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COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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February 20, 2025

Start: 1:10 p.m.

Recess: 4:05 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - Committee Room, 14th
Floor

B E F O R E: Althea V. Stevens,
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Gale A. Brewer

Rita C. Joseph

Linda Lee

Julie Menin

Chi A. Ossè

Nantasha M. Williams

2 A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

3 Jess Danhausser
4 ACS Commissioner

5 Ina Mendez
6 Deputy Commissioner, Family Permanency Services

7 Dr. Sophine Charles
8 COFCCA

9 Fernando Canteli De Castro
10 Self

11 Everson Ladson
12 Self

13 Lyn Lamadrid
14 Self

15 Galloway
16 Ali Forney Center

17 Kearny Coghlan
18 Self

19 Sharon Brown
20 Self

21 Charles Budnick
22 Self

23 Pedro Gonzalez
24 Self

25 Davene Roseborough
Self

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Check, check. This is a microphone check for the Committee on Children and Youth, located in the 14th Floor, recorded on February 20, 2025 by Pat Coughna(SP?). Check, check.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon, good afternoon. Welcome to the New York City Council hearing on the Committee on Children and Youth. At this time, please silence all electronics and do not approach the dais. I repeat, please do not approach the dais. If you need to fill out a testimony slip, you may do so at the back of the room. If you want to fill out one online, you can fill it out at testimony@council.nyc.gov. That is testimony@council.nyc.gov.

Any further questions or concerns please contact the Sergeant. Chair, you may begin.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: [GAVEL] Good afternoon and welcome to today's hearing on evaluating New York City's Foster Care System. I am Althea Stevens, Chair of Children and Youth Committee. The purpose of today's hearing is to take a comprehensive look at services and policies that shape the extremes of children in foster care. When a child is placed in foster care, they often are already facing

inadmissible hardships, instability at home, and separation from their families and uncertainty about their futures. It is our duty to ensure that the system that's meant to protect them is actually providing safety, stability and support they need to thrive.

Today's hearing, we'll be exploring the range of critical issues, including placement stability, the role of kinship care, residential foster care, and long term outcomes for youth aging out of the system. I will also examine the financial and structural challenges providers are facing, particularly as they struggle with rising costs, staffing shortages and growing needs among the children they serve. Additionally, we must consider the impact of federal funding uncertainties, whether ACS is doing to encourage a secure alternative, funding streams to maintain essential services.

We will also be looking at the role of supportive services. Programs like Fair Futures, which provide coaching and mentoring to youth in foster care and those who have aged out have proven to be valuable lifelines. Is this program reaching enough young people? Similarly, ACS Parent Empowerment Program,

PEP, which embodies parent advocates with lived experience in case planning units is a promising step towards supporting families and improving outcomes. But we need to examine its implementation and whether parent advocates are being given the resources and compensation they need to be successful in their roles.

Additionally, we need to look at aging out of foster care. We must ask whether the city is doing enough to support youth and those transitioning to adulthood. Are they receiving the housing vouchers they need? Do they have access to education, employment and mental health services to build independence and successful lives?

Too often we hear that from residential care providers that essential items like prom dresses, laptops for college or emergency funds for students living away from home are not included in the budget and must be funded through private donations. We need to ensure that our young people are not being left behind due to bureaucracy and gaps.

Finally, we must hold ACS accountable for commitments outlined in their five year strategic plan. The agency had pressed to strengthen kin

placement, improved child assessments, expand access to Medicare base mental health services, and stabilize a workforce through better pay and contracts flexibility.

Today, we will be asking how the commitments are being met, what obstacles remain and what steps are being taken to ensure the best possible outcomes for the children and families in the foster care system.

At the heart of this hearing, it is a simple but urgent question. Are we truly doing everything we can to ensure children in foster care are receiving the stability, support, opportunities that they deserve? New York has a duty to care for its most vulnerable children and we must be relentless in making sure that the duality is fulfilled. I look forward to hearing from ACS providers and individuals who with lived experience who can help us better understand what is working, where are we falling short, and what must be done to build a stronger, more efficient foster care system.

Finally, I would like to thank my Committee Staff Christina and Elizabeth for all their hard work to prepare for this hearing and all of the A-Team back in District 16. And at this time, I would like to

recognize my colleagues, Council Member Brewer, Council Member Ossè, and Council Member Lee.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Hello, please raise your right hand. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth before this Committee and to respond honestly to Council Member questions? Thank you. You may begin.

JESS DANNHAUSER: Good afternoon. My name is Jess Dannhauser. I am the Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services. I am joined today by Ina Mendez, the Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services. Thank you to Chair Stevens and the members of the Children and Youth Committee for holding today's oversight hearing regarding New York City's Foster Care System and thank you for your remarks Chair Stevens. We share the urgency.

We are intently focused on the safety, permanency and well-being of the children and youth in the care and custody of ACS, and we appreciate the opportunity to share more about the work ACS and our foster care provider agencies do each and every day to support children and strengthen families.

Currently, there are about 6,500 children in foster care, down from 13,000 a decade ago and nearly 40,000 in late 1990's. Our goal for every child and family we come into contact with is to tailor our response to the individual needs of that family. Our child protective responses, along with our continuum of prevention services, have enabled us to greatly reduce our reliance on foster care as an intervention.

At the same time, when there's a child who cannot remain safely at home, we must take steps to seek family court approval for the removal of the child, place the child in foster care and then provide high quality services and supports so the children can safely return to their families. Our efforts have resulted in recent improvements in safe reunification. When that is not achievable, we work to achieve permanency for the child through adoption or kinship guardianship.

As the foster care census has declined, we have taken important steps to strengthen those services in foster care. We have greatly reduced the use of residential care so less than ten percent of youth in foster care are in residential placements, and at the

same time, we have been leading the state in our rate of placing children in kinship foster homes, with about 45 percent of children in care currently residing with family or close family friends.

The safety of children in foster care is a top priority. Our efforts have resulted in important reductions in maltreatment in foster homes. We have strengthened foster parent recruitment strategies, infused trauma-informed training for foster parents and created a trauma informed environment at the Children's Center, where some children first enter foster care.

We've also strengthened support for young people in care, including major expansions, as you mentioned, in programs like Fair Futures and College Choice, so that youth and care can thrive into their adulthoods. Today, approximately one-third of children who come into foster care reunify with their families in that first year, and the rates at which the children achieve timely permanency are steadily improving each year.

As our outcomes continue to move in a positive direction and our new contracts with providers were being implemented, we developed a five year plan with

four key pillars: Meet the need, the present need with sufficient foster home capacity; focus on family; create safety and stability; and ensure child and youth success and improve wellbeing.

Notably, the voices of the youth in care, youth who have been in care, and the families and foster families of these children continue to shape the work we do every day to continuously evolve to better meet the needs of children, youth, and families involved in the foster care system.

The remainder of my testimony will focus on these four pillars. When a child is placed in foster care, ACS strives to ensure that children are safe and receiving the highest quality of care. The foster parents, both kinship and non-kinship are receiving the supports they need and that parents receive the services, supports and family visits they need to safely reunify. Our new contracts for family based foster care, residential care, and the Supervised Independent Living Program began in July 2023, and enabled us to right-size capacity to fit with our current needs while enhancing the foster care program in a number of ways. When children and youth come into care, we prioritize placements with relatives or

close family friends because we know that being placed with someone familiar helps reduce trauma, improve stability and aids in reunification efforts. When kin or fictive kin are not found initially, children are typically placed in non-kinship family foster homes. For family-based foster care, we created the Enhanced Family Foster Care model, which blended our prior regular family foster care and family-based therapeutic foster care into one program that provides more therapeutic supports for children who need them, so that socio-therapists, also called behavioral specialists, are part of every case planning team. EFFC also uses a new more robust, therapeutically responsive foster parent training known as TRIPP so foster parents can respond to the need of children and youth in care who have experienced trauma and have more complex needs. ACS works closely with our foster care providers to focus on identifying and supporting kin; recruiting and training foster parents; and providing robust supports to foster parents, so we have high quality certified foster homes for the children in our care.

We are also focused on enhancing case planning staff's capacity to assess for safety and risk, while

also focusing on caregivers' readiness for reunification. Case planners connect parents to services and other supports, all with the goal of reducing children's length of stay in care and increasing safe and lasting reunification. The new model that you mentioned for foster care includes Parents Empowering Parents, which provides Parent Advocates systemwide so that every parent working to reunify has the help of a parent advocate with lived experience. Foster care agencies also have more flexible resources to support hiring staff, such as kinship engagement specialists and case aides to help with family visiting.

For some youth, residential placements that can address their therapeutic needs are the most appropriate placement. As I mentioned earlier, less than ten percent of children are in residential placement. ACS and our foster care providers operate a variety of specialized residential care programs designed to meet the specific needs of youth needing this level of care. All of these placements are intended to be temporary, with children stepping down to lower levels of care and ultimately returning to

their families or achieving permanency with another family.

As part of our new contracts, we added the SILP program to our continuum. We brought it back to our continuum, which are apartment style placements for older youth ages 18-21. A SILP is a 12-18 month transitional program for youth who are ready to live on their own, while receiving ongoing support, services, and supervision from their foster care agency. Youth in SILPs are provided with supportive services, which encourage personal growth and development and empower them to make mature and healthy decisions.

Families is at the heart of all of our work. When children and youth need to come into foster care, we work closely with our providers so that each individual and their family members receive the services they need to address the issues that led to the placement. All children and families in foster care have access to trauma-informed mental health and supportive services. We prioritize keeping children in their school of origin so that they can maintain their connection to the community, teachers and friends, whenever safe and possible.

We also prioritize Family Time aka family visiting, as this is a both critical for reunification and maintaining bonds and connections. The ACS visiting unit regularly provides training for providers on how to creatively arrange Family Time so children and parents are able to spend as much quality time together as possible. ACS also operates the Children of Incarcerated Parents Program, known as CHIPP, which brings children to foster care to visits with their parents on Rikers Island and other facilities throughout New York State and the surrounding states. CHIPP makes every effort to make visits as family friendly as possible, helping families maintain and strengthen their bonds even in this challenging environment.

Foster care is intended to be temporary while ACS and our providers work with families to address the safety issues that led to foster care. To do this, our foster care providers engage parents in the services and permanency planning process, which is now enhanced through the use of Parent Advocates, who can use their lived experience to help guide and support parents. Our providers proactively plan for the safe reunification of children and engage youth

in the development of their own service and permanency planning.

When reunification is not possible, ACS and our providers seek other permanency options, including adoption and kinship guardianship. ACS uses a variety of strategies including data analysis, technical assistance, family team conferences, and case reviews to strengthen agencies practice to achieve permanency safely and as timely as possible. Overall, ACS is committed to lifelong connections for all young people. For youth who exit foster without legal permanency, there are Fair Future coaches and after care supports to work with youth to develop and maintain a network of supports outside of foster care.

ACS and our providers appreciate the anxiety and trauma the removal and placement into foster care can create for children and youth. We know that it's critical for us to provide safe, stable placements for children in foster care. While many children are placed directly into a foster home, including with kin, for others this work starts at the Children's Center. Most children who go to the Children's Center spend fewer than seven days there, but we know

that for some children and youth, the stays are longer with about 15 percent of youth remaining at the Children Center for over 30 days.

Our teams at the Children's Center has worked tirelessly to enhance onsite programming, supports and safety. Most recently we have renovated the intake area to be more trauma informed and welcoming, created a cell phone café, renovated the family visiting area to be more family friendly, and opened a Comfort Shop where children and youth can select the items that make them most comfortable, such as pajamas, stuffed animals, books and sneakers, all age appropriate.

It is essential for us to continue to recruit foster parents, particularly for teens and large sibling groups. We have worked closely with our providers to implement robust foster parent recruitment, support and certification strategies. In Fiscal Year 2024, our providers recruited nearly 500 new foster homes citywide. Once children are placed into foster care homes, it is essential that the children remain safe and well cared for. We've been consistently seeing the data regarding maltreatment in foster care decline, this past year,

98 percent of foster homes have no incidents of indicated neglect or abuse.

As of January 2025, OCFS has shifted the foster care training model statewide to the National Training Development Curriculum. The training addresses separation, loss, grief, trauma, and addresses cultural differences. This training supports the foster care givers ability to determine their own capacity to parent and/or explore additional supports, resources or training needed to enhance their capacity. It provides preparation for the foster caregivers by increasing their knowledge and ability to understand and respond to the unique needs of children placed in their care.

