

Testimony before the Assembly Standing Committee on Children and Families
Hearing on Preventive Services for Families
December 1, 2014

Submitted by
Lauren Tobias, Director of Policy
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy

The Schuyler Center would like to thank the chair and members of the committee for the opportunity to submit our testimony on Preventive Services for Families. Schuyler Center is a 142-year-old statewide, nonprofit organization dedicated to providing policy analysis and advocacy in support of public systems that meet the needs of people in poverty. Schuyler Center often works on areas that fall between multiple systems of care including health, welfare, and human services.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony.

Overview

After several years of recession and a slow recovery, poverty rates remain high, particularly for our children and for those who live in urban areas. The effects of living in poverty, even for a short period of time, have been well documented. Poverty in childhood is strongly associated with cognitive, behavioral, social and emotional difficulties, and with the lifetime effects of compromised educational and employment attainment. The implications are significant, lifelong and societal.

Investments in human services are critical to New York's future. The last several years of growing need and flat or reduced funding have taken their toll on the services that families depend upon. This sector should be prioritized for reinvestments to strengthen the State's infrastructure.

Child Welfare Preventive Services

The child welfare system serves some of our most vulnerable children and their families, striving to keep children safe from harm and strengthen families. The responsibilities that we place on the child welfare system are enormous, and adequate resources are required if the system is to meet those expectations.

Ensure that statewide data on prevention services are readily available.

Across New York State, families are facing economic hardship, the stresses of which have been shown to contribute to child maltreatment. Also across the state, child welfare systems are struggling to manage caseloads that vary greatly by region, including some caseload averages well above the recommended levels of approximately 1:15. While supporting caseworkers and addressing caseload size are critical, we must also provide services that prevent families from becoming involved in the child welfare system. Fortunately, there are proven preventive interventions, such as maternal/infant home visiting programs that work with families in their homes to strengthen parenting skills and promote child well-being. Preventive services, including home visiting, are critical to the child welfare system. They help to strengthen families, build

parents' skills, and ensure that children are healthy and safe. With effective preventive programs, we have the opportunity to reduce involvement in the child welfare system and reduce downstream costs to the State.

However, while evidence-based preventive interventions exist and some counties invest in them, we do not know how preventive funding is spent, due in part to the nature of New York's county-run system and the State's limited tracking of the funds. This makes it difficult to understand which programs and services are available in which parts of the state, and whether preventive services are being effectively implemented. Information about preventive programs and services provided by counties is not readily available at the State level. In fact, when Schuyler Center requested (in March 2014) data regarding prevention services and expenditures from the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), the only information that was provided were reimbursement claims from each county for preventive, protective, independent living, and adoption services. While this helped to clarify the amount of funding requested by each county, it did little to clarify the types of prevention services being made available to families or the number of families able to take advantage of such services. Also included in Schuyler's request, and not provided by OCFS, were county expenditures for preventive services.

The lack of statewide data inhibits our ability to assess statewide access to evidence-based programs and to understand communities' approaches to prevention. In order to strengthen and support the child welfare system, it is imperative that we have baseline data from across the state. This is important in order to assess the statewide availability of services and the development of best practices to be shared with the rest of the state.

Understanding whether, and to what extent children and families have access to preventive services can help to explain other child welfare outcomes, such as continued involvement with the system. Data is essential to understanding what programs are working and how we can best serve the whole state so that children and families are healthy, stable, and safe.

Recommendation: The Schuyler Center urges the State to collect and make public statewide and county-level data on preventive services in New York. Data to be collected should include, but not be limited to: programs and services by county, aggregate program enrollment numbers by county, demand for services, and referrals/case closures.

Restore the State share for preventive, protective, adoption, independent living, and after-care services from 62% to 65%, as is written in statute, and ensure that it remains open-ended.

Localities use preventive, protective, adoption, independent living, and after-care services funds to provide essential services to families who become involved with the child welfare system with the aim of keeping children safe, preventing foster care placements, and preventing re-reporting and re-entry. The direct and indirect costs resulting from our country's failure to prevent children's maltreatment are staggering. The costs grow significantly as maltreated children become adults. This funding is absolutely critical for the State in terms of reducing expenditures associated with Medicaid, unemployment, homelessness, and public benefits.

The research on the prevention of child abuse and neglect provides a clear pathway to the prevention of child maltreatment through policies that nurture children, strengthen families, and

build caring and responsive communities. More evidence-based and evidence-informed services are needed to address the root causes of child maltreatment—social isolation, poverty, substance abuse, maternal depression and illness, domestic violence and lack of parenting skills. With close to one in four of the State’s children living in poverty, assistance obtaining concrete supports and benefits can help put families back into the workforce and ameliorate the impacts of poverty on children. A large number of the reports that come into the State Central Register have to do with neglect that is poverty related. The Family Assessment Response (FAR) is particularly effective for these cases.

Uncapped preventive funding is the core component of the State’s strategy to reduce foster care placements by increasing services to families in their communities and homes, and strengthening and supporting their ability to care for their children. In 2003, the foster care population totaled 37,232; by 2012 this number had dropped to 20,631, a 45% decline over ten years. But localities cannot afford the 38% local share required for these programs when they struggle to meet other demands on their budgets.

Restoring the State’s share to 65% would enable counties to provide more preventive services to families, keeping more children out of foster care. But, the Schuyler Center recommends that the restoration of the State’s funding share be accompanied by a maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement or explicit quality measures that help counties address the needs specific to their communities to improve the number or quality of services provided. Doing so will help to ensure that the increased State funding supplements and strengthens, rather than replacing county investments.

Recommendation: The Schuyler Center urges the State to re-assume the 65% share, as provided in statute, so localities can serve more families and increase the quality and availability of their services. It is critical that this funding remain open-ended.

Invest in targeted community-based prevention services.

Preventive services should be offered on a targeted, community-based level. By so doing, a locality can target an at-risk population without singling out a specific family unnecessarily.

Currently, State reimbursement for preventive services requires a case to be opened for a family to receive services. To do this, there must be a documented risk of foster care which does not allow a local social service district to invest in primary preventive services. Changing this requirement to allow preventive services to be offered before a case is opened would enable local social service districts to use the data to target services to locations with high rates of reports, such as public housing complexes, homeless shelters or schools in areas with high rates of reports.

These community-based programs should also serve as a referral point for other preventive services, such as home visiting programs, as needed by families. At present, it is difficult for the general public to know how or where to gain access to programs, such as home visiting, that are meant to strengthen families. Creating targeted preventive services that are based within communities provides a unique opportunity to connect at-risk families with services they may otherwise never learn about or know how to access. Providing this point of referral will help to

ensure that communities are informed about important services in a culturally appropriate setting and are able to access the services they need to promote family safety and stability.

Recommendation: The Schuyler Center urges the State to create a new program that allows districts to more strategically invest in community-targeted and community-based services to prevent abuse and neglect.

Thank you. We appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony and look forward to continuing to work with you.

*Lauren Tobias
Director of Policy
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy
518-463-1896 x138/ltobias@scaany.org
www.scaany.org*