



NJ Department of Children and Families Budget Testimony, FY 2023
Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer
May 4, 2022

Good morning, Madame Chair, Mr. Vice Chair, and members of the Assembly Budget Committee. It's my honor to appear before your committee representing the New Jersey Department of Children and Families and the FY 2023 NJ DCF Budget.

Joining me today are members of my leadership team who will be available to assist me in responding to your questions should it be required.

Before I begin, I would just like to take the opportunity to publicly thank the members of this Committee – and the members of the Legislature – for all that you have done to support the New Jersey Department of Children and Families through the years.

As you will likely recall, the Department was created in 2006 as the State's first cabinet-level agency devoted solely to supporting children and families. Establishing DCF as a standalone department of state government was part of New Jersey's modified settlement agreement in response to the Charlie and Nadine H. v. Whitman federal lawsuit.

Earlier this year, two decades of reform efforts were rewarded as we announced, with the support of the court, the federal monitor, and the plaintiff's attorney, that it was the beginning of the end to federal oversight for New Jersey's child welfare system.

This is a milestone moment for child welfare in New Jersey, and one that could not have been accomplished without critical support from the Legislature and Governor Murphy.

Many of you have joined us on this reform journey through the years and have championed our department, but I want to specifically thank Senate President Nick Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin for sponsoring recent legislation to ensure a key component of accountability and transparency will be in place to facilitate our exit from the Sustainability and Exit Plan. I believe their introduction of this legislation is assurance enough for the Plaintiff and the Courts that New Jersey is committed to sustaining our efforts over the last two decades, and I look forward to working with the legislature to see this bill across the finish line.

After 20 years of hard work, we have reformed our system from one lacking basic structure, statewide coordination, and adequate resources to a national leader among child- and family-serving systems.

We have reduced caseloads to a manageable level, developed data systems and self-monitoring capacity, and we have prioritized evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies to prevent child abuse and neglect before it even occurs, through family strengthening frameworks and proactive supports.

We have reduced the use of out-of-home placement as a primary safety intervention. At the start of our reform efforts, in 2003, we had approximately 13,000 children in out-of-home placement. Today, that number stands at just about 3,000.

We are safely supporting children and families at home, meeting their challenges together rather than apart. And our safety data suggests that this strategy is working – New Jersey is among the jurisdictions nationally with the lowest rates of maltreatment and the lowest rates of repeat maltreatment.

When we do have to rely on an out-of-home placement to preserve the immediate safety of the child, more and more, we're turning to kinship resource placements. In 2021, for the first time in our system's history, we had more children placed with kin than in traditional foster care placements – resulting in reduced trauma from out-of-home placement, and better outcomes for the children in care including a higher likelihood that siblings are placed together, higher rates of reunification, and more timely permanency.

To be clear, the success of the last 20 years did not come overnight. This is an extension of the work that has been performed by my predecessors in the role of Commissioner, the various Administrations, through the support of legislators along the way, and most importantly, through the hard work and dedication of those who serve on the front lines at DCF.

In particular, I want to highlight the frontline workers who have been stewards of our reform efforts.

The members of our Team DCF are compassionate, professional, dedicated individuals who often put their own needs aside to serve families on their caseloads.

During the early days of the pandemic, as the rest of state government and the private sector shifted to remote work, we continued to have staff in the field, providing in-person support for the highest priority cases.

I've remarked previously about how truly privileged I am to lead this team. They are a very special group of public servants. And the exit from federal oversight is their achievement more than anybody else's.

While we're excited about exit from the federal Sustainability and Exit Plan, we have absolutely no intentions of becoming stagnant as a system.

In the last four years, and throughout the COVID pandemic, we have made progress in meeting the elements of the SEP not through focusing obsessively on benchmarks and metrics, but rather by focusing on the desired outcomes for our families.

This focus on families – on respecting their voice and honoring their strengths, on engaging them in the solutions to their problems, rather than simply demanding compliance– this is the direction for the future of NJ DCF.

It's about recognizing and appreciating the role that reform has had on elevating our department to a position as a national leader in child welfare, while striving for more, because it's not enough to be best in the nation, if NJ families continue to have unmet needs.

It's about forging a new way and transforming our system from a child welfare system to a child and family wellbeing system.

And while this year marks a milestone for DCF in overcoming our past system challenges, from here, we will continue to focus on becoming the system that we want to be, that our NJ families tell us we have to be.

We have many exciting things happening at DCF right now that align with this future vision for our system.

We're developing an infrastructure that supports our department's expanding portfolio, one that has shifted from punitive to supportive and protective of families, across generations and from infancy through adulthood, and provides solid administrative supports for staff in the field.