Trauma Responsive and Informed Parenting, TRIPP, is also provided to all New York City foster parents. TRIPP is a learning program designed to prepare and support foster parents and child welfare professionals who are either parenting or working with children with therapeutic needs. It helps participants gain a trauma informed lens when caring for children of significant emotional behavioral needs.

TRIPP coaches participants to practice examining and reinterpreting the behavior of children, in order to appropriately respond to their underlying thoughts, feelings and needs, rather than react to their behavior. Finally, ACS expects all foster parents to be affirming and receive training on supporting LGBTQAI+ children and youth.

Stability is also critical for children in foster care. ACS and our providers take many steps to support foster parents and foster care placements so that it can be preserved when in the child's best interest and children in foster care have the fewest moves possible before achieving permanency. Last Fiscal Year, excluding youth who moved to kin or were reunified with siblings, 88 percent of children and youth in foster care did not experience a placement change.

Our over-arching goal is for all the children and youth and families we serve to thrive. We have an important responsibility to the youth in our care and we strive to provide them with the tools and skills they need to become successful adults. We continue to listen to them and who are in foster care or have

been in foster care, so that we continue to improve our programming to meet the needs they identify.

Young people help shape programs such as Fair Futures, College Choice and our soon to be launching Career Choice program.

Youth told us they need the ongoing support and to have someone involved in their case who is just there for them. As a result, we developed the Fair Futures coaching and tutoring model and have expanded it to providing ongoing support to youth up to the age of 26. In Calendar Year 2024, more than 4,000 youth benefited from Fair Futures coaching and/or tutoring. Of the 2,000 young people coached for more than 90 days, 92 percent achieved at least three positive outcomes goals, such as reconnecting to high school, grade promotion, graduation, enrollment in college or vocational training or successfully engaging in a job or internship.

We also strengthened and modified our CUNY College program into what is now known as College Choice. In 2024, participation in the ACS College Choice program where tuition, housing, and a daily living stipend are given to youth in foster care attending college doubled from the program's

inception just two years ago. In the Fall 2024 semester, there were over 400 youth in College Choice. Students are attending schools locally within New York and throughout the country and both public and private institutions, College Choice students are represented at every CUNY college, attend many SUNY schools such as Stony Brook and Binghamton, can be found on other college campuses within New York, like Syracuse and Ithaca College, and are also studying at Vanderbilt in Tennessee and Holy Cross in Massachusetts. College Choice also supported a student studying abroad in Japan.

As announced in the State of the City, in coming year, ACS will expand Fair Futures and College Choice to serve more youth and create Career Choice, a program similar to College Choice but for youth who choose not to attend college at least for that time. We look forward to sharing more information about this program when it rolls out next Fiscal Year. Youth in care also benefit from our collaboration with other city agencies such as DYCD, Department of Social Services and NYCHA. For instance, children and youth in care participate in afterschool programs and the Summer Youth Employment program. ACS also

assists youth leaving care and families reunifying to obtain housing through NYCHA or with City FHEPS rental vouchers.

Our collaboration with Anthos Home, which recently assisted 100th youth secure permanent housing is helping to connect youth in care and newly reunified families to housing more quickly than in the past. Our agencies also help equip youth with the financial management tools that help them prepare to maintain housing stability.

I'm happy to share of all the 100 young people who have moved in with Anthos support, all remain in their apartments.

ACS is committed to providing high quality services, improving outcomes for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care. We have a dedicated LGBTQAI+ Equities Strategies Director who is responsible for policy, best practice and guidance. The LGBTQAI+ Equities Strategies team focuses on ensuring all ACS and provider agency treat all youth and families equitably and with empathy regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression.

As I mentioned earlier, all of our work must be centered around youth and family voice. The ACS

Youth Leadership Council formerly acknowledges the contributions and voice of current and formal juvenile justice and foster care involved youth. By enabling young people to express their ideas, opinions, views, knowledge and experience and develop the competencies, values, and connections they need to achieve positive outcomes through their life and their transition into adulthood.

ACS also works very closely with the Youth Advisory Board for Fair Futures and Project Unite, which includes youth advocates with experience in either the foster care or Runaway Homeless youth programs.

In conclusion, I want to take a moment to thank all of New York City's foster parents who have opened their hearts and home for the children and youth in their care. Not only do they open their homes, they give up so much control of their lives having to get to appointments and visits, and we are deeply grateful for all of them.

I also want to thank our 25 foster care providers who spend each and every day meeting the needs of the children and youth in foster care as well as their families. And finally, I want to thank the Children

and Youth who have not only been in the foster care system but have leveraged that experience to support us to help children and youth who come into foster care after them. Together, we'll be able to meet the families of today and better meet the needs of those in the future. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you Commissioner. You did read that pretty fast. It wasn't too bad. I appreciate that. I think it was because of the heat and you wanted to get through it. But I just want to start off one by just saying you know, I know coming into this role, you came in with a lot of ideas on trying to right some of the wrongs that a lot of communities felt you know especially Black and Brown communities. Can you talk a little bit about how you're also trying to shift the culture and some of the challenges you might be facing because even in our last hearing, you know you talked about like a lot of the vision and stuff that you working on but then we often have families who are still feeling some of the old repercussions of some of the issues that we're trying to address or you're trying to address at the top. So, how are we assuring that the work that in your vision that's happening and plans

that you're implementing are actually happening? And what safeguards are we putting in because again, I had a foster care roundtable with young people and some of the things that I heard were very upsetting. And so, it's not matching up from like the things that you talk about and like how it's being implemented and understanding you can't be everywhere and do everything and so, how are you shifting the culture with people who might have been there, you know who have been there longer than you and have a way of doing certain things. How are you shifting the culture?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, thank you Council Member. In a variety of ways, obviously a lot of the things that I spoke to about training did not include some of the training we do for foster care provider staff. Fair Futures coaches are trained by the Center for Fair Futures. They do a lot of work around motivational interviewing. How to be empathetic. We're also building that on foster care case planners who are trained in motivational interviewing. To really start where that young person is. To start where that family is and to try to understand what they are hoping for and then build plans around that.

For too long, there's been sort of cookie cutter plans that we say here is what we need you to do without stopping, seeing the human being in front of us and making sure we're meeting their needs and engaging with how they would like to get there. A lot of it how we engage with young people to make sure that our providers are engaging with young people and listening to them, and that the young people know there are many avenues to express their concerns. Whether that be the work in any committee that they have at the Children Center, the Youth Committees, whether that be our Office of Advocacy, whether that be their attorney. To change culture we have to build skills, we have to value the right things.

You know when I came into this work, young people told me how can you expect us to trust you if my 21st birthday is the last time you're going to do anything for me, on my birthday? And so, we've set out over the years to change that culture and we're doing that with Fair Futures. We are not all the way there yet. I want young people to know and they often have my number, call me, reach out to DC Mendez but reach out to a lot of folks in their continuum that there's a

lot of options for help. That we can pause, bring people together. So, it's a multifaceted strategy but I'm never satisfied until every young person feels like they are heard and they have what they need.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And so, I hear some of the stuff that you are doing in the agency, but a lot of the work that you do are contracted out to providers. How do you shift that culture right? These providers have obviously had these contracts long before you got here. You clearly are trying to shift the process of how things are being done. How are we holding agencies accountable? Especially when sometimes when they have longstanding contracts. What does that look like because again I think, well, I'm hearing a lot of the concerns from parents and families about the things. Some of it is from the providers and so, what does accountability look like for a provider and has any provider and I guess since your tenure, have any provider had contracts removed or revoked?

JESS DANNHAUSER: Not in the foster care space but here's what we do. We have a - we operate under something called Approved Outcomes for Children that

1 was a redesign of both the foster care and preventive
2 relationship between ACS and the providers over a
3 decade ago. And in that, while case management
4 decisions are delegated to the providers, there's
5 overseen obviously by the Family Court as well. We
6 have a dedicated unit that is looking at provider
7 data, so we know which agencies are thriving around
8 stability for kids in care, around permanency for
9 kids in care and where we need to put in - implement
10 plans. And so, we look at how many young people when
11 awoke to the point of the human trafficking
12 conversation we had last time to make sure we
13 understand how each provider is doing. We then sit
14 down, craft plans and hold them accountable for
15 implementation of those, assess whether they are
16 making progress on that data. If they are not, then
17 we begin to move up.

19 We also asked DC Mendez to talk about the Office
20 of Shared Response and I can talk a little bit about
21 the Office of Advocacy. When young people express a
22 concern or a family expresses concern, there are
23 dedicated staff that dig into that issue. They might
24 hold a conference, bring people together to try to
25 create a solution there.

INA MENDEZ: Thank you Commissioner and thank you for your question Council Member Stevens. So, to follow up on the Commissioner has a vision that aligns with my personal values and my professional values. And so, the division of family permanency is very aware of the strategic plans and we have touch points with providers in very different ways. And so, we're able to speak with agency leaders, agency staff. So, if there is an issue that gets to the Commissioners attention, my attention, the officers shared response can follow up on individual cases. We have the Office of Family Team Conferencing; they sit in on key conferences at certain key points. There are times when I may reach out to an ED to give a very concrete example, we have been sharing some information about a new expectation, probably starting sometime in Fiscal Year 2024. We had a larger meeting and it was clear, the information I was sharing didn't trickle down. So, I started something called Third Thursdays and that is for all case planning staff to join so they can hear directly from our team. This is what our expectation is around this. This is what our expectation is around that. So that we can continue to have the

1 conversations. Youth reach out. They reach out to
2 the Commissioner. I started something in this Fiscal
3 Year called Dinner with the DC. They're small group
4 meetings. We're starting with older youth. They
5 come together and we eat. I go to the various tables
6 and hear their concerns and what needs to be followed
7 up on. It gets followed up on. So, we're really
8 trying to create an opportunity.

10 There are times when providers will reach out and
11 say, "well, how can we do x, y, and z? And I often
12 say, "pay for it, we'll get it approved." Right and
13 so, we do that and we haven't had too many problems
14 yet and so, that's what we really want to do because
15 to support older youth, to support youth who have
16 exited care but coming back and reaching out for
17 help. We had a young man from December, January,
18 February, had to work with our community based
19 organizations to help him. He's about 24 now. He's
20 no longer in care but last week I got a picture of
21 his keys in the kitchen in the background. So,
22 Anthos Home was able to move him in. That's a
23 culture shift because these kids aren't in care.
24 They were over 21 but we're continuing to work with
25 them and it's conversation by conversation, example

by example to let everyone know within FPS, within ACS that this is an expectation.

JESS DANHAUSSER: And while we haven't closed any agencies, Chair if I can, in the last few years, there used to be 50 foster care agencies. There's 25 today.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Is there a reason why it shrunk by half?

JESS DANHAUSSER: I think to largely during about 15 years ago, there were so many fewer kids in care. There was a very intentional rightsizing when we first introduced EQUIP, which is now our score card, which scores and ranks each agency on various outcomes like safety and permanency and wellbeing. That work led us to make some decisions to shrink the system. We are today moving contract capacity around based on how well they're doing in permanency. How well they're doing in recruiting and supporting foster parents. And so, we do have performance based contracting in place. If an agency is demonstrating concerns in a particular area that are egregious, we have the right to end contracts, to use corrective action and a variety of other tools.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, I have some more questions on that but they're going to kill me if I don't get to some of their questions, so let me stop veering off.

On January 27th, the Trump Administration issued a memo halting all agency grants, loans and fiscal assistant programs. The Office of Management and Budget detailed a federal program subject to freeze Title IV E of the Social Security Act, which funds foster care as well as its adoption assistant, child abuse, and the uh neglect block grants and programs designed to educate young people aging out of child welfare system.

This order was rescinded the following day. How much funding does ACS receive from federal grants such as Title Grants and other federal sources and please provide a breakdown of the funding sources and the amounts?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Sure, so I'll give a broader review and then we can provide additional detail. ACS receives about \$1.35 billion in federal funds. It falls into two broad areas. One is childcare through the Childcare Block Grant which goes to the state and the state divvies up across the localities.

preventive services. The state is still working with the federal government around drawing that money down. So, it is a sort of bipartisan supported grant, so I'm hopeful that -

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I mean, at this point, it's all executive order, so.

