Testimony submitted to the Assembly Committee on Children and Families on the State of Primary Prevention Services in New York State

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Schuyler Center thanks the chair and members of the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on the state of primary prevention services in New York State. The Schuyler Center is celebrating our 150th anniversary as a nonprofit organization dedicated to policy analysis and advocacy in support of public systems that meet the needs of disenfranchised populations, including people living in poverty.

Our priorities focus on strengthening families before they experience crises or trauma and preventing families from enduring hardships like involvement with the child welfare system. Schuyler Center leads and participates in several coalitions focused on child welfare, including the Child Welfare Financing Coalition, CHAMPS-NY, and the Fostering Youth Success Alliance. For more about Schuyler Center and our work, please visit our website www.scaany.org.

New York has an opportunity this year to make real strides toward transforming its approach to child welfare to one that is intentionally anti-racist and dedicated to improving family well-being and self-determination, increasing non-coercive support, and strengthening community-based services that meet the needs of New York’s diverse communities. This new vision of child welfare – better described as child and family well-being – should end the current practice of offering families “preventive” resources and services only after a report has been made to child protective services and a traumatic investigation has begun. Instead, child welfare should feature pathways for families to easily, voluntarily, and without shame or punishment, access the resources and supports they need. In September 2021, New York took the important step of fully implementing the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), which changes the paradigm in child welfare by providing more federal funds for preventive services. While significant, Family First largely maintains the practice of offering preventive supports only after a child protection investigation has begun, and only funds a narrow set of prevention strategies. Therefore, New York must take intentional, additional steps to ensure all New York parents, caregivers, families, and communities are healthy and stable by investing in primary prevention programs that reach them and can help prevent families from being flagged for a call to the State Central Register (SCR).

Importantly, primary prevention – which really means programs available to all families that support family and child well-being – should not be treated solely as a child welfare responsibility, or even an Office of Children and Families responsibility: it should be a full-state effort; a top priority of all agencies and all lawmakers. Below we lay out three areas of
opportunity New York should seize this year to improve the well-being of all the state’s children.

**Invest in family and child well-being**

Robust investment in and efficient, effective delivery of primary prevention services is a matter of racial justice. Racial disparities follow families through each step of the child protection and foster care process. Black families are disproportionately reported to the SCR every year (disparity index 1.91: moderate disparity), investigated by Child Protective Services (disparity index 2.32: moderate disparity), and separated, with Black children placed in foster care (disparity index 3.28: high disparity).³ New York must act with urgency to end these disparities by ensuring fewer New York families ever come into contact with the child protection and foster care system. True child welfare is achieved when families can access resources and supports long before they come into contact with the formal child welfare system.

Child poverty is a major driver of involvement in the child welfare system. Nearly half of families (47%) who have their children removed from their homes have trouble paying for basic necessities.⁵ Additionally, a contributing factor to the disproportionate representation of Black children in the child welfare system is the higher rate of poverty in Black communities – a disparity caused by historic, systemic and ongoing racism. Last year, New York passed the historic Child Poverty Reduction Act, and with it a commitment in law to cut child poverty in half in the next decade. New York convened the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council for the first time in October 2022, commencing the work of meeting this target. Cutting child poverty and providing families the resources and supports they need to achieve economic security is understood by many experts to be the single-most effective way to keep families safely together.

Approaches proven to reduce child poverty, including higher wages, housing, child care, more robust and equitable tax credits, more effective and equitable temporary financial assistance, and work supports, are also tremendously effective methods of primary prevention. Effective primary prevention requires the collaboration of multiple state agencies, including the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), the Department of Tax and Finance (DTF) and the Department of Labor (DOL).

**Strengthen and expand the Empire State Child Tax Credit**

Among the most effective ways to improve child and family well-being is to ensure families have the financial resources they need to meet their needs. One strategy proven to increase and stabilize family income is strengthening and expanding refundable tax credits. Study after study has shown these credits to improve child outcomes in all aspects of their lives: higher high school graduation rates; better health; fewer child welfare interactions.⁶ Perhaps the best case study just occurred when, in the midst of the pandemic, the federal government temporarily expanded the federal child tax credit by making the credit much larger (up from $2,000 maximum to $3,600 for young children; $3,000 for older children), omitting minimum income thresholds and phase-ins, and making it fully refundable, which means it directed the most funds to the lowest income families. This policy was credited with single-handedly cutting child poverty by 30% during the months that families were receiving a portion of the credit on a
monthly basis. Also of note is how families used the child tax credit: they used it to buy food, clothing and school supplies, pay their utility bills, and cover the rent.