We're taking a holistic approach to supporting families, and we've launched new offices around Housing, Family Preservation and Reunification, and an Office of Monitoring to ensure that our department's procured services are providing quality services to NJ families.

We're leading the way on our work around Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, and the impact that adversity in childhood can have into adulthood.

Through the Office of Resilience, we're expanding the conversation on ACEs, working within the community and with our system partners to develop an understanding around the intergenerational role of trauma, and how supportive, caring, and compassionate adults can help disrupt the trajectory of ACEs and promote healing.

Over the past year, the OOR and community partners have provided training to 2,400 individuals throughout the State on ACEs and, to date, have developed a network of 200 trainers across a variety of disciplines who can continue this important work.

We recognize that the past two years have created challenges for families, for children and youth like nothing we have experienced in our lifetime.

When families face high levels of stress, maltreatment rates tend to rise. But when families are thriving – when stressors are met with solutions – you see a reduction in maltreatment rates.

Throughout the pandemic, DCF has worked to help families reduce the stress, access needed services and meet their material needs.

Through our Division on Women, we have maintained and increased state and federal investment in services and capacity for survivors of sexual violence and we have expanded culturally specific programs for the survivors of domestic violence.

It is common knowledge that children and youth are experiencing emotional and behavioral challenges like never before.

Through the Children's System of Care and our Mobile Response and Stabilization Services, month over month, we are consistently setting and shattering utilization and dispatch records.

As you know, the Children's System of Care is New Jersey's safety net for children and youth experiencing behavioral or emotional challenges, substance use issues, or children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Services and therapeutic supports are contracted out to providers and offered to the children and their families, regardless of a family's insurance status or ability to pay.

In-community and congregate care behavioral health providers have been hit hard by the pandemic and the ensuing “Great Resignation,” but DCF continues to support our providers as they navigate workforce challenges, assisting and supporting them through recruitment and retention efforts, and creating opportunities for collaborative recruitment for hard-to-fill positions.

We have been able to stabilize our System of Care through timely investment of over \$100 million from the Murphy Administration over the last two budget years.

Through this investment, we have been able to increase rates for individual behavioral and developmental health services offered through CSOC on average 43%, achieving parity with the adult system. And while we are continuing to work to increase capacity and meet the needs of families in New Jersey, we have been able to avoid program and provider closures during the pandemic.

It should be noted that without the Governor’s and the Legislature’s support to rebalance and modernize rates – for the first time in over 15 years – New Jersey would be in a far worse position that it currently is in. We would have lost providers, and programs would have closed.

While I do not want to understate the seriousness of the mental health crisis affecting New Jersey and the rest of the nation, it’s due to the Governor’s and your critical investment in stabilizing our system that New Jersey is weathering this crisis better than some of our neighboring states.

During the past 9 months, we have been working to evolve our School Linked Services to meet the clinical and social and emotional needs of students more effectively, and within every school and district across our state.

The DCF Division of Family and Community Partnerships has convened a statewide workgroup that will offer recommendations for the future of School Linked Services in New Jersey, because the emotional and mental health of our teens and young adults is of the utmost importance.

And in support of maternal and infant physical and mental health, we have been actively engaged in building and implementing the state’s Universal Newborn Home Visiting program, to provide every family with the best start possible.

In August 2021, Governor Murphy signed legislation sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, Senator Joe Vitale, and Assemblywoman Shanique Speight to make New Jersey only the second state in the nation to offer universal home visiting.

Home Visiting services allow families to have access to appropriate postpartum healthcare and screening, parenting resources, referrals to early intervention and family-supportive services and has been proven to reduce incidents of maltreatment.

As only the second state in the nation to adopt Universal Home Visiting, we’re taking a planful and deliberate approach, to ensure that we get it right. We’re writing the playbook for other jurisdictions behind us to follow, and I’m confident that we have the right partners to make this program a success. This is an all-of-government effort that will ensure that the Legislature’s and the Governor’s investment in Universal Home Visiting is maximized, and that every family will be able to benefit from this program.

From the little bit that I shared, you can hear how much amazing work is happening within the Department of Children and Families right now.

We are evolving our practice and meeting families' needs. We're being guided by data and engaging in thoughtful analysis of our outcomes. We are creating the future of child welfare while responding to the present challenges in our system.

All of this is possible through the support of the Governor and Legislature Together, we can – and we have – achieved fantastic results for the children, youth, and families across New Jersey.

I'm happy to answer any questions that you have about our work or proposed budget.