JESS DANHAUSSER: We're watching everything extremely closely. OMB wants to work with us more generally around contingency because we're not sure exactly where changes might show up. And so, we're just monitoring vigorously.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah because I mean, what did you say? \$1.3 billion is a significant amount and losing that funding you know, I don't see how we can make that up.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, it would hurt a lot of families, including on the childcare side, as I mentioned earlier.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, and a big support and that we continue to fight for that and highlight that. How does ACS communicate with foster care agencies and service providers during this moment of federal uncertainty? Like what's the messaging and how have you been working with them? Because I can

1 see this obviously, we all are feeling anxiety in
2 this moment but even with the uncertainty where it
3 was a freeze and all these things going on, how do we
4 - what is the messaging to our providers?

5 JESS DANHAUSSER: So, as you know the providers,
6 the foster care providers and almost all the
7 prevention providers are part of COFCCA, the Council
8 on Family Child Caring Agencies. We are in regular
9 communication at my level with Cathlyn and with Dr.
10 Charles to make sure everything we are learning,
11 everything they are learning, we're in communication
12 around. We are in addition to the funding issues, we
13 are working on guidance to make sure that the
14 providers are clear that we are staying the course to
15 support our LGBTQAI+ young people, including gender
16 affirming care. We met with Legal Aid this morning.
17 They're helping us with some feedback on that
18 language but we're going to be getting that out early
19 next week. We're trying to make sure that we are
20 communicating what we believe in for our young
21 people, for our families, that we are moving forward
22 to take care of young people who are mostly Black and
23 Brown, who need to know that they're supported. We
24 know that there's an over representation of LGBTQ
25

kids in foster care and so, those things are central to us to speak to and we're getting that message out to COFCCA and to the providers regularly and often. In addition to the guidance that has been put out around immigration.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you. ACS relies on multiple funding sources to cover foster care expenditures, many of which are state mandates and subject to annual inflation. What is the current reimbursement rate for foster care parents and how are those rates determined, and what metrics are used in the calculations?

JESS DANHAUSSER: So, they are set by the state. There are three - they're variable by age and by need of the child. And so, there are three categories. One is the basic category special needs and then exceptional needs. And so, the ranges for zero to five on a basic level for \$36 a day to \$103 for a teenager who has exceptional needs who might have a developmental disability as one example. The state, you may recall from budget hearings, increased the rates, which we are very supportive of and they've been increasing over the past fiscal years, it's an unfunded mandate at this point. They did not add

additional monies for us to cover that, so it is one of the class that we speak with OMB to make sure we can continue to cover those rates. And so, that - we can provide the exact detail in writing.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Okay. More and more, we'll see you next month.

JESS DANHAUSSER: That's right, I'll see you in a month.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And a Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Budget, ACS budget included two program areas specifically that it's catered to expenditures related to foster care service. Can ACS confirm if all foster care related expenses are housed in those program areas and please provide the budget codes associated with those foster care related expenses.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Thank you. The bulk of them are in those categories. There's a few that are fairly technical like at some of the adoption subsidies and some of the other. So, I have the budget codes here that cover the entire foster care and so, I can give it back to Stephanie.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Someone has to -

JESS DANHAUSSER: I know, you shouldn't go up. I tried that last time to come give it to you.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I know and I want you to get tackled. You can just hand it to me here. Thank you. Preventative services provider had expressed that they have become a catchment for care cases resulting in supporting youth with high needs that are unmet by ACS limited budget. How are decisions made regarding the services and materials, resources, a family receives?

JESS DANHAUSSER: So, this it's a little surprising to us. Cares is typically low to moderate risk and so, in certain situations, perhaps there's a young person who is struggling with attendance. And so, it goes down the Cares Track. Then we work with them. They're 15 years old. They're school phobic. They are connected to some negative peer group that we want to help them, so then we'd be working with either our prevention providers on the child welfare side. We have programs like FFT and BSFT evidence based models to help family therapies for teenagers. We also have our FAP program, which is operated out of our juvenile justice side but it's available across the continuum. And so, in there, we've added Fair Futures and mentoring. So, I want to talk to our providers a little bit more about what they're

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, because I think that is important because that is definitely something I have heard from multiple providers of like Cares becoming this catchment area, and even just quickly, I think I mentioned this to Stephanie the last time I seen here, even with that, with the Cares, someone did an ACS report and when the Cares person got back to them, they told them well, you're a social worker. You could do this yourself. Why are you calling us?

And so, again I think some of this, I'm still working on the email to get you the person's name but I want us to make sure that we're making a look at like some of the things that we are talking about here at the top are not necessarily trickling down because that was something that was super alarming to me when I had - and this was a school social worker who had called in educational neglect. That they

were like, you're a social worker. You can make your own referrals. You don't need to call ACS for this.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah so much is how you say it right? So, we're doing loads of training as you know Chair that is equipping schools with resources and also resources through ACS but they don't have to call CPS if it's unnecessary and so it sounds like the wrong way to deliver a message and we have help. We have folded Cares into our child forum and so, which we get between 500 and 700 of our staff on every -

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: But I just wanted to also just point out, this person who called ACS is not a person who would call lightly and so, for her even when she reached out to me, it was a struggle for her to call because she's like no, I would never call unless it needed to be elevated but it was like, why are you calling us? And so, now I think even in like some of the spaces, the conversation has been like, we're not going to call ACS for anything if that's the case. And so, there is some disconnect in some of the things and thinking about you know I know that like, and this wasn't - this was actually a Charter school so it was like separate and so, I don't know

1 if they have access to the services and what that
2 looks like because I did ask them and they were like
3 well, we haven't heard of that. And so, you know I
4 just think we still need to figure out like what is
5 the branding and what does that look like to report
6 some of this stuff back up?

8 JESS DANHAUSSER: Absolutely and as it relates to
9 the Charter schools, we are doing training for them.
10 We've developed given the size of success academy
11 throughout the direct partnership with them as well
12 to make sure that they know how to access services.
13 That kind of language is not acceptable to me.

14 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, I'm working on
15 getting a name for you guys. I'm working on that.
16 Uhm, I do see my colleagues, they have a question.
17 So I'm going to pass it over to Council Member Brewer
18 and then I have some more questions, so.

19 JESS DANHAUSSER: Okay.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much. I
21 have a question in terms of migrant youth as well as
22 New York City youth. So, I know well that if you're
23 21, you have to move out. So, there are a lot of
24 migrant youth doing that. There is a program called
25 guardianship so you can go to court and sign up and

end up with kids and I'm familiar with that program.

So, my question is are you getting into the system?

Young people who are migrants or asylum seekers?

JESS DANHAUSSER: So the way we track it Council

Member is by destitute children or not and so, a

couple of years ago, there was about 50 young people

who came into our care as destitute. This past year

119 young people came into our care as destitute.

So, we saw a modest but important increase in that

number. We're developing services. They have

everything that's available to a young person who has

lived here domestically is available to them. We are

working on permanency plans with them, school etc..

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Are you doing the

guardianship program?

JESS DANHAUSSER: We have not gotten to the point

where those young people are turning 21 with us and

if they - are commitment to young people is if they

are 21 and not having housing, they're staying with

us until -

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay because between 18

and 21 you can do the guardianship program.

JESS DANHAUSSER: So, we'll absolutely add that

to the -

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I'm very good at it so if anybody needs help, I can do it.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Love it. Thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: You do need a lawyer though.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Sergeant at Arms, you guys at the time.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay the next question I have is just in terms of numbers and just generally, how many young people who have aged out of foster care remain with ACS through the older youth services unit and what's the most common barrier to continued engagement?

JESS DANHAUSSER: So I'm going to have DC Mendez speak to that work and Associate Commissioner Cheri is also here. There's about 90 young people who are between the ages of 18 and 20 who are engaged with that unit. That is a population that concerns me greatly. If a young person is signing themselves out of care at 18 or 19, it typically means something isn't right. I want to say we've been driving that population down pretty dramatically. 429 young people aged out in Calendar Year 2023. 69 percent of those did it after 21 and so, it used to be thousands

of kids and so, that's a population that we're really concerned about and we're working to engage.

INA MENDEZ: Sure, I can talk a little bit about the unit if you're interested. So, we do have what we call the supervision, the 21 unit and that is a unit that works specifically with young people between ages 18 to 20 that have decided to sign themselves out of foster care. That unit stays in contact, so upon that time of leaving, they'll get their information, their phone number, their address, where they're going to stay, and they make regular visits or try to stay in contact.

We know young people are young people so sometimes the phone number changes. The address changes but what doesn't change is that unit is there on the second floor at 150 Williams Street. So, those young people may come in and we have services that we can provide if they need something right away, a gift card. We have a clothing closet but then we continue to work with them, make connections to community based organizations and referrals, and if it appears that it's in the best interest for them to come back into care, there is a criteria. We'll hold a conference and more often than not, they're

connected back to the agency they were previously working with. So, we do have a provision for that group and then they can stay in care and we continue to support kids as the Commissioner mentioned.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So just everybody else, I love Fair Futures. Everybody loves it but do you have to opt in? How do you get in? I mean obviously if you're interested you could participate but do you automatically opt in or?

JESS DANHAUSSER: It probably wouldn't have happened without you Council Member. So first of all, thank you for that. You do not have to opt in. When a young person is in middle school, 8th grade, they begin with high school counseling. We've seen young people really begin to elect their school. In the past, we tried to high school goal weekend and this kind of stuff. We're seeing actually last year, young people in foster care for the first time. We're in the top cortile of graduation rates.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Because of Fair Futures?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Because of Fair Futures and coaching and so, about 4,000 young people have been connected. They have - some of them first accept tutoring or first accept the coaching or just want to

be part of a youth group. And so, we're constantly working to engage them more fully. We've also engaged 800 young people after 21. And so, the investments that are being made in the - in next year will allow us to continue to expand to make sure that young people 21 to 26, anyone who wants it can get those supports and then every young person leaving care, whether they're adopted, whether they're reunified after 16 years old, all of those kids can keep their coach.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay, and just quickly two other questions. One is how many young people aging out secured housing using a rental assistance voucher? And then the other question is more of those God damn buses. I have had so many hearings and I think we all have on getting young people from care into the schools. It just goes on and on in temporary housing. So, that was my second question. Go ahead.

JESS DANHAUSSER: On housing, 2023 there were 269 youth who were connected to housing. That includes either through a voucher, NYCHA or supportive housing, 24 increased at 320. We are currently working off about 150 HPD Section 8 vouchers that we

1 have access to. If and when those run out, there are
2 other potential Section 8 options and then obviously
3 we can go back to City FHEPS but since we have the
4 Section 8, we want to use it.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay and then just
6 busing, getting to you. It never seems to work no
7 matter how much work we put into it.

8 JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, so we created this policy
9 with the Department of Education, New York City
10 Public Schools, because of that gap period where
11 agencies can get reimbursed for transportation,
12 chaperoning, etc.. We got the numbers yesterday.
13 About \$800,000 has been reimbursed to the agencies
14 but what we noticed, not every agency is taking full
15 advantage of it and so, we are going to double down
16 and retrain the agencies on this policy that we put
17 out last year because there does seem to need to be
18 sort of a gap filling measure because the bus lines
19 are not - routes are not available within a couple of
20 weeks sometimes.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Well, September is awful.
22 I don't know it all falls apart in September and then
23 gets a little bit better.
24
25

JESS DANHAUSSER: And we have - for children at the Children's Center, it is a very robust operation. Early every morning, we have our own drivers and contact drivers.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Well that's different than the regular foster care NYCHA family trying to get everybody to school. I'm just saying if we could help more with the buses.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I would appreciate it. Alright, thank you Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Just really quickly, I know Council Member was just ask questions around housing for young people aging out of foster care. Do you feel like there's significant housing vouchers available to meet the demand for aging out of foster care? And this is a question also I had especially within the lottery. Do we often have set asides for young people aging out of foster care? I know there was some in my district. They had like four or five units in those but is that a need or something that we should continue to push for? Because I don't feel like that's enough as far as like in the housing lottery? Are we setting aside? I know we do

1
2 formerly homeless and things like that but do we have
3 a category where we can set aside units for young
4 people aging out of foster care?

