



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.

Reinvest in Children and Families: 2021 Budget Priorities

Sustain New York county efforts to place more children in foster care with relatives or in family-based care through the Family First Transition Fund.

Why: Research is clear, loving, supportive families – whether birth, kin, foster or adoptive – are critical to the healthy development of all children. This is especially true for children who enter foster care – an experience preceded by the trauma of separation from family and followed by the uncertainty of new surroundings and new expectations. In these circumstances, it is well established that most children do better when placed with a relative or close family friend, or, if none are appropriate, in a supportive family-based setting.

New York State should continue the work begun in the 2019-20 budget to support and encourage counties to transition their practice to place more children in foster care with kin or in families, rather than in congregate care. Furthermore, so that new practices implemented with funds from the Transition Fund are continued, counties should reinvest a portion of any savings accrued into the child welfare system.

Recommendations: We urge New York State to maintain \$3 million in funding for the Family First Transition Fund in the budget. The Transition Fund enables counties to expand their efforts around kinship foster care, recruitment and retention, and other efforts to better support children in family-based foster care. To allow counties to be nimble in their efforts to prepare for Family First Implementation, and sustain efforts begun in the first two years of the Fund, we urge the State to:

1. Disburse funds up-front so that counties do not have to wait for reimbursement.
2. Open all three years of funding for disbursement at once, so that counties can confidently invest the funding in larger, longer-term commitments, such as dedicated personnel. This commitment will also enable the counties to begin to realize savings.
3. Allow counties to partner by pooling limited funds, and for example, to hire jointly. This option could be particularly useful for smaller counties which, under the funding formula, are eligible for annual funding that is less than a full-time salary (lowest allotment for Year 1 was \$30,000).
4. Redistribute unused funds to counties that have used their first round of disbursement.
5. Require that county plans demonstrate how efforts initiated under the Transition Fund will be sustained, including a requirement that counties reinvest a minimum of 20%-30% of any savings into the county's child welfare system.

Provide a path to permanency for more children in foster care across New York State with relatives and close family friends through KinGAP.

Why: The research makes clear that, when foster care becomes necessary, children do best when they are able to live with a family, and preferably with relatives or someone with whom they have an existing relationship. The Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP) provides a permanency arrangement for children in foster care with kin for whom neither adoption nor return to family are an option.

The current funding mechanism discourages use of KinGAP in many counties. As more children in foster care are placed with relatives, KinGAP will become an increasingly relevant and valuable resource for achieving permanency. By improving its funding mechanism, we can help to ensure that more children and families across the state can benefit from it.

Recommendation: In order to provide an avenue to permanency for more children in foster care with kin across the state, we urge the Legislature to establish an open-ended funding stream for KinGAP outside of the Foster Care Block Grant. This new funding line should not reduce funding for the Foster Care Block Grant.

Ensure the needs of kinship families are met by restoring funding for the Kinship Navigator and local kinship support programs.

Why: The statewide Kinship Navigator provides information, referral, advocacy and education services for kinship caregivers and kinship families. The 14 local kinship service providers cover 25 counties and provide case management, respite, and support groups. Both are administered by the Office of Children and Family Services and have the responsibility of meeting the needs of kinship families of kinship families who are not in foster care.

Recommendation: The 2021-22 Executive Budget provided \$322,000 for local kinship programs and \$210,000 for the Kinship Navigator, 5% less than what the Governor proposed last year.

1. In order to continue to support the kinship caregivers and families during these trying times, we urge the Legislature to restore funding by adding \$1.9 million for local programs and \$100,000 for the Kinship Navigator.
2. The December 2020 federal stimulus package (the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021) provided federal funds for up to 100% match of any money spent by New York State on kinship services. We urge the State to seize this opportunity to strengthen kinship support services, which have continued to provide kinship caregivers with supports while adapting to changes and challenges caused by COVID-19.

Reimagine Child Welfare: Keep preventive services strong in the coming budget.

Why: 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. These services include home visiting, housing assistance, child care, day care, homemaker services, parent training or parent aide, clinical services, transportation, job training, education, and emergency services (i.e. cash grants). They are designed to help families deal with any issues which might prevent them from taking care of their children on their own, and provide an environment where children can thrive.

Without these services, more families will be separated, with children placed in foster care. With New York families having endured a full year of unprecedented stressors, deprivation and loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for robust preventive services has perhaps never been greater.

Recommendation: The 2021-22 Executive Budget cut preventive services state share of funding by 5% (\$30.5 million), reducing the already lowered state share from 62% to about 59%. In order to continue to prevent families in crisis from needlessly entering foster care, we urge the Legislature to restore the 5% cuts to preventive services.

Realign New York's Approach to Foster Care: Legislative Priorities

Appropriate Levels of Care

Why: 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:

- Significantly reduce congregate care placements for children under 13 years of age.
- Create a pilot project to reduce the number of children in residential care by transitioning youth from congregate care to families with essential supports.

Oversight/Accountability

Why: New York needs a strong, effective and publicly accountable office that can mediate conflict, provide information and help support foster parents, kinship caregivers, biological parents and youth in foster care. This is crucial now, as New York prepares for implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, which is intended to reduce states' reliance on congregate care and promote family-based foster care and kinship care.

With a foster care ombudsman, New York will be able to emphasize family-based foster care for the majority of children because of the new office's responsibility to provide information about the foster care system to all who need it. An ombudsman's office will provide greater oversight of the foster care system and promote greater satisfaction for children and parents.

Recommendation: To better ensure that children in foster care, and their caregivers, are connected to the resources and supports to which they are entitled, New York should create a Foster Care Ombudsman. This office would be tasked with answering questions, educating individuals about foster care policies and regulations, receiving complaints, mediating and acting as a liaison between involved parties, searching for real-time resolution and following up to ensure that recommendations and resolution are achieved. Such an office would contribute to better support and accountability to children and families involved in the foster care system, thus leading to better long-term outcomes. The Ombudsman should be located within the Office of Children and Family Services, with a director appointed by an Independent Review Board.