Unfortunately, the federal expanded child credit expired. Now, inflation is striking a hard blow to low- and middle-income families with children who spend a high proportion of their household income on food and gas and other necessities. The coming winter is going to present tremendous challenges for many lower-income New York families. Further, food price inflation is higher than it has been in 4 decades, coinciding with a reduction in federal food supports (like free school lunches for all children). It is critical that New York take action this year and strengthen its state refundable credits to provide meaningful support to the state’s children, particularly those in families experiencing poverty, starting with the state’s child tax credit.

This year, New York should strengthen New York’s child tax credit by first and foremost, ending its harmful and illogical exclusion of young children by securing a robust credit for children under age four. It should also restructure the credit so the highest credit goes to the lowest income families – by ending state’s regressive minimum income requirement and phase-in, increase the credit amount to provide families meaningful support, and ensure the credit continues to be available to as many immigrant families as possible.

**Strengthen and expand child care**

High quality child care is proven to strengthen families and improve child well-being in many ways. It enables parents to work, attain an education or training or take care of caregiving, health or other issues. It provides children with early learning opportunities and socialization. It provides parents respite from the demands of child rearing. Unfortunately, due to decades of underinvestment, child care is not accessible for many New York families due to high costs (average annual tuition for an infant in a child care center is more than $16,000), lack of availability, and the many bureaucratic hurdles a family must overcome to gain access to assistance.

This year, New York should take next steps toward stabilizing and transforming child care by investing in the essential child care workforce, and ensuring all the state’s children can access child care, regardless of immigration status. While New York achieved historic, foundational steps forward on the path to universal child care in the 2022 Legislative Session - including raising income eligibility from 200% to 300% of the federal poverty level - the promise of significant expanded access will not be realized if New York does not immediately invest in the child care workforce. According to a recent report by The Children’s Agenda, between January 2020-July 2022, 3,524 child care programs closed resulting in “1,326 fewer [child care] programs” and a statewide loss of capacity by about 10,550 spots compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. One reason for this sharp decline in child care programs and capacity is due to an increasingly severe staffing shortage. The median wage for child care workers – made up almost entirely of women (96%); predominantly people of color (56%) – is $31,880, one of the lowest among all professions. Ninety-six percent of job categories identified by the Department of Labor paid higher wages than the child care sector. This year, New York should create a child care workforce compensation program to provide wage supplements to the essential child care
workforce while the NYS Child Care Availability Task Force develops a permanent compensation scale and structure.

New York should also create a state-financed Excluded Families Child Care Subsidies fund to provide child care subsidies to immigrant families whose children are barred from accessing federally-financed subsidies on the same terms as other families. This is critically important to pull immigrant families into the economic mainstream so they can achieve self-sufficiency, help address the state’s workforce shortage, and grow our economy. All New York families need and deserve child care in all corners of the state.

Conclusion

New York has an opportunity now to make innovative changes and investments in prevention services. The implementation of Family First is the first step in investing in services that center family strengthening, but it is clear that Family First is not enough. New York’s families and communities need robust primary prevention services that will support their health and stability, which is what children need to thrive.

Thank you. We appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony and look forward to continuing to work with you to strengthen New York’s children, families, and communities.

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8 The Century Foundation. September 2, 2021. The Case for Child Care and Early Learning for All: Healthy Child Development and School Readiness. https://tcf.org/content/commentary/case-child-care-early-learning-healthy-child-development-school-readiness/?gclid=CjwKCAjw-rOaBhA9EiwAUkLV4p6y539N1zlsCHvPHkeigk-25d3cIVy5PqD_Eibd-b81h6jR_zz-NRoCTlcQAvD_BwE&session=1