5 JESS DANHAUSSER: I would be doing our young
6 people a disservice if I said it was enough. They
7 would like to see a lot more. They want a lot more
8 choice out of their housing options. The Fair
9 Future's Youth Advisory Board, this is something that
10 they've been really focused on. Some of our
11 providers, like the Children's Village and New York
12 Foundling, having creating housing options, permanent
13 housing options for young people, mixed use but a
14 high set aside for young people. We do currently
15 have enough vouchers. We used up all 200 City FHEPS
16 vouchers.

17 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Does that mean you don't
18 have enough because you used them all up?

19 JESS DANHAUSSER: No, but now we have 150 Section
20 8 that we're working down. We're in constant talks
21 with OMB about - we think if we use some of these
22 programs federally, if you use them, you can get
23 access to more right there and so, we want to use
24 them as quickly as possible.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Okay, is that low? You can't remember? It should have been like -

JESS DANHAUSSER: It's much more likely that sort of support housing has set asides and that's sort of something that we want to make sure is high quality and some of the set asides that I'm familiar with are when our providers have sort of put together an entire package.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Hmm, hmm, some of our nonprofit providers who are building are doing it. Not necessarily the city because I think it's something that we do need to look in because -

JESS DANHAUSSER: We got city financing.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah because every young person coming out of foster care doesn't need to go to supportive housing right? Like there needs to be multiple options. And so, you know if I'm hearing like oh, there's a lot for supportive housing. That is not the only need. Some people can move independently, so I would definitely love to you know work with you on seeing how we can advocate to see more of that being built, especially after we just passed City of Yes and we're building all those housing. It was one of my asks in my demands but it kind of got swept under the rug. But we should continue to fight because I think that it's really

important as the city is building, we need to make sure we are building for everyone, right? And I think that this is going to be a really important issue around that.

I'm going to stop and hand it over to my colleague Council Member Williams.

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Hi.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Hi Council Member.

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: How are you?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Good. How are you?

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Uhm, I just have a few questions on residential foster care. Uhm and I feel like at the last hearing this sort of came up just around how like not all providers are created equal and so some providers are doing raising private funds to supplement the work that they're doing and some maybe don't do that.

So, and this question I think kind of falls in line with that, which is residential care providers have shared that under new contracts, there are still unmet needs for older youth. I think the essentials from prom attire to financial support for youth in college, providers often rely on private fundraising to cover these gaps. Is ACS aware of these

challenges? Has the agency explored options to increase funding or provide additional resources to adjust these needs?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah I think a lot of the times - so the residential rates are quite high since you're talking about sometimes \$1,000 a day but it goes into staffing ratios right. And so, the more flexible dollars are what they're talking about, not always the amount. DC Mendez and her team have been working with each provider to make sure they understand all of their budgets. It's about eight different funding streams that go into our foster care budget, including some preventive dollars that we're able to match per youth development. And so, we are making sure they understand also that we have special purchases that they can make. Young people should not having to be getting their prom dress through a private fundraiser.

And so, there are ways to fund all that. Sometimes there's gaps in how to do that. Do you want to speak a little bit about how you're trying to close that gap?

INA MENDEZ: Sure. Good afternoon Council Member. So, as the Commissioner mentioned, within

1 the Division of Family Permanency Services, we have a
2 contract management team that works with the agency
3 on their budgets and where they can leverage certain
4 funds in terms of client services. There's also with
5 the new contracts; there's an area that allows for
6 some funding predictability. So, there's a little
7 bit of a variance if you will. And so, if they need
8 to make certain purchases, they can use those funds.
9 So, it's conversations as I mentioned earlier, it's a
10 shift because this is different in how they did the
11 contracts before, so it's a lot of reiterating the
12 new expectations and speaking to the right people and
13 we can continue to have those conversations because
14 everyone should have a prom dress, a tuxedo, whatever
15 it is they need for these milestones in life. I want
16 to make sure everyone in foster care has those
17 opportunities.

18
19 To just answer the question regarding college, we
20 do have the College Choice program. It started in -
21 well, we're providing access to college. We created
22 a centralized program, College Choice in 2022 with
23 200 young people. This last fall semester, we had
24 over 400, I think, like 438. So, anyone that is
25 interested in college, they can make that referral.

There's an application process. We have a team.

Again, I think it's about sharing the information and making sure it's trickling down so that childcare staff knows about the College Choice program, just like the Executive Director.

So, there are opportunities to go to college, whether it's a two year or four year degree. So, if you have specific cases or agencies that might need additional information, please share because I want to make sure everyone -

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Could I just add on to that because at my foster care roundtable, the young people in the room were very frustrated because they often feel like they share a lot of the information amongst themselves, especially for like college, being able to get a laptop and things like that where they don't have access and in the conversation, a lot of them felt like if you were with specific providers, they were able to access stuff whereas like some people didn't.

Have you guys thought about doing some type of like information stuff for the young people who are in care so that they can do their own research. I mean they should have to but for them they were very

frustrated and they were like, could we get some type of like app or something where we could have and be able to see all the things that are available to them because that was one of their requests and frustrations.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, we absolutely can look at that. We've been doing most of that through making sure that it's been great partnership with Center for Fair Futures that they know everything that they are training directly, the coaches in addition to the leadership of that program but there are some young people that have not engaged there and shouldn't have to engage. There should be multiple ways and so we'll look at, we do lots through the Youth Leadership Council but if it's not happening for every single child, we got to find other ways.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: They suggested an app and I thought that was a great idea of like, I mean, you know we use technology and that's what they use anyway. They was like, "could we just get an app and we could just be able to go beep bap boo and figure it out ourselves?" Because I mean in that moment, what was beautiful was that the young people started to share information with each other and were

literally becoming their own case managers and it was a really good thing but they were like, just how easy it is to even connect with other people who have aged out and things like that. So, that was one of their suggestions I'm bringing up here and I'm sorry I jumped into your time Council Member Williams. Go ahead.

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: It's okay, you're the Chair. You have rights and privileges. The next question I have is residential care providers have also shared that there have been violent incidents between youth in their facilities where staff have been harmed or at risk. I know in some cases; I'm sure maybe young folk might have been harmed.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: What security measures are in place to protect staff? And I have heard this a ton of times about the Children's Center. Like firsthand accounts from people who have gotten into altercations. So, just I know that is a thing across the agency.

JESS DANHAUSSER: For young people who are in any kind of congregate care, whether it's in residential,

a group home or a campus or the Children Center, all the staff -

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Or like one of the juvenile facilities.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Hmm, hmm. All the staff are trained both in de-escalation and in restrained policies as needed and that's ongoing training. So much of this is about the programming that young people are engaged in. The trust that they have in the staff. We're looking at sort of ways in which we can continue to invest in the staff because my believe is that that core staff in addition to adding clinical services and things that we have, that that core staff is the difference between the young person getting upset. They might have learned something that triggers them getting upset and having a violent incident. And so, we're also working with the providers in an ongoing conversation about advocacy we can do with OCFS. I think there are certain times when particular protocols are appropriate, whether that be if a young person has had a weapon before, the ability to do some - to want them to make sure everybody is safe. We want to make sure we are

respecting the liberty of our young people but also making sure that every single place is safe.

The Children Center has a series of protocols that we've been able to drive down a lot of the incidents there. In large part through programming and relationship and trust building. And so and obviously sort of a lot of attentiveness and making sure that the staffing is strong. These are incidents that we don't want ever to happen. We're working with young people, sometimes they get triggered and we have to have all the skills and staff to make sure that they are safe and that staff are safe. I am deeply grateful to young people. I think sometimes residential gets a bad name because of horrors that have happened in the past but we have some really dedicated wonderful staff who show up every day. They're with kids 24/7 that deserve our investment and respect.

And so, as we look at a declining residential care population, as we've invited the providers to bring to us innovative ideas, one provider said, I don't think I can operate a campus anymore with these new models that have evidence based models infused. I want to go to sort of a group home model and we

work with them on that. We want to keep hearing, sometimes I think smaller sites are better. So we have a series of what's AOBH's Agency Operated Boarding Homes, which is an old name but it's about four to six kids who live together and that's a different environment. St. Vincents, I visited one of their group homes recently where they've really built sort of a healing sort of environment through an evidence based program. So, all the providers are trying to do different things and to a lot of success but also there are times when things are not safe enough and we got to continue to deal with that.

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think that's sometimes like my overall issue with many agencies that contract out. Like you know New York City, like most of the work that we do in Human Services is contracted out and I think my issue with that and I know the Chair and I have talked a lot about this as it pertains to the crisis management system, but I think that the crucks of this can be found in many agencies that contract out their services is that like continuity across agencies. So, if one agency is doing this particular evidence based model on how to ensure that they're decreasing violence or

1 whatever, versus another one, like how are we issuing
2 like if there is truly a best practice model that's
3 working at each SVS, how can we assure that
4 Forestdale is also - I'm just like naming
5 organizations. I know of like Forestdale is like
6 adopting you know this model that has been proven
7 successful. Like the issue that we have had with the
8 CMS system and now like hearing some of the things
9 that you're saying I'm wondering if this is true, I'm
10 not sure but like it's like yeah, there's a great
11 healing model that you know one provider is doing in
12 the community and then this organization is doing
13 excellent at workforce development. How can we kind
14 of like match these evidence based models that have
15 been proven successful in a New York City Urban
16 environment? And I don't have the answer and then to
17 the last thing I want to say just to like violence
18 and staff. I think making sure that staff feels safe
19 is important to the youth and the children feeling
20 safe, and I continue to receive a ton of complaints
21 across various spaces, whether it's residential or
22 Crossroads, Horizon, or some of the nonsecure
23 placement facilities about like violence and staff
24 not feeling supported around that if an incident
25

occurs. And so, I just always like to uplift that. It's important, we care about the young person. We 100 percent that is our focal point but if the people that are not caring for the young people feel safe, I feel like it also impacts or it could impact how they interact with young people you know.

JESS DANHAUSSER: It most definitely does and I thank you for highlighting our staff, I'm often on the phone with them if there is an incident and I'm certainly on the phone with our labor partners to work through, to problem solve around it to see what they're seeing. Our staff are extraordinary. They put themselves in difficult situations. I do want to make a distinction between the foster care population and the juvenile justice population. I think for the young people in the foster care population, we also are really seeking support from the Office of Mental Health at the state level. We're meeting with them because some young people have extraordinary needs that aren't - the child welfare system isn't designed to support alone, right? And they are kids, so we got to be there no matter what.

I don't want to make Associate Commissioner Cheri come up here but here team under DC Mendez does a lot

1 of the visiting to residential programs to try to
2 create that consistency. I think that there's a
3 balance between innovation. Like things like Fair
4 Futures came up because some agencies raised some
5 money and decided to start to put the pressure on the
6 city to build on that model that we demonstrated was
7 working.
8

9 So, I love innovation from the providers and then
10 let it work and then spread. And so, some of the
11 third Thursday work, some of the work we're doing on
12 the preventive side is to try to say, let's talk
13 about what's working out there. Usually you could
14 pick all the models. They have a few fundamental
15 things underneath and if you're implementing, we'll
16 help you but you can't do anything without great
17 staff and so, I appreciate you highlighting them.
18 I'm always concerned when staff gets hurt and making
19 sure that we are being responsive. Not only in the
20 incident but to try to prevent them going forward.
21 We have seen incidents come down at Horizon and Cross
22 Roads despite a significant uptick in the population
23 but we are nowhere near where we want to be.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Yeah and I appreciate
25 that distinction. I know like the population in like

foster care is like different, so I do appreciate that and I didn't mean to conflate.

JESS DANHAUSSER: I know. I know.

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: I was just thinking about like staff, yeah but I was just thinking about staff and violence and so, this is like my last question. So, do you have a mechanism? I know you like come from that space, which is like why you're so valuable but is there currently a mechanism to sort of look at the innovation coming from providers and figure out how to scale across the agency? Like do you have as system or it's just you being Jess and anecdotally looking at it? Like is there an official system where like oh, I see - we see that this has been working through our conversations with providers and like, maybe this is something we want to scale again across the agency.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, yes and no. On certain - on the yes side, when we see providers doing well, let's say in permanency with you know have them give a presentation to the rest of the providers. Same thing on engagement and preventive services. DC Lynn [INAUDIBLE 01:07:25] will have them come give a presentation so people can learn from that. Like

recently, we had a presentation for the Center of Family Life.

