



**Jess Dannhauser  
Commissioner**

**Testimony to the New York City Council  
General Welfare and Finance Committees  
May 8, 2023**

**Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget Hearing**

Good afternoon, Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Brannan and members of the City Council General Welfare and Finance Committees. My name is Jess Dannhauser, the Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services, and I am pleased to be here today to testify about the impact of the Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget and to share updates about the work we are doing to support New York City's children, youth and families. I am joined today by Winette Saunders, our First Deputy Commissioner, and Margaret Pletnikoff, the Deputy Commissioner for Finance.

ACS remains committed to building a City that is more safe, just and equitable for children, youth and families. Despite the need for ACS to be efficient and implement a 4% CTL budget reduction to help the City maintain a balanced budget, ACS is continuing to build on our progress and will continue to be able to do so without negatively impacting the services and supports we provide to families. My testimony today will focus on our progress and the thoughtful decisions we have made to reduce spending with the least amount of impact for New Yorkers in need.

### **Keeping Children Safe and Supporting Families with Family-Driven Solutions**

Keeping children safe, while supporting families, is our core mission. ACS's child protection specialists respond to nearly 60,000 reports accepted by the NY Statewide Central Register (SCR) of alleged child abuse or neglect each year. In each of those instances, ACS child protection specialists (CPS) are required to assess the safety of the children and, when necessary, connect families to supports or services. In 2022, ACS sought court intervention in just 8% of the investigations and just 3% of investigations led to a child's removal and placement in foster care.

Child welfare work is nuanced and complex, as every family's situation is unique. CPS need support, training, supervision and manageable caseloads to be able to make quality assessments. We are regularly hiring and training new classes; 122 new CPS started this past February, and we have another class of 130 new CPS starting this month. This is essential so that we can maintain caseloads well-below the national standard—ACS's caseload average is approximately 10 while national standards range from 12-15.

Our CPS are highly-trained individuals and we have enhanced our training over the past several years based on lessons learned through our comprehensive quality management processes. Our new simulated training site for child welfare workers provides CPS training in mock apartments and a mock courtroom, which gives CPS a more realistic sense of what it's like to conduct home visits during investigations and interview parents and children. At the sites, parents and children are played by actors who role-play elements of actual cases that have come to our attention. We also deploy Staff Development Coordinators in Child Protection borough offices to bridge the transition for new staff from initial training to practice, and coaches to support supervisors and managers to help them reinforce the extensive training programs. We have also expanded our coaching and quality assurance efforts through ASAP (Accelerated Safety Assessment Protocol), which examines child safety practice during open investigations, involving children at elevated risk of physical or sexual abuse. The quality assurance team reviews open cases in real time, collaborating with child protection staff when safety interventions are needed, and providing coaching to CPS to help strengthen casework practice.

At the same time that we have expanded and strengthened our coaching and quality assurance mechanisms in high-risk cases, we are working with Deputy Mayor Williams-Isom on a city-wide strategy to reduce the number of unnecessary child welfare investigations and replace reports, where appropriate, with upstream family supports. We believe this is how we can reduce the number of families experiencing the formal child protection system, prevent child maltreatment, and help families feel comfortable and safe enough to ask for and receive help.

A key component of our work to “narrow the front door” and reduce unnecessary calls to the SCR is educating mandated reporters on the ways to provide support to families without making an unnecessary report to the SCR. This past summer, ACS worked with the Department of Education (DOE) to revise their annual training, which we then jointly provided to staff from over 1,800 DOE schools. The training focuses on helping DOE staff understand the impact of making a report, the need to focus on objective facts and be aware of implicit bias when deciding whether to report, and how to access resources available to families citywide without making a report. Later this week, I am meeting with all of the superintendents to reinforce this important message. We are also tailoring and expanding this work to other city agencies with mandated reporters, such as the Department of Homeless Services, and we are working more closely with medical staff.

We are also continuing to expand CARES, our non-investigative child protection response to low-risk cases referred to ACS from the SCR. From 2021 to 2022, there was a 72% increase in the number of cases with CARES responses. In March 2023, we created two more CARES units so that we now have 48 CARES units, and we

anticipate creating an additional 16 units before the end of 2023. In CARES, specially trained child protective staff assess the safety of the children and then partner with the family to identify their needs, empower the family to make decisions that address their needs and the needs of their children, and connect families to appropriate services, all without the need for a formal child welfare investigation and determination that would remain on someone's child protection record.

### **Strengthening Prevention and Foster Care Services for Families**

ACS contracts with community-based non-profit providers for both child welfare prevention and foster care services. I want to take a moment to thank our provider partners for all of the work that their staff do on behalf of children and families.

