregivers and foster parents involved in the child welfare system are connected to the resources and supports to which they are entitled.

Robustly Support Families Able to Care for Youth at Risk of Institutional Placement

New York has an opportunity to make real progress towards eliminating congregate care placements for children under the age of 13 by increasing kin and foster care payments for families who could care for a child of any age where there is a risk of institutional placement. This goal aligns with and advances New York's implementation of Family First, and moves New York farther down the path of creating a child welfare system that centers and strongly supports families.

Nearly 1 in 5 children in New York's foster care system live in an institution instead of with a family. On a given day, this is over 2500 children, including over 400 under the age of 13. Youth of color are disproportionately represented in congregate settings, especially Black children, who represent half of all children living in institutions and group homes state-wide despite representing only 15% of New York's child population. Congregate placements are not safe for children in the short or long term. They increase the risk of physical and emotional harm, especially for younger children, and set up older youth for leaving foster care without permanent family bonds. By robustly supporting and incentivizing family-based placements, New York can shift the culture statewide more toward families.

New York limits congregate care placements for children under 13 years of age and increases foster care payments for families who could care for children of any age at risk of institutional placement.

Reauthorize Essential Child Welfare Funding and Restore 65% State Support for Investments in Preventive Services

New York State currently invests state dollars in services for families to avoid deeper child welfare system involvement and to support children remaining safely in their homes. This open-ended state reimbursement funding has contributed to the 59% reduction of children in foster care since 2010 through supports including housing assistance, child care, clinical services, home visiting, transportation, job training, education, and emergency cash grants. Many of these kinds of family supports are not eligible for federal reimbursement under Family First, making it imperative to their survival that the state continue to fund these programs.

The enabling legislation for state preventive services (SSL 153-k), is subject to a sunset provision in 2022. New York must recommit to New York families by reauthorizing the statute and restoring state funding to the statutory mandated level of 65% to meet the full potential of its purpose by budgeting for the state share of these costs. In state statute, the requirement is 65% funding, yet since 2008, the state has consistently reduced its share of reimbursement for these essential services to 62% each year—forcing counties to absorb a larger share of costs of serving families and children outside of foster care.

New York reauthorizes crucial funding for preventive services, including restoring the 65% state share required under the original law.