



## CHAMPS NY Fall 2020 Framework: Reimagine, Realign, and Reinvest in Child Welfare

CHAMPS NY is a coalition of more than 15 organizations – providers and advocates representing children and families with foster care experience – from across New York State. CHAMPS is grounded in research that shows that loving, supportive families – whether birth, kin, foster or adoptive – are critical to the healthy development of all children. We are dedicated to advancing policy and practice change that helps to ensure that when children are unable to remain safely with their parents, they are placed in a family-based setting whenever possible.

COVID-19 has created unique challenges for children, families, and child welfare. It has also illuminated pre-existing challenges that children and families in historically underserved communities have struggled with for decades in their experiences with child welfare. New York, like the rest of the nation, is reckoning with structural, historic, and ongoing racism in all systems that serve and govern New Yorkers – including the child welfare system. In New York State, the events of 2020 are co-occurring with the pending implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act. This reinforces the research that shows children thrive in family, but funding is often at odds with data-supported solutions. However, this year has also created an opportunity to reimagine, realign, and reinvest in our children and families.

Communities of color disproportionately come into contact with child welfare. This disparity follows and compounds on families of color as they become entangled in child welfare, from calls to protective services to family separation through each step of the process, ending too often with youth aging out of foster care without a family. New York State must support and cultivate meaningful engagement with communities to end these disparities.

New York State's successful implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act should include addressing the following priorities: Prevent child welfare involvement and family separation, strengthen family-based care, reduce congregate care, ensure youth age out of care with family, and confront and reduce racial inequity.

### Reimagine Child Welfare as Preventing Entry into Care

New York must empower families to address their own needs to prevent child welfare involvement and children entering care. A comprehensive array of preventive services should work to keep families together.

#### Recommendations

- ▶ Implement a robust localized input process for families and young people who use preventive services.
- ▶ Ensure that children and families have the tools and technology they need to stay connected.
- ▶ Require LDSS to provide prevention services to families caring for children who have been diverted from foster care.
- ▶ Provide quality and timely legal representation for parents and children by claiming available Title IV-E funds.

## Realign Approach to Care

New York must deliberately confront racial bias and inequity in every level of decision-making, especially removing children from their families. Should children enter foster care, family-based care through relatives and fictive kin should be prioritized until they can safely return to their families. Recruitment and retention should empower caregivers to programmatically and financially meet the needs of children in their care.

The lion's share of child welfare resources exist under the umbrella of congregate care; those resources should follow a young person throughout the life of their case, from entry to step-down to exit. New York must examine which children can be stepped down to more appropriate levels of care and ensure they are supported as they reenter family-based care.

### Recommendations

- ▶ Support LDSS improving and increasing the training and recruitment of foster parents, and reducing barriers to certification:
  - Use data-driven recruitment and retainment strategies
  - Provide timely access to dedicated staff and peer support to foster parents
  - Support relationships between birth and foster families
  - Expedite licensing and training for kin to reduce barriers around training, certification, etc.
- ▶ Significantly reduce congregate care placements for children under 13 years of age.
- ▶ Provide timely access to physical and mental health services.
- ▶ Create a pilot project to reduce the number of children in residential care by transitioning youth from congregate care to families with essential supports.

## Reinvest in Children and Families

New York must effectively allocate resources to address racial inequity, strengthen families, and increase community resilience to smoothly transition into FFPSA implementation. The more entrenched children become in foster care, the more likely they are to “age out” of care without a family. Aging out results in concerning outcomes in education, employment, housing and justice-involvement and disproportionately impacts youth of color. New York State must reimagine, realign, and reinvest in children and families, implementing innovative reforms to child welfare that can prevent youth from exiting the system without the support of a loving family.

### Recommendations

- ▶ Maintain funding for preventive services.
- ▶ Restore funding for local kinship caregiver programs.
- ▶ Maintain State Family First Transition Fund.
- ▶ Issue a moratorium on “aging out” of foster care, including expedited reentry to care, for at least until 180 days after the pandemic state of emergency has been lifted.
- ▶ Enhance reimbursement for foster families during COVID-19.
- ▶ Move KinGAP to State Adoption Funding Line.
- ▶ Fund Foster Care Ombudsman.
- ▶ Support transitions from congregate care to family-based care.