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Legislators, Families, Providers and Advocates Urge Legislature to Pass Bills to Help Children in Foster Care and Their Families

Bills Pending in Both Houses Would Prevent Homelessness and Help Children Permanently Live with Relatives
Strengthening Child Welfare System Especially Critical in Light of State's \$62 million Cut to the Foster Care Block Grant

Albany, New York- Legislators, advocates and providers from throughout the State gathered in Albany today to urge the Senate and Assembly to pass two key bills to strengthen the child welfare system, a system that serves children and families through preventing child abuse and neglect, foster care, and services that help children leave foster care to permanent stable families, including their own.

This advocacy effort comes on the heels of a state budget that cut \$62 million from the foster care system, leaving many counties struggling to both provide quality foster care services while investing in prevention efforts.

These two bills will help strengthen the child welfare systems throughout the state by preventing homelessness for families and youth and help children living with relatives and those with ties to their family more quickly through the subsidized relative guardianship program, called KinGAP (Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program). The two bills are sponsored by Assembly member Hevesi and Senator Avella (A259/S1291 is the housing subsidy bill and A7554/S4833 is the KinGAP bill.)

"Now is the time to take steps to strengthen New York's child welfare and foster care systems, which is why I have introduced these two bills. The housing subsidy bill, S1291, would help to prevent homelessness for both families with child welfare cases and youth who age out of foster care. The KinGAP enhancement bill, S4833, would strengthen New York's subsidized relative guardianship program to improve the lives of children and youth who leave foster care to relatives and those with close family relationships. These bills are common-sense ways to help children and families who are in the custody of the state and the counties, and thus to whom we have a responsibility to ensure our laws meet their needs," said **Senator Tony Avella, Chair of the Senate Children and Families Committee.**

"I want to thank the Citizens' Committee for Children (CCC), the Schuyler Center for Advocacy and Analysis (SCAA), Assemblywoman Jaffee, Senator Avella, and my colleagues in government for their support and advocacy towards helping children in foster care and their families. Amongst a multitude of other benefits, bills A259/S1291 and A7554/S4833 will provide youth aging out of foster care with greater financial and residential security, and will also help relatives of youth in foster care provide for them through the KinGap program. I am proud of these pieces of legislation, and look forward to continuing to work to help the Foster Care population in New York," said **Assemblyman Andrew D. Hevesi (A.D. 28).**

“Among my top priorities as Chair of the Children and Families Committee, and as a co-sponsor of these bills, is the well-being of children and youth in kinship and foster care. I am committed to making sure communities have the resources, programs and services they need to support children and youth, their caregivers and families. The deep cuts to foster care are shameful and unacceptable. We as a state have a moral responsibility to strengthen the child welfare and foster care systems, prevent homelessness, and help these children live safe, stable lives in secure family settings. Simply put, we *must* pass these bills. Now is the time to do more,” said **Assemblywoman Ellen Jaffee**.

“Despite bold promises to provide safe haven to low-income and disenfranchised New Yorkers threatened by expected federal budget cuts and policies, New York State this year passed a budget that features deep cuts to foster care. At such a time, it is even more important for the state to take steps to build stronger programs for children and families in our foster care system. Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy commends Senator Avella and Assemblymembers Hevesi and Jaffee for their leadership on this issue, and urges the legislature to pass S4833/A7554 and S1291/A259,” said **Kate Breslin, President & CEO, Schuyler Center for Analysis & Advocacy**.

“The State has a responsibility to give the counties the tools they need to better serve children and families at risk of abuse or neglect and those in foster care. Unfortunately, recent cuts to the State reimbursement have negatively impacted both preventive services and foster care. To counter this and produce better results for New York’s children and families, two specific pieces of legislation (A259/S1291 and A7554/S4833) must pass the legislature and be signed into law by the Governor,” said **Jennifer March, Executive Director of Citizens’ Committee for Children**.

“These laws will ultimately save the counties and the state money by preventing homelessness and reducing the use of foster care, making them a win-win for children, youth, families and all New Yorkers. A259/S1291, will help prevent homelessness by increasing the child welfare housing subsidy from \$300 per month to \$600 for families and youth and will ensure youth do not leave foster care to homelessness by increasing the age from 21 to 24. Furthermore, A7554/S4833 will make certain kinship guardianship payments available for half siblings, children placed with close family friends, and until age 21 for all,” said **Stephanie Gendell, Associate Executive Director, Citizens’ Committee for Children**.

“We need to modernize the child welfare housing subsidy to reflect current rent levels and to make the subsidy available to youth up to age 24. Making these changes will help NYS to support young people transitioning out of foster care and to encourage their future success,” said **Jim Purcell, CEO, Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA)**.

“We know from experience that children do best when with kin. Expanding the scope of ‘kin’ recognized as part of the KINGAP process will help children move out of foster care sooner and increase the number of resources who are willing and appropriate. Whether that ‘kin’ family member is a godparent or a close friend to the family, if the child recognizes this person as family, we owe it to that child to do everything we can to maintain the connection and support that relationship,” said **Daniella Pogue, Director of Adoption and Foster Care, The Children’s Village**.

“Expanding KinGap to address the realities of NYC families is a no-brainer that will help children stay with those who know and love them,” said **Lisa Freeman, Director of Special Litigation and Law Reform, Legal Aid, Juvenile Rights Practice**. “These changes to the Housing Subsidy are a must to assist youth aging out of foster care in obtaining housing,” added **Freeman**.

More information about the legislation:

A259/S1291: Prevent Homelessness for Families and Youth Aging out of Foster Care

Since 1988, the Social Service Law has provided for a child welfare housing subsidy to help stabilize housing for families and youth and prevent children from entering foster care, help families when children reunify from foster care, and help youth who age out of foster care. Due to the low subsidy amount, the child welfare housing subsidy is no longer able to effectively prevent homelessness for families and youth involved with the child welfare system. The bill would:

- Increase the monthly housing subsidy allowance to \$600 (from \$300);
- Increase the upper age limit eligibility from 21 to 24 so that youth who age out of foster care at 21 can avail themselves of the subsidy for up to 3 years;
- Ensure those receiving the housing subsidy can live with unrelated roommates.

A7554/S4833: Help Foster Children Achieve Permanency by Strengthening KinGAP

For children in foster care living with relatives, the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP) is often the permanency plan in their best interests. It enables children to leave foster care to relatives without a termination of parental rights proceeding, and provides the relative with ongoing subsidy to care for the child (like foster care and adoption do.) This bill would:

- Provide the subsidy until age 21 regardless of the age at which KinGAP is finalized (like foster care and adoption subsidy)
- Use the same definition of “kin” as is used in foster care so that half-siblings are treated as a sibling unit.
- Expand KinGAP to fictive kin, meaning those who are like relatives but not related by blood (e.g. close family friends, godparents, etc.

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