With regard to prevention services, we have been taking important steps to move services upstream so that families can access the services long-before there is a need for a traditional child welfare response or intervention. After surveying thousands of families who has participated in prevention services, the 2022 annual Family Experience Survey once again found that families were overwhelmingly satisfied with the services: approximately 94% of survey participants said they were happy with the prevention services their families received and 90% of participants said that they would recommend these services to a friend and/or family member.

ACS currently contracts for approximately 12,500 child welfare prevention slots. There is no waitlist and families in need can be connected to services in their community. As proposed in the Executive Budget, ACS has conducted a preventive

services contract re-estimate and we are able to realize a savings of \$3.2 million CTL (\$8.5 million gross) through a careful review of utilization rates and spending patterns.

ACS looks forward to continuing to work with our foster care and residential providers as we enter into new contracts July 1<sup>st</sup>. The Executive Budget includes \$47.2 million for ACS to fund the increased foster parent and adoption subsidies to the new rates, which while appreciated remain an unfunded mandate from the state.

This past year, we have continued to see our work on behalf of children in foster care move in the right direction. Over half of children entering foster care are placed with family or close friends (kin) and the percentage of youth in care placed with kin continues to increase and is now 45%. In addition, the number of children in foster care is at all-time low and the percentage of children in foster care who are long stayers has decreased.

In FY 23, ACS was able to leverage additional funds to support strengthened foster care services. Service enhancements included the launch of a new trauma-informed training for foster parents (TRIPP) and the integration of Parent Advocates into our Enhanced Family Foster Care program.

We have also seen a great deal of success in our implementation of initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for youth in foster care, such as Fair Futures and College Choice.

In FY23, the Fair Futures Program served a total of 3,451 young people ages 11- to 26-years-old, a significant increase from the 2,946 youth served in FY22. Of the youth served in FY23, 2,206 were coached, including an additional 262 youth in the

older age range of 18- to 26-years-old. To date, in FY23 Fair Futures funded over 400 additional staff to provide coaching, mentoring, and support to youth.

Launched in July 2022, College Choice enhanced ACS's support for youth in foster care attending college by giving youth more flexibility and options. As part of College Choice, ACS pays for tuition and room and board fees that are not covered by financial aid at whatever college the youth chooses to attend. ACS also provides youth with \$60 per day to cover food and other living and college-related expenses, while they are attending school and for up to 6 months after graduation. Youth also receive coaching, tutoring, and career counseling from The New York Foundling and or Fair Futures. There are currently 300 youth enrolled in college and accessing College Choice benefits, up from 200 youth in FY22. We are happy to announce we currently have 25 youth graduating from college in May.

### **Supporting Families and Communities**

We remain focused on keeping children safe by ensuring their families have the resources that they need to thrive. Much of this work is done in collaboration with other city agencies, as meeting the needs of children and families really does take a village.

Since our last budget hearing, many of the first nine new Family Enrichment Centers (FECs) have opened their doors and all have begun working deeply with community members. We are so pleased with the community collaboration and engagement we have seen with these new FECs and we are excited to watch them grow into the community treasures the three original FECs have become in their respective neighborhoods.

These past few months we have also made important efforts to prevent unintentional childhood injuries related to cannabis-infused edibles and window guards by focusing on education and outreach to families and child-serving professionals.

Following an increase in the number of children being treated in NYC emergency rooms due to unintentional exposures to cannabis-infused edibles, which are often made to closely resemble popular brand name candy and snacks with nearly identical packaging, ACS launched a new safety campaign aimed at educating caregivers on the need to keep cannabis-infused products locked away and out of reach of children, and to call the NYC Poison Center if they suspect that a child has eaten something containing cannabis.

The week of March 20<sup>th</sup> was National Poison Prevention Week and we collaborate with partners to host Information and Resource Fairs, including at a licensed Cannabis dispensary. At the fairs, we shared information about the risks and symptoms of poisoning in children; offered guidance on what to do if a child has been exposed to medicines, household chemicals, cannabis, or other poisons; and provided lock boxes to support New Yorkers in keeping medicines and poisons locked up and out of reach of children.

### **Expanding Access to Child Care Assistance**

We know that access to child care is essential for families. This past year, we have made tremendous progress in increasing the number of children receiving child care assistance, including for the first time-ever for undocumented children through FY23 funding for Promise NYC.



We have dramatically expanded the number of families getting help paying for child care. Today, compared to a year ago, 11,000 more low-income children are enrolled in care with the support of a voucher. And we are working hard to ensure families living in the highest need areas understand and can access the full range of child care options. This is why we focused outreach to the 17 community districts across the City with the highest poverty and highest unemployment. Since Mayor Adams announced his Child Care Blueprint this past summer, the number of low-income children living in these CDs using a voucher to attend child care has increased by 126%.

We have also taken steps to stabilize child care providers by working with the State to increase the maximum reimbursement rate for providers and then we made it easier for providers to apply for the higher rates. So far, over 4,000 NYC child care providers have been approved for higher rates. We also streamlined the process for child care providers to sign up to serve children receiving vouchers, substantially reducing the amount of paperwork involved. We hope efforts like this will increase our partnerships with providers and in turn, give families more options.

