

Prevention should be our primary approach to child abuse and neglect, with a focus on child and family well-being. There is increasing attention to addressing child welfare from a public health perspective, focusing on the impact of family, community, and environmental factors, but New York has not yet implemented these approaches. Public health aims to improve the health of individuals and communities by addressing conditions where people live, learn, work and play. The overwhelming majority of maltreatment cases are related to child neglect—the failure of a caregiver to provide a child with food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education – often linked to poverty—rather than abuse.<sup>i</sup> The prevalence of neglect over abuse indicates an opportunity to intervene early, to strengthen families and communities, and avoid the serious, long-term effects of maltreatment.<sup>ii</sup>

## Why Primary Prevention is Important?

- In 2014 there were more than 155,000 reports of child maltreatment across New York.<sup>iii</sup>
- Research shows that the overwhelming majority of reports of maltreatment are cases of neglect, rather than abuse,<sup>iv</sup> indicating the opportunity for interventions that strengthen parenting skills, connect families to necessary resources, and help to address the social circumstances that impact a family's stability before abuse or neglect ever occurs.
- Studies have also shown a correlation between reports of maltreatment and families with low incomes; residing in neighborhoods with low economic status; facing unemployment or underemployment; experiencing food insecurity; or with a family member struggling with depression. Poverty can lead to increased rates of actual maltreatment and poverty itself is often mistaken for neglect.

Because preventive services in New York State are tied to preventing entry into foster care, families can only receive services when there is a documented risk of entry into foster care for the family's child(ren). This means that there are very few opportunities for upstream efforts—primary prevention or community-based preventive services. By failing to invest in true primary preventive and family support services, we miss the opportunity to strengthen families before children become at-risk for maltreatment. Community-based family strengthening focused on neighborhoods or communities that are “high risk,” whether because of high poverty or high rates of reports of maltreatment, could serve families well before there is a risk of removal from the home. Through primary prevention we can change the focus from *preventing foster care* to what is truly at the heart of prevention: *strengthening families*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2016-2017

- The State should renew its commitment to preventive services by restoring the State share of reimbursement for preventive and protective services from 62% to 65%.
- The State should invest in **primary preventive services**, starting by redirecting the restored 3% (above) to be used for **primary preventive services**, available without the need for a case to be opened. So doing will ensure counties use the increased funding to create new services to prevent children in New York from ever experiencing abuse or neglect. These services should be directed to communities based on community need, as determined by relevant community-level data, such as poverty and maltreatment.

<sup>i</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014). Definitions of child abuse and neglect. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

<sup>ii</sup> The ACEs study examines the long-term effects of maltreatment, and other adverse childhood experiences, on health and other outcomes

<sup>iii</sup> OCFS Bureau of Research, Evaluation and Analytics. *2014 Monitoring and Analysis Profiles: New York State*.

<sup>iv</sup> See the Institute of Medicine