On the no side, where I think we can do better is I think providers aren't convinced that we will be nimble enough to sort of move budgets around, change contract language to make sure that they can do those innovations with our support, not just with private support. And so, with Dr. Charles and COFCCA, I think we are starting to work towards that process and to make sure that our processes are nimble enough not only to get paid on time but also to make sure that if we want to modify a budget and it's within the contract, then it's legal, we should be able to do that and do it quickly.

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: I appreciate that. Thank you for answering questions and thank you Chair.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Thanks Council Member.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you so much. Back to our regular scheduled programming and just to kind of like piggyback off some of what - oh first of all, I would like to acknowledge Council Member Williams here today. I didn't do that for the record. So, she's here. But just thinking about staff too and

the extraordinary work that they are doing and it is a lot. I mean it used to be a provider; I used to be a provider literally in trenches. What I know with all the innovations you bring in, what are you doing around self-care for staff? Because we know that a lot of times we do this work so thanklessly and we forget about ourselves so I think that as we are - you're putting implementing things, I would love to hear what are you doing around self-care for the agency and like even with providers, what does that look like to hold them accountable to also do self-care because sometimes even with the staff, they are burnt out which sometimes lead two things escalating in situations. Listen, I've been there. So, I'm just how are you shifting the culture and I mean the culture and climate in that way as well?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, starting at ACS and then I think we can do a better job engaging the providers and how to do that well, and a lot of them are doing it well but just in how we can be supportive of that. We survey our staff at ACS and what we learned a couple years ago was staff could see how their job was consistent with the mission and vision of the agency. They could - they felt like the supervisors

1 were knowledgeable. They felt like they were
2 responsive but about less than half felt what I'll
3 say as seen, right? Appreciated specifically for
4 their contributions. And so, we've tried to really
5 go about making sure that all of us have different
6 events, different ways in which we have CPS
7 appreciation week but then we try to bring it all
8 year around to make sure that folks hear what we're
9 saying. I think it also is about the culture when
10 something goes right and something goes wrong that
11 we're really trying to build a learning culture that
12 this is a place that you can grow. Staff who see
13 themselves in a growth trajectory all the literature
14 says like they can tolerate a lot more challenge
15 because they feel like they're growing rather than
16 just getting stuck. I think it's responsiveness when
17 things don't go right. When there are safety issues,
18 sometimes that happens for a case planner, at an
19 agency or CPS. I think also obviously we've got
20 things like healing circles where folks can come but
21 also going out to express appreciation directly to
22 staff. And that they know - you know my perspective
23 on this work and being a leader of ACS is if staff
24 make a decision, and I delegated that decision, then
25

1 we made it together. I'm not coming to actually - we
2 might need to learn from it. We might need to do
3 something different. We might need to make sure but
4 if they made, if they did their level best and made a
5 good, solid decision, even if it wasn't perfect,
6 we're together going to learn from that as a system.
7 And I think part of that's how I'm trying to create
8 the learning culture. We have an extraordinary team
9 of cabinet members, many of whom you've met. We're
10 building that in each of their areas and I know the
11 providers, especially during COVID figured out a lot
12 of things, group work that they're doing with their
13 staff, ways in which they're making them feel
14 appreciated. We can always do more. I think surveys
15 and those kinds of things are deeply important so you
16 get the actual data of what people are experiencing.
17 So, I'll pause there with that but it's such a hard
18 job, everyone of these jobs.

20 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, it's not an easy job.
21 Listen, I worked with kids for 20 years. It's not
22 easy and so like and even there's moments where it
23 was like you know, you need to take a day because you
24 just experienced something really bad or you know and
25 so it's hard. So, you know it definitely is

1 something that we do need to keep in the forefront of
2 making sure that self-care is part of the process
3 while we are rolling things out. Because burnout is
4 real and we don't want to lose good people, and we
5 often do because we you know don't pay them anything.
6 And so, there already doing this for the love, so we
7 also got to think about how we also just keep people
8 sane as well.

9 I know you mentioned before that were about 25
10 provider, uhm placement providers and you don't have
11 to do it now. If you can get us a list of all those
12 providers so we can have it in one place.

13 JESS DANHAUSSER: We have it for you.

14 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: In ACS five year strategic
15 plan it says one of the priorities to ensure that
16 adequate family based placements for children with
17 complex medical developmental or sibling related
18 needs. What efforts are underway to improve the
19 recruitment and retention of high quality foster care
20 in parents, particularly for older youth and children
21 with special needs?

22 JESS DANHAUSSER: DC Mendez is going to start.

23 INA MENDEZ: Thank you for that question. So, we
24 have at ACS as you know our five year plan and want
25

1 to meet the need, which means we want to build the
2 capacity to care for children in family based
3 programs and in residential care. Regarding the
4 family base side, we have a team, the Office of
5 Foster Parent Recruitment and Support, they work with
6 providers. Because the agencies are doing the
7 recruitment. They're doing the certification, the
8 training, and the support but we're working so
9 speaking to Council Member Williams conversation
10 about best practices, they have all of this
11 information. They actually have a curriculum and
12 using data, they tune it towards each agency because
13 not all agencies are equal and they're not all in the
14 same place and it really talks to them about how you
15 are engaging when someone calls and says, I want to
16 be a foster parent. What's the time to orientation?
17 What's the time to training? How are you supporting
18 people through that process?

20 So, and we want agencies to have targeted, be
21 very intentional. We did a scan across the country
22 and we noticed that some states are very - they
23 articulate who - we need homes for teens. We need
24 homes for sibling groups and we need homes for
25 children that have complex needs because that's what

our data shares. So, foster parents call. That's part of the education process so we understand starting out, maybe you take one child but over time, you'll feel more comfortable taking a sibling group or taking an older youth. So, that's how our approach is. So, the team at ACS works with the agencies and depending on where the agencies are in their practice, maybe it's once a month, maybe it's a call, maybe it's regular meetings. We also bring everyone together. We often share best practices and we have agencies present. This is how we leverage social media. This is how we're helping foster parents to talk to their network, their family, their friends because the data showed that maybe going to a street fair with a table doesn't really bring in as many foster parents as - if I'm a foster parent and I talk to you and you and you, that might get more interest because people can feel like how they're doing that.

So, those are some of the efforts. Part of the budget, as we talked about, talks about how your foster care recruitment and support innovation. So, there's dedicated funds and agencies develop a plan

on how they're going to use those funds, so that they're very intentional about recruitment.

JESS DANHAUSSER: There are also five agencies who are dedicated to have special medical programs for young people who have of any age, who have complex medical needs.

And so, there's a few hundred young people. We expanded that in the most recent contracts. And so, those agencies are building up and again, we are moving contract dollars and capacity around based on and we did that recently within that continuum because some agencies were able to recruit more. You know as DC Mendez is saying, there's no better recruiter than a satisfied foster parent right?

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: So, what happens what you have foster parents who feel like they've been discriminated and now, you know they're at a place where they feel like an agency isn't working with them because that also can have the same effects as a good word of mouth when we have foster parents who have had negative experiences.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Absolutely so foster parents need to be responded to. They need to be whether that's in the middle of the night or whatever

services that they need for children in their home.

In the area where a young person is removed from a foster home, ACS has an independent review process and then there's also a fair hearing process at the state level. But the core of this right is having foster parent councils where staff are listening to the experience of foster parents. Being a foster parent is complex for a lot of reasons. We're deeply grateful to all the New Yorkers that step up to do it. You know you not only have to care for a child who has gone through a lot early in their life. You also are making sure that they're getting to visits and appointments and it's logistically challenging and so, you give up the power over whether that child is going to be in your home for a long time, as your child forever as an adopted child or for a short time. And so, we are grateful for the sacrifice that foster parents make. Each agency needs to be able to have those systems. DC Mendez team helps support them on that but ultimately, we also need to make sure that the contracts are moving to where the providers are demonstrating where foster parents are voting with their feet to go and if they're not going to go to a particular provider because they have a

bad reputation, well, then the provider needs to work on that. Obviously, we have our corrective action tools as well. We don't ever want to get to that point but it needs to be a multifaceted approach.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah uhm, because I know that we actually have a couple who is going to testify later here who was told specifically that the agency was not interested in doing some work with them because they were a same sex couple and there was a lot of issues around that. And so, I'm trying and I know we had a hearing back in September around how we're trying to recruit more same sex couples to be a part of this because we have such a high number of LGBTQ, especially in the HRY system and trying to connect the gaps and this family I think, and they're still fighting to try to get the young people back and was told that they're no longer going to be able to be foster parents I guess with that agency and I'll make sure I'll connect you guys at the end but that's something that's normal. And then how do we like put in safety nets so things like this does not happen? Because I believe there was a couple of - they put in complaints and everything was unfounded but now they're still saying that they can't be

1 foster parents anymore. And just in a system where
2 we know that it is such a hard job and it's not easy
3 to become a foster parent and we have people who are
4 fighting to keep this right, what could we do to kind
5 of like protect this or like how should folks be you
6 know knocking this up? Because I tell you this all
7 the time like incidents are often are just us putting
8 a flashlight on things that are happening in the dark
9 and you know for me, I don't want to lose the foster
10 care parents that's in the system who want to do good
11 and lose them because you know issues with agencies
12 or providers, not agencies, providers.

14 JESS DANHAUSSER: We agree with you
15 wholeheartedly. While I can't speak to individual
16 incidences, especially those that are ongoing and
17 being evaluated. Let me describe some of the
18 processes. So, let me back up and say we absolutely
19 not only welcome, encourage, want LGBTQ foster
20 parents in our system, and for the reasons you
21 articulated and also because anyone who is going to
22 give a loving home to a child and support them and
23 provide them stability and care, we want in our
24 system. There are times when a child makes an
25 allegation, someone else makes an allegation. We

1 have a dedicated office of - our Office of Special
2 Investigations within our child protection that does
3 this. That does evaluations, assessments,
4 investigation of those allegations. They include
5 talking to you know going to the home, talking to the
6 children, talking to collateral contacts, that could
7 be a child advocacy center. They make a
8 determination. As you know Council Member, the
9 standard of evidence is that it is the preponderance
10 of evidence. And so, there are times where the
11 situation is not entirely clear but there are
12 concerns.

14 And the agencies do have the delegation of case
15 management, do have the authority to change a child's
16 placement if they think that there is something
17 that's not right. That authority is overseen by that
18 Office of Special Investigations as well, so there's
19 an independent review. If the parents feel like that
20 authority by the agency has been abused, then they
21 get an independent review. The independent review
22 makes a decision about whether or not that was an
23 appropriately made decision. If the foster parents
24 are not satisfied with the independent review, then
25 they can pursue a fair hearing outside of ACS with

the state that looks at whether we made the appropriate judgment both in the independent review and in that initial, that the agency made the right decision.

Beyond that, because there are situations that are not entirely clear, you know one of the things that sometimes we have to live with as a system, as we're trying to continue to gather more information is situations where we're hearing multiple things from different sources from the children, from different parents, etc.. So, we're trying to weigh through that and make the best decision possible in every incidence. It should never be, at the same time I say all that, it should never be that any decision is made other than what's in the best interest of the child.

And so, we've heard some of the concerns that you reference. We're also engaged in a process with the agency that is involved here to make sure that if there's anything flying out there that we get beneath it and sort of on a more systemic level throughout the agency and to make sure we really understand everything that's going on here because it's not okay to any of us that a family that is LGBTQ doesn't feel

safe. In fact, under Commissioner Cari(SP?) we're the first city in the country to require that all foster parents to ask that they are affirming.

And so, this is work that's been going on for a long time and we're not going to step away from it now.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, we had a whole hearing on this in September and so, you know I understand the commitment and I feel like you guys also have been working really hard around that and so, I definitely want to make sure that we are highlighting the changes and the issues that we are doing but also want to make sure we holding everybody to those standards, right? I think again sometimes it gets really hard of what we might want and how is that trickling out in playing in other places.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: So, according to the FY 2025 PMMR, the percentage of children placed with relatives has declined from 48.9 to 44.2 percent. Due to the part in the increase of number of teens entering care, many from outside New York City was limited local family resources. Why does ACS believe they are seeing this rise in teenager entering from

outside of city and what steps does the agency taking to find placement for those groups?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, so we are - so first of all just that number on the kin is initial placement into care. We continue to see strong results because the agencies continue to work on this even after a child is placed they are talking to a child, they're searching for kin, and so we are - we've gone from the low 30's to about 44 percent in care, 45 percent in care that are placed with close relatives or friends.

