



## Office of Children and Family Services

ANDREW M. CUOMO  
Governor

SHEILA J. POOLE  
Commissioner

April 9, 2021

Darlene Ward  
Welfare Research Inc.  
14 Columbia Circle  
Suite 104  
Albany, NY 12203

  
Dear Ms. Ward:

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) has received the Citizen Review Panels' recommendations to reform practice in child welfare. Despite extremely challenging times for our state and the children, families, and vulnerable adults we serve, we are seizing upon the opportunity this pandemic and related civil unrest have presented to transform our system. I strongly believe that now is the moment, with additional federal pandemic relief funding and additional federal assistance for human services, to improve our capacity and sharpen our focus to serve all children and families fairly and equitably, regardless of race or social or economic standing. OCFS supports new policies and initiatives to better serve New York's children and families with an intentional focus on addressing bias and structural racism.

Last year, New York took bold steps in requiring counties to follow a blind removal process when considering whether to remove a child from their home to eliminate implicit bias from decision-making. We also implemented a kin-first firewall policy requiring an additional administrative review before a child is placed in care. We are now expanding these efforts to create a more safe and just child welfare system by creating a "blind step-up" procedure to determine whether a child needs to be elevated into congregate care, eliminating the use of prone restraints in all child welfare and residential juvenile justice settings, and requiring implicit bias training for all child welfare staff statewide.

As you know, the State Fiscal Year 2021-22 Executive Budget advances legislation to expand the Family Assessment Response (FAR) approach to certain Child Protective Services (CPS) investigations. This collaborative, alternative response to a traditional CPS investigation engages families in assessing their unique needs and connects them to tailored services and supports. In counties currently using the FAR approach, families have experienced better outcomes because of more focused caseworker visits centered around engagement in assistance/services, not focused on an investigatory outcome. Pending enactment, my staff and I are eager to expand this approach statewide.

These ongoing efforts complement federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) implementation efforts. On September 29, 2021, OCFS, our partners, and stakeholders will begin a new approach to service provision and foster care financing. OCFS is meeting the significant changes that FFPSA will bring with legislative, regulatory and policy creation, revision, and promulgation. I welcome your continued feedback as we navigate through these new waters together. OCFS will continue to explore every funding source available to us; however, as a reminder, federal Title IV-E funding remains a reimbursement that is based upon costs incurred. It isn't an elective stream that can be diverted to activities outside those that receive federal participation.

But while usage of Title IV-E funds remains limited, the passage of the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provides us a new opportunity to help lift families out of poverty and many anti-poverty efforts are being created, increased, or expanded. Further, if these funds are made permanent, child poverty can be reduced by 50 percent.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, OCFS continued to work with the Caseworker Recruitment and Retention Workgroup. We produced a video recognizing child welfare workers as first responders during the pandemic that was recognized and circulated by our federal partners. We met with NYS Civil Service to discuss reconvening the workgroup in which members will set short- and long-term goals which are changing due to the effects of the pandemic. We look forward to sharing our updates in the near future.

I congratulate you on your 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and look forward to continuing our dialogue to make improvements to child welfare practice supporting the children and families of New York State.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sheila J. Poole', written in a cursive style.

Sheila J. Poole  
Commissioner