Working with our city partners, we have also made it easier to apply for child care assistance by making the child care application the first city service application available through the new MyCity Portal. Through MyCity, families can apply for child care assistance available through multiple agencies, and easily upload their supporting documents.

As part of the Executive Budget, ACS is able to realize \$7.2 million CTL savings by moving eligible families from SCCF city-funded vouchers to federally funded CCBG

vouchers. Importantly, the eligibility requirements for both SCCF and CCBG vouchers are the same.

### **Supporting the Success of Justice-Involved Youth**

ACS is committed to providing young people across the juvenile justice continuum with opportunities and skills they need to thrive. We have continued to see tremendous progress in the past few months.

Despite the increase in the number of youth in our secure detention facilities, we are seeing the number of incidents decrease. At the end of April, the Nunez Monitors (a group of juvenile justice experts that ACS voluntarily agreed to work with in support of our reform efforts) released their most recent report on Horizon and found that “ACS has made important strides in reducing the rate of violence at Horizon.” The Monitors recognized our new and stronger leadership, the “significant reductions” in youth violence, and the substantial efforts to improve facility functioning and provide an array of programming to the youth. We are taking important steps to increase the staffing levels at both Horizon and Crossroads, and in the first quarter of FY23 we brought 78 new Youth Development Specialists (YDS) on board.

While the census in secure detention is higher than last year, detention admissions are actually down 18% since the implementation of Raise the Age, and 2022 admissions were lower than 2019 (pre-pandemic). This increase in census is largely due to the increased length of pre-adjudication stays in detention, often due to the complex legal cases many of the youth are facing.

Since our last budget hearing, we issued recommended awards for two important programs that will help connect youth to programs and services aimed at helping them

thrive. First, with the Alternative to Detention (ATD) contracts moving from MOCJ to ACS on July 1<sup>st</sup>, ACS selected CASES for Manhattan and the Bronx, Justice Innovation Center for Queens and Staten Island and Good Shepherd Services for Brooklyn. These new contract awards will strengthen the ATD programs by adding a court liaison to connect with the young people in the courtroom, develop individualized supervision plans tailored to each youth's needs and goals, offer workforce development, internships and stipends, and connect youth to Fair Futures coaches and support. We also recommended Children's Village and Bard College for awards for our new workforce development programming. Through these new contracts, the providers will offer career exploration, work readiness, vocational education and training, college access and life skills for justice involved young people. These contracts also include the expansion of Fair Futures to youth in detention.

The Executive Budget proposes to continue to right-size the Close to Home placement system for youth sentenced to placement by the Family Court. ACS will realize savings (\$3.9 million CTL in FY24 and \$4.0 million in the outyears) by closing one of our Limited Secure Placement (LSP) sites; the site has capacity for 16 girls but has not served youth for over a year. Its closure will not impact our ability to ensure safety for young people and the community.

ACS is also required to reimburse the state OCFS for the cost of juvenile justice placements of AOs and JOs in their facilities. ACS regularly has a large annual surplus of these allocated funds, so the Executive Budget proposes to reduce these funds by \$7.1 million, continuing to leave us with over \$15 million should we need the funding. For example, in FY23, we estimate reimbursing the state for the placement of 75 youth.

## **The Executive Budget**

The Executive Budget for FY24 proposes to fund ACS at \$2.72 billion, including \$855.6 million of City Tax Levy. This includes \$103.9 million in new needs for FY 24, to fund the increase rate for child care providers (\$56.8 million) and foster parent/adoptive parent subsidies (\$47.2 million). The Executive Budget also includes the funds for ACS to meet the collective bargaining agreement between the City and DC37. Many ACS staff, such as CPS and YDS, are hard-working members of DC37 and we are grateful to the Mayor, OLR and DC37 for their recent contract agreement that recognizes their critical work.

Like most city agencies, ACS's FY24 PEG target was 4%, or approximately \$33 million of City Tax Levy, in FY24 and baselined thereafter. ACS took a careful and thoughtful approach to identifying efficiencies and other ways to reduce our budget in a manner that would not have a negative impact on the children, youth and families we serve. In addition to the re-estimates for prevention services, Close to Home, OCFS placements and SCCF vouchers previously discussed, ACS has also proposed to reduce our budget for DCP Family Court Mental Health due to historic underspending and the Cumberland substance use disorder program MOU, which was not being used by ACS clients.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I want to thank the staff of ACS and our provider agencies for the work they do each and every day, on behalf of the children, youth and families and New York City. While this Executive Budget required ACS to look closely at our spending, I



am confident that our proposed budget for FY24 will help us to continue to move ACS in the right direction as we support children and families.