We did see an uptick. Some of this has to do with a destitute child, the children that we mentioned earlier.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah.

JESS DANHAUSSER: With Council Member Brewer. That's from two sources. Some that are new to the country or to the city. There's also been some work that you know we've been doing with the runaway and homeless youth shelters and so, we are trying to be responsive to young people who are coming in. And so, I think those two sources. There's also, you know we talked earlier about Cares and the questions

around youth. We want to make sure everyone is connected to preventative services when appropriate.

We are finding placements for young people coming in in this situation. Last year on any given day we averaged about 74 young people at the Children's Center. Today we're at 64 and we're seeing kids move. Again, more placements right now, we have a lower level of longer stayers than we typically do. So, the team is working really hard with providers and you know to make sure that the whole panoply of placement options is being used.

And I'm proud that we have been able to continue to reduce the use of residential care even with this increase. It's not a huge increase but it's kind of an important one that effected the kin numbers.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: In ACS five year strategic plan, it says working with childcare systems will be conducted to identify strength, treatment needs and readiness for stable placement. How frequently are child assessments conducted and what measures are in place to ensure that assessment results are effectively used to inform service provisions and permanency planning?

1 INA MENDEZ: Thank you for your question. So,
2
3 with our new contracts, we launched a program called
4 Enhanced Family Foster Care and that was a blending
5 of two programs that were in operation previously,
6 regular families, foster care and therapeutic family
7 foster care. We created one model because we
8 recognize that as a child is in foster care, their
9 needs change and they fluctuate over time and what
10 was happening in the past was that children would
11 either need to move to another home or sometimes to
12 another agency if they didn't have that therapeutic
13 program.

14 So with Enhanced Family Foster Care, all foster
15 parents are therapeutically trained. The staff also
16 receive the training and part of that model is to
17 have treatment team meetings and that can happen
18 every three to six months or when something happens
19 with a case. If maybe the child goes awoke, you
20 would come back and have a treatment team meeting.
21 The information from that meeting is then what is
22 used to inform the service plan that is part of the
23 facts which is required as also which is done at
24 least twice a year but it can be done more often
25 again depending on what's going on with the case.

1 We have a team at ACS that does regular reviews,
2 random sample reviews, it's called PAMS but I can't
3 think of the acronym right now. I'll get it to you
4 but they look at cases. They look at the quality of
5 facts. So, this is how we are looking at, so they're
6 looking at the case dynamics and the progress notes.
7 What is in the facts, what are the services that are
8 being recommended? We also have a permanency
9 hearing. The family court is reviewing the service
10 plan and the progress of the child and the parent
11 because the facts covers both the parent and the
12 child so that's how we kind of monitor internally
13 what they're doing as the model is designed.

14 JESS DANHAUSSER: And there's at the initial
15 placement there's assessments that happen at the
16 Children Center and in other setting to make sure we
17 understand all of the needs of the children at that
18 moment.

19 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: According to the FY 2025
20 PMR, the number of children move in from one foster
21 family to another increase 1.3 to 1.4 per hundred
22 care days. ACS attributed those moves to the need
23 for better matches between foster children and
24 families. What specific strategies are and
25

improvements is ACS implementing to ensure that foster care family matching process and reducing placement disruptions ensuring that children are placed with the most stable foster family from the outset.

And this also came up last year when we had Shadow Day in Chambers as you guys know, we host Shadow Day here for foster care youth. The best time of the year. I'm going to process the plan now but we have one dynamic young person came in who had a list of legislation and I spoke about this in our hearing in September but one of the issues she had was she felt like she was put with a very strict religious family and she was LGBTQ and she was just like, it was just not a good match.

And so, how are we looking to kind of make sure that those things are matching up and lining up so that young people aren't disrupted less often?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Thank you for that Council Member. It's deeply important. After young people have been removed from their homes, they shouldn't be bounced around the foster care system. The numbers that you cite are per 1,000 care days so about 88 percent of the young people in care were stable last

year. At the onset of especially for teens, there's a process of assessment. Often there is a meet and greet between potential foster parents and that young person. They both can decide whether that's an appropriate match for them. We try to keep those to be very normal, maybe having a foster parent visit or having them go for a weekend or do an activity together as best we can because we don't want this to be a situation where young people feel like they're begin selected but we want to give them a voice in that process. They speak obviously on the kin side with the CPS, talk about where they might be comfortable within their family network and then during that assessment process that that is not an option at that moment. They get to articulate what kind of home they would like, sometimes whether there's other ages of kids. There are times where there are behaviors that are assessed that we want to make sure that they are not maybe a foster home that can dedicate their entire self to that one child. This is constant work. I think the other piece of this is when something, whether there is a sort of conflict in the relationship and as you may know teenagers and parents often have conflict, that we

are trying to bring solutions to bear there and not just saying, alright, someone is upset and we're going to move the child. So, we have something called a placement preservation conference and so everyone comes together to try to say, how can we support you here? What's the core issue? Sometimes it's around curfew. Sometimes it's around you don't want me hanging out with this person. Sometimes it's you don't have the right food. And so, to try to manage that, most often that is successful. I'm not satisfied with 1.4 and I think every child really should be stabilize in care so we're going to keep at it.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: No, thank you. I think it's definitely something we could all be working on and thinking about and even when I'm thinking about recruiting, how do we all work to do more recruitment for positive foster parents? I've someone so let's check in about it later.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Great.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: It's just something at the Council about foster care parents and foster care parenting. Uhm, how does uhm - one of ACS stated goals to ensure that timely placement for youth in

foster care. How does ACS define timely and what benchmarks are used to measure that success?

JESS DANHAUSSER: So, we don't have a specific timely placement number but we look at the number of - the percentage of young people going directly to kin care. We're working with a group called Action Research to really help us understand that initial placement. So, we look at metrics like when you are placed with a kin home, how long does it take you to get to an agency that is now supporting you and what is child protection doing in that intern period to provide funds and supports. So, that's a sort of stream of work. We look at how long children stay at the Children Center. And so, as I mentioned in my testimony, 60 percent or less than seven days. And then we look at sort of the long stair group and what is getting in the way for them. Sometimes in the long stair group, you have not only large sibling groups but you could have a three year old and a twelve year old and that twelve year old might have special needs. We do prioritize keeping them together, 95 plus percent of our siblings stay together. We never want to separate them if it's at all possible and we do well on that. So, those are

1 some of the metrics that we look at on a monthly
2 basis. Every day we get an update on these metrics
3 but on a monthly basis we sit down with Action
4 Research and we're developing plans on each of those
5 components. We recently had our CFS, our Child and
6 Family Specialists support child protection in a
7 different way to move the kinship process more
8 seamlessly because they're doing assessments of the
9 home. They're making sure that the kinship foster
10 parents understand the support that's available to
11 them, so it's a multifaceted process for this as
12 well.
13

14 You know we want to see you know our goal that
15 we've set for this year is a 55 percent of children
16 are going directly to kin and that we're seeing
17 closer to 60 or 65 percent never attached to the
18 Children's Center. We're not there yet but that's
19 our goal.

20 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And so, even when we're
21 thinking about - I know you mentioned earlier that
22 there is like report cards for providers and can you
23 talk about some of that accountability? Because one
24 of the things I did hear was like sometimes providers
25 don't like to push adoption because they like to keep

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1 That when sometimes when surrender can happen and
2 families can have an open adoption, we can pursue
3 that. So, we are making sure we actually have
4 slightly fewer adoptions this year over last year but
5 we have more children who are now on the adoption
6 track that we had the year before. Just to make sure
7 that when it's the right decision, that we're moving
8 as quickly as possible, we're not satisfied where we
9 are on reunification on any of it, so what we did was
10 under DC Mendez leadership and my office, we're
11 creating an enhanced permanency review with
12 providers. We're actually selecting cases, going
13 through them, seeing where they're stuck. Coming up
14 with solutions there and making sure sometimes it's
15 just in the paperwork, right? Did you get the birth
16 certificate? Did you get this? And so, that we're
17 moving those processes as quickly as we possibly can.
18 We can always - the court is part of it but we always
19 have to do our piece of it.

21 What Ina was also mentioning earlier, just on the
22 provider side, there's something called PAMS,
23 Provider Agency Measurement System.

24 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: There you go. That's why
25 you're the Commissioner.

JESS DANHAUSSER: But that's like case reviews and so, we're looking at our agencies making decisions that are consistent with the case facts and so and moving those along. You know I think a decision around termination of parental rights is a really hard one for agencies and for a judge.

And so, but there's times where it has to happen and so, we want to support them in that decision making and this is another place where we're using providers to support one another. There are agencies that have systems and their teaching other agencies how to do that. I think by and large we see in our reunification numbers that agencies are paying attention here and deeply care about giving children permanency but we can do better.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: In the five year strategic plan, ACS emphasized the importance of identifying kinship placements for children and young people. How does ACS assess the stability of kinship placements before making a placement, a permanent placement decision? Because one of the things that I'm always like curious about and obviously we want to keep families together and that is always the goal and that needs to be the priority. But sometimes I'm

clearance around criminal background, SCR, state registry and in and around the home. And so, and sometimes there's something that comes up in the state registry that's 30 years old and then that has to get ratcheted up to our managers are empowered to wave certain rules under the same law so that we can maximize that.

During that process, we found gaps in the support to the kinship providers. This is why we had the other unit of social workers, not just CPS so our child and family specialists, which is a separate title, they are now going out to support those kinship foster parents, making sure that not only they're going through the process to get connected to an agency but they know what's available medically. That there is reimbursement for things like getting to school. And I think we're seeing improvements there because of that additional support. We do have a parent to parent meeting and that's for kinship parents and parents and that happens within the first week to talk about, you know parents want as an example, their child's hair done a certain way or they want to make sure they have their teddy bear. Like, those kinds of things where they can talk about

ways in which the coparenting relationship can be as healthy as possible. We do have mediation that's often available through the court as well, whether the kinship and families are at. Sort of butting heads or not getting along or need to be able to come to a decision together and so, the court has expanded the availability of that and we're working with our providers to make sure that they take advantage of it.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, I mean it's definitely hard. That was one of the things that I'm always pondering because I'm like, I know we are focused on keeping families together in kinship. Sometimes there's just so much trauma there and like it's so much to uncover but they're not given like any like you know support around like therapeutic services for them or counseling or do they have folks that are - obviously you have a case manager that come and do assessments but like stuff to support the adult and not just the young person. Is that available as well?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yes, absolutely. I mean we have some, some services that are around early attachment that are available. There's certainly

therapeutic services for families that we can get access to. There's definitely therapeutic services for children. I think, I should note that the stability amongst kinship caregivers is higher than non-kinship caregivers. And so, we are working through this process most often to provide stability for kids but yes, those services are available. You know as I mentioned OMH earlier, the availability of mental health services generally is difficult, so I don't want to paint a picture that's perfectly rosy there.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, the shortage, yeah across the city. But it's just one of those things that has been really like pressing to me of like, hmm, some of these people are toxic. Are we sending them back to toxic - alright, what post recertifications support does ACS provide to ensure that families remain stable and successful after reunification and are there specific programs and services in place to prevent reentering into the foster care system?

JESS DANHAUSSER: So, we're pleased that reentry is down, even with reunifications being up. It's a little over seven percent and so, the 90 plus percent

of families are remaining reunified. We have a child discharge period where services are provided. Many of the behavioral health and medical services now that children in foster care went into managed care. The year after reunification, providers are able to continue those services for families after. You know to be perfectly frank; there's times where parents want the services from that agency. There's times when they don't want.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I can see why they wouldn't.

JESS DANHAUSSER: You know they're concerned about the oversight but we provide a whole series. Also, some providers for post permanency services that operate throughout the city, the Council on adoption. Did you want to add anything there?

INA MENDEZ: Not really but that particular group, they do a lot of work around for families where adoption or kin gap was the permanency option. And so, they will provide support. They can provide counseling therapy. They do a lot of preservation as well because sometimes it's possible that the adoptive - it's not a placement anymore but the adoption could disrupt and they do a lot of work on

keeping that family together. And then if it is the best decision that maybe the adoption is not going to work, we have a post adoption team that can work on supporting that child if they need to come back into care or if we need to find maybe other adults that can care for them.

JESS DANHAUSSER: There's also about 15 to 20 percent of reunifying families connect to preventive services. As I said earlier, often they want services from different providers and we facilitate that as well.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, I can see probably having a different provider might be helpful because they're like, hmm, they took my kids, I get it. The rate of maltreatment in family foster care more than doubled, increasing from 1.5 to 2.8 per 100,000 days, care days. Given the increase in maltreatment rates in family foster care, what additional oversight mechanisms are being implemented to ensure foster care homes are safe?

JESS DANHAUSSER: So, that is for the PMRR period, the four month period and so, we are still down year over year. Just a few years ago, it was 6 per 100,000 care days and so, this sums up to 98

percent of foster homes have no indication of maltreatment. Any is not okay. The child has come into care, the vast majority of these are and there's about 49 children were effected in 2023. I'm not giving 2024, not because I'm hiding it but because the 60 period for investigations, but we can get you that number. So, we've seen a significant decline. A lot of them are things where there's a situation about did the foster parent take the child to the doctor appropriately or something like that where there's a neglect situation.

In each of those situations, there is a full investigation. We created a new protocol to make sure that we understand because some of the maltreatment in care is also relates to something happened on a family visit and so a protocol to make sure all systems, agencies, Office of Special Investigations, Family Permanency are talking together. So much of this Council Member goes back to the recruitment and the support of foster parents that they're knowledgeable about the services that are available and so, I want to work with you. I love the idea of a day to do some recruitment. You know -

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: That's going to put the Council Members to more work.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Alright, you said it. I love it.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Every office should be helping with recruitment, so.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: That's 51 people.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Everyone's business.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Recruiting good foster parents. I got some ideas. We're going to work together on this.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Wonderful.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I know that Council Member Brewer kind of spoke about some of the aging out stuff but I just had a quick question around, can you guys provide any data around how many young people between the ages of 18 to 21 who have been discharged during their discharge period who have utilized the additional services. Who have like come back to either be reinstated or come back to get some of these services.

JESS DANHAUSSER: So we had ten children reenter. I think 90 are in that period. As I mentioned

earlier, we're seeing a reduction in children aging out and we're seeing even a greater reduction in children who sign themselves out. You know if you're signing yourself out of care, I really worry. We want to make sure you're housed. You have everything that you need and so, I believe it's about 90 young people who are in that category right now.

INA MENDEZ: There are 90 young people that are working with our supervision and 21 just to piggyback. There were 32 reentry requests so as I mentioned earlier, there's a meeting, there's a conference and sometimes even though there may be a request, they can be safely maintained and they don't come back into care but 10 young people did.

JESS DANHAUSSER: If you're in that category, you're eligible for all the housing support, so Anthos, Fair Futures, all of that is - that's what we're trying to engage them in to make sure that they know that they can either come back to care. In some of those conferences they say I really just want housing support and then they'll work with our housing unit.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: An ACS five year strategic plan states that FY24 Residential Care contracts

1 include workforce enhancements to support payment
2 equity staff recruitment and stability as the revised
3 payment structure that provide a great flexibility to
4 cover fixed costs because we did not ask for the
5 enhancement but I'm not going to go there.

7 What has been the response from providers to the
8 workforce enhancement and the revised payment
9 structure because I have heard like different things
10 from different providers on like, you know obviously
11 it wasn't meant to be a COLA and so it wasn't
12 necessarily, everyone didn't get it and it's in
13 different structures. So, I'm just trying to hear
14 what feedback have you heard around that?

15 JESS DANHAUSSER: So, a lot of good feedback. I
16 think the providers are grateful for the enhancements
17 around use of courts and housing.

18 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: They should get it anyway,
19 so I'm just going to speak for them.

20 JESS DANHAUSSER: Well, they've said different to
21 me but uh, -

22 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: You're not grateful. You
23 used to be a provider too.

24 JESS DANHAUSSER: I'm going to get to the other
25 side of it. So, you know it's been around that

1 providers are happy to be able to provide supports to
2 young people that weren't there in the past. I think
3 as you said, each provider has sort of structured it
4 differently. The COLA's come from the state budget
5 so they're advocating right now for additional
6 investment in that workforce, which I certainly
7 support. We've also heard on the flip side that the
8 money might not be in the exact right spot for what
9 their priorities are or what their needs are and so,
10 this is where we want to hear from the providers
11 around particular budget modifications that they
12 think make sense. There's a significant amount that
13 goes into a residential care placement. You know
14 well over, when you add it all together, it's
15 typically well over \$1,000 a day. And so, if it's
16 not in the right spots, we have to move that around.
17 For example, each provider has money for an evidence
18 based model. They might want to choose a model that
19 has a promising practice or you don't have to fly to
20 that particular place to get trained in it and save
21 some money there and invest it in their workforce.
22 We want to be open to that. They might be providing
23 their therapists one rate but their childcare staff
24 something else and they want to change that.
25

Obviously more resources for all of the staff I think is key, and so, that's some of the feedback that we've gotten and the flexibility we want to provide.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, we're going to keep fighting to make sure that you know there's equity, so thank you for that. The Parent Empowerment Parents PEP program embeds parent advocates in each case planning unit. Parent advocates are individual lived experience of the childcare, uhm child welfare system who have successfully addressed the issues that brought their family to attention of the system. What specific training do parent advocates receive to ensure they can effectively support families navigating the child welfare system? Because I met with a group early on around how they wanted to see more of this happening and not just in some of these meetings. We're seeing this being embodied and embedded more into all aspects of the program of having more people with lived experience in this.

And so, I would love to just hear what specific trainings are you guys giving these parents? What does that look like? What does the compensation look

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, DC Mendez really made this happen, so I'll let her speak to most of it. It is a full time salary position with benefits. The range is typically somewhere around \$40,000 for salary. So, something to look at there. We have 75 of the 150 budgeted positions on. This is a program that's been growing recently and we actually -

JESS DANHAUSSER: 75, 150 budgeted positions but know we don't want to rush that. This is a situation that is as - has particular experience and want to make sure that they have the training and support of the agencies. So, I'll ask DC Mendez talk about the work they are doing around the training and the cultural support at the agencies.

INA MENDEZ: Thank you Commissioner. Thank you for the question. So, the Parents Empowering Parents program started actually as a pilot in 2020 with two agencies, they had about nine parent advocates and they were working with just a handful of units. We co-partnered and co-designed the model with the agencies that were involved and also Rise. Rise does

1 all of the training, so the training talks about what
2 is a parent advocate. They have a Rise 90 day
3 practice model, so it really talks about what does
4 the life of a case looks like and so, the parent
5 advocates get that training. There's also a support
6 group component as part of the training piece.
7 That's for the advocates. Prior to rolling out, one
8 of the things we learned in the pilot was we can't
9 just say here, do a parent advocate program. We need
10 to have a culture shift.

12 So, there are modules that were developed in
13 training so that the case planner, the supervisor,
14 the program director, will have an understanding of
15 how this parent voice is important. How to embed it
16 in the case planning unit and how we can all work
17 together. How we can debunk this? How can we trust
18 the parent advocate? How can we now have this lens
19 that can inform case planning? We have a team that
20 specifically works with the agencies on the
21 development of the Parent Empowering Parent model and
22 so, it's an ongoing thing. It launched. It's new.
23 We're at about 75, we want to get to 150 like every
24 other social service role. There's turnover, so you
25 hire a parent advocate and maybe they move on but we

really are embracing this model. We believe parent voice; youth voice is extremely important if we want to make those shifts.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Is this part of a contract?

INA MENDEZ: So all EFFC units, so a unit is usually four case planners and a supervisor. The goal is every unit will have a parent advocate.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: What does recruitment for that look like?

INA MENDEZ: So, we partner with Rise again and other organizations and they have job fairs to kind of explain what the role is, what's the process.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I mean because that's a really specific niche, so.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, that's why Rise has been terrific because they do so much of the advocacy with parents and so, they have a contingency of folks who have been doing this work in different places. They - a lot of folks who are connected to Rise are also parent advocates at a variety of places, like the parent defender organizations and so, they come together not only for parent advocates that are going to be placed within the foster care system or the

preventive system but sort of more broadly and they've been doing an amazing job at it.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And do you have a similar thing with young people? I know we have like the Youth Advisory Boards and those things but would those be something that you would want to see also with like young people who have had like lived experiences being part of like case management as well as young people are transitioning out and is that something or part of like on your list of six billion things that you're already working on?

JESS DANHAUSSER: I think that it would be wonderful. I think there's a few things that are happening that are important. We obviously, we do it through SYEP. We do a lot of summer internship programs, young people at the agency doing lots of projects but also helping us. Each agency, many of them have youth advocates on board. We work with the youth advocacy committees that I was mentioning earlier. In addition, we're following closely some of the work that the Bravehearts are doing. They're an organization, they are actually connected in the FEC in your district. They are also connected with Children's Village.

OCFS just started something that I think has a lot of promise and we're looking at whether we could support it, which is a hotline for young people in foster care statewide. And so, the Bravehearts staff, so they are young people who have been in care. Some in the Juvenile Justice System, some in the foster care system. The staff that they respond they get young people to the support that they need. It's just launching and so we're meeting with them regularly to understand their success and I'd also like to see if at all possible we can find some resources for that kind of both centralized support but at the agencies as well.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And this is like a phone number where so they will call?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: We got to get an app to because no one talks on the phone anymore. These kids don't want to talk, so we got to get an app where they can have live chats with them as well.

JESS DANHAUSSER: They may, it's also text that's available through that I believe.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: They don't want to talk to anybody. They want to text you, so.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, let me triple check before I say -

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: We're kind of old in data results but you know. I just have a couple more questions and then we'll wrap up. One of I know Council Member Brewer also talked about this was just around like the busing and the issues around busing and one of the things that we've seen that like DOB providers provide per paid ride, share ride services, which is only available after a ten day waiting period for a school bus. Students in foster care still require chaperones that accompany them. This especially becomes challenging for foster parents with multiple children in the home. To reduce the finance and logistical staff burdened on agencies, would ACS contract with the prepaid services with vetted drivers that does not require a chaperone?

JESS DANHAUSSER: We would definitely be having to look into it. We looked into it in the past and there's been sort of staffing challenges and sort of enough that would actually cover the need.

We've talked to the Department of Education, New York City Public Schools that has some of these contracts. The agreement we made with them last year

1 was to create this reimbursement pathway for those
2 ten days. So, for chaperoning for the actual
3 transportation itself. As I was mentioning earlier,
4 we got the most recent data from them and there's
5 been some substantial reimbursements, \$100,000 plus
6 in some agencies but not all of them are taking
7 advantage of it and so, we've got to double back and
8 make sure they understand how to navigate that
9 process. But we'd be happy to take a look at
10 additional solutions here because it is definitely a
11 challenge.
12

13 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah. You know one of the
14 things, I mean this is one of the things we're
15 yelling at the DOE hearing just around like, if we
16 look at the amount that we're paying on contracting,
17 we can just bring it back and have our own drivers
18 and do it ourselves with the insurance but we can
19 only look at because that would actually help with
20 some of this stuff and some of these issues. But
21 that's not your fight, that's DOE's fight but you
22 know whatever.

23 Advocates have shared that ACS used to provide
24 direct transportation such as car and van with
25 chaperones to the foster care. Is this something

that you can get from schools while waiting for the bus on that ten day waiting period and have those services been discontinued?

JESS DANHAUSSER: As far as we could tell, this only was happening at the Children Center and then various with some places related to residential care. So, would love to learn more. We'll reach out to COFCCA to understand.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, this was actually - these questions are actually directly from providers. So, they were bringing this, so I will definitely make sure we'll follow up and we can get you instances that you have as well.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: The next question and final questions are just around like insurance and liability. This is another thing that came up when we were meeting with providers. Arriving costs of general liability and sexual molestation liability insurance is effectively effected providers nationwide. Last year nonprofit insurance alliances of California announced it would not be renewing coverage in California for foster care agency. How is ACS working with foster care agencies facing this

financial pressure? And has ACS explored any strategies such as pulled insurance options, advocacy at the state level for funding assistance, or policy changes to help mitigate the burden on providers?

JESS DANHAUSSER: Yeah, this is a hugely important issue and providers cannot operate without insurance in our space and for very good reasons. And the California example is one that we're watching closely and are very concerned about. We had not seen providers not be able to access care yet here but we're hearing that there several who are concerned as they enter into negotiations for insurance. We have been advocating at the state level to make sure that they understand the issues here, including directly with the governors office. They seem to be quite engaged on it. I understand that the state health insurance leadership has recently acknowledged a COFCCA that they are focused on this and concerned.

It really does need to be at the sort of broadest level of statewide solution because so many of the levers around insurance, the statewide Health Insurance Fund, etc., but also providers operate beyond the city borders and so, they have to have

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CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah. I would love to make sure that we're working together on the advocacy at the state level. I was just up there not only this weekend but the week before doing some advocacy and so, especially let's figure out how to do that more collaboratively. Because I think that uhm, insurance is not just an issue in this space but in a lot of spaces and it's not a sexy topic, so I don't think

people want to lead with that but it is necessary.

And so, a lot of programs will lose you know contracts and funding because they are not able to get insurance, so we definitely have to figure out solutions before we get to a place where it's dire.

JESS DANHAUSSER: And I'll add as you know Council Member, the agencies that provide foster care in New York City also provide billions of dollars of other services through every system. So, this is an important issue for the whole sector.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah because everything is interrelated but sometimes we, people don't realize how interrelated it is. So, definitely want to work with you all on that as well but with that, I am done with my questioning. Thank you guys for being here. I appreciate your expertise and always being so open and honest. And with that, I'm going to take a quick five minutes recess.

JESS DANHAUSSER: Thank you Council Member.

RECESS [02:03:42]- [02:07:59]

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I now open the hearing for public testimony. I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such,

members of the public must remain silent at all times. The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recordings or photography will be allowed at the witness table. Further, members of the public may not present video, audio, as testimony but may submit transcripts of such recording to the Sergeant at Arms at the conclusion of the hearing. If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please feel out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and wait to be recognized.

When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's topic and I mean, we will be staying on topic, evaluating New York City Foster Care System. If you have written testimony or additional written testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of the testimony to the Sergeant at Arms. I will now call the first panel. Fernando Canteli De Castro, and I'm sorry if I messed up your name. Everson Ladson, Lyn Lamadrid. Oh, I'm sorry. I am sorry that I am butchering people's names, I apologize and Dr. Charles. You could put the other chair at the end so they don't have to be on top of each other.

FERNANDO CANTELI DE CASTRO: Good afternoon. My name is Fernando Canteli De Castro and my story highlights how ACS fails to support foster children and families. For almost three years, my husband and I put all of our energy into caring for two small children but we want to tell their protecting their privacy because privacy can not be used as an excuse to cover up a systemic failure that continues unchecked.

We were fully committed to kids returning to their parents. See this picture. It's us with their mother on our foster daughter's graduation, 15 months after the kids came into care and they were placed with us. On that day, were hopeful for reunification but just four hours after this picture was taken, the kids came home terrorized. Our foster daughter told us that during the supervised visit at the foster care agency, she was forced to talk to the aggressor, the person who had a restraining order from her. She had nightmares and we told the kids worker but she strongly denied it ever happened and told us to not report it to the kids lawyer. She even said our foster daughter was lying. Weeks after this picture, it was proven that these calls had happened.

On January 17th, after kids had been in care for 33 months, we spoke with Danhausser and Denise and he suggested that the problem in our case was ineffective communication and co-parenting and that the focus should be instead on listening to birth parents voices and understanding that they believe in the best interest of the children. By that, does he mean watching as the kids get revictimized over and over again without saying anything about it?

And let me be clear about who is failing in our case. It is SCO, Family of Services and ACS. They would not approve the kids vouchers. They did not follow restraining orders. They did not provide insurance cards for the kids for five months and they did not have a medical team for a year and now, they're not making sure the kids go to school every day.

On multiple occasions, we tried to report mismanagement homophobia to this office that the Commissioner mentioned as advocacy but the response was always the same. If we didn't like, just give the kids back and change the agency.

We're committed to these beautiful, smart, creative, beautiful children and ACS Commissioner

Danhausser can try to humiliate us with more and more investigations but our commitment goes far beyond his tenure. I'm about to finish.

Many people usually tell us, "Oh my God, these kids are so lucky to have you because you are fighting for them." No, I am very lucky to have taken care of them but no child safety in this city should depend on luck. Thank you.

LYN LAMADRID: Greetings to the Committee and thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Lyn Lamadrid, a member of the Parent Council at the Children's Village.

We provide one of the broadest continuums of programming in New York with an emphasis on trauma informed evidence-based family and community programming to keep at-risk youth safe at home with families and to reunite youth with their families after placement. We hear so much about family values. How about investing in families?

I came to The Children's Village after many years of trying to heal my family and help my son. There was a time for like two years in a row, I'd leave the doors open between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. because if the cops were going to come tell me my son was dead, I

Staff retention was high, and I had great people working with us. I made Wednesday dates with my son, and through Children's Village, we found the two best foster dads one could hope for ever. These dad's still are part of my family. Now, I was lucky, some parents aren't. We are at a time when we need more funding to keep staff. Families are only as good as the people pouring into us. Families are only as strong as the people who help us through. But when you take an angry, untrusting child, tell them to trust and then their worker has to leave in a few months and not by choice, but because they cannot pay their own bills and they need to feed their kids, it disrupts everything.

I have had great workers and I have seen great workers at the Children's Village, and I've seen how hard it is when families lose those connections. It took my son a while to get right. We didn't just stop at the - he messed up in a few places -

What I'm asking for, today he 26 and he has a family of his own but if you take the same services. You take my grandsons mother, she was left at a police station as a child, placed in numerous foster homes and never received the services she needed. As a result, she has left two of her children. My grandson has felt abandoned and deeply hurt. If we invest in preventive services and family and staff, we are ultimately investing in children. I have been part of the Children's Village Parent Council for ten years. I believe in this work. I believe in paying forward the blessings my family has. I believe in investing in families. I believe in hearing in families. I believe certain times like they gave back my grandson. I had my grandson for a little bit. They gave him back to the mother and the mother again just dropped him off and I get it. I get she needs services too. That's what I am also praying for as well but I also urge you to listen to us, the people that take care of the children, that you drop the children, give the children to because we matter and we should also be heard. I urge the City Council to invest in policies and programs that uplift families rather than break them apart but also listen

to all families, not just the biological ones. Foster care should be the last result, not the first response but also listen to the foster parents and more investing in prevention family preservation services, foster parents equitable support, we can build a system that truly serves the best interests of children and families.

Thank you for your time and your patience.

EVERSON LADSON: Okay, my name is Everson Ladson. I'm Fernando's husband. I want to talk about a chilling message that ACS is sending to foster families, as well as their contracted agencies. They're telling foster families in New York City, advocate for child and you'll be punished.

In our case, the pattern could not have been more clear. When we told the legal advocate and the court about their contractors refusal to provide services and violations of court orders, allegations were made three hours later. When those were dismissed, the agency resubmitted them. When we reported strange men coming and going in visits and an injury that our foster child sustained at a supervised visit, allegations were made days later. In fact, our foster children's advocate successfully removed the

caseworker from their case because she was putting the children in danger. When SCO saw in the children's lawyers petition that we were among her sources, they removed the children without warning three days later.

Now, that sudden removal was after two and half years of attachment between the children and us. Like the others, all of these allegations were investigated and unfounded. In fact, we remain in the 98 percent of foster parents that Commissioner Danhausser mentioned with no founded allegations. When the agency learned that we won the appeal, they refused to return the children to our home and instead submitted the same allegations for a second time within 24 hours.

Those two were investigated and unfounded but this time ACS's leadership went with their contractor and against their own investigators. Despite the allegations being cleared, they declined to return the children to the home that they had known for two and a half years. Specifically, citing a report that the contractor put together claiming that the children were inappropriately exposed to sexual content because they had seen my husband and I kiss

one another on the lips. ACS has been aware of this particular agencies homophobia for years. We and other LGBTQ foster families that have reached out to us have reported it to them in the past and they have done nothing. But we were shocked when ACS's leadership and Commissioner Danhausser actively endorsed it.

Two weeks ago, New York one exposed the injustice and most importantly the trauma that it has effected on these two children. Hours later, ACS moved the children again to their sixth home in four months. The next day, ACS called us informing us that they were opening another investigation into our home. More than 100 days after removing the children. After two previous allegations were invested and cleared by them and the NYPD and right after hearing that the press was coming out. It's shameless.

In closing, I ask you to imagine, what does it do to a small child to have six sets of parents in four months? What does it do to a six year old and to a three year old? I hope this Committee will hold ACS leadership accountable because they are not just failing these children. They are actively harming them.

DR. SOPHINE CHARLES: Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Sophine Charles, the Associate Executive Director for the Council of Family and Childcaring agencies. We represent more than 180 agencies across New York State. We're a membership organization and advocates for the agencies that provide foster care.

I want to, on a high level, lift up four important factors as you investigate the foster care system, insurance, staffing, procurement issues, and prevention services. Foster care is sustainable only if we're able to keep our agencies insured and in practice with liability insurance. So, as we have this hearing, if we're not able to insure our agencies, then the city will be responsible for the direct care of the children that are currently in foster care. And I'd also like to just urge the City Council to work with the Mayor's Office and the state governor's office to assist the foster care agencies with and accessing insurance and creating a risk pool in order to ensure that agencies can remain in business and insured.

I would also urge the City Council to carefully consider the magnitude of all of the changes that have already happened in foster care and through ACS

over the many years. We're not there yet and we haven't covered everything that needs to be covered in order to fully support children and families in foster care but COFCCA supports all of the reform and we encourage the City Council to continue funding and creating a pathway for additional child safety enhancements and practices.

COFCCA also requests the City Council to elevate the importance of the workforce and the staff and value their value in providing foster care services. An investment in salaries, scholarships and tuition assistance to help agencies sustain a highly trained and credential childcare workforce. We also encourage actions to reform the current city procurement system. Agencies are not being paid. It's hard for them to provide quality services. If the city is not paying them for services already rendered and we also encourage the City Council to make sure that prevention services in their contracts are getting the true cost of what it costs to conduct services.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you so much Dr. Charles just to echo some of the stuff. Everybody knows I fight really hard to reform this procurement

process but it is years of bureaucracy that we're trying to untangle here and I'll continue to be a champion to make sure our folks are getting paid for the services and uhm, just like I just told the Commissioner, we definitely want to make sure that we're aligned as we are also going to the state to lobby to make sure that funding is adequate and supported and you know I'll continue to be a champion at the city level.

So, thank you for that testimony but I did want to turn my questions; I have a few questions. For all the parents on that on the panel today and in just talking about some of the I guess disconnect that I've kind of kept mentioning through the hearing around like what's happening at the top and the vision and how it's not necessarily being trickled down. You know I'm really sorry to hear that one that you know you guys are still fighting to get the children back. All of you are fighting to get children back and one, I want to say thank you. Because it is important that we have people continuously fighting for our young people.

I'm a fighter as well for our young people and so, it's always really good to see people who are

1 saying, no we want to do right and to do good by on
2 the young people but I had a question because the
3 testimony Mr. Castro that you provided, you said that
4 you tried - that the agency had you wait five months
5 to get uhm, I guess the medical or insurance cards
6 because you were trying to provide services. Is that
7 - that sounds a bit strange. Why wasn't that given
8 to you when you got the children? Why would you have
9 to wait five months? Did they give you a reason for
10 this?
11

12 FERNANDO CANTELI DE CASTRO: So, the system is so
13 messy that when the kids were removed from their
14 parents, they didn't have our phone number correct,
15 so the kids stayed in the shelter for a whole weekend
16 and they called us on a Monday and said, "how are the
17 kids?" And we were like, "what kids? We don't have
18 them at home." So, it took them five months to
19 provide Medicaid Healthcare Insurances and each one
20 was different and complicated. But at the same time,
21 the agency lost the only doctor they had, so they
22 didn't have medical service in the agency and they
23 didn't have healthcare insurance cards.

24 We had a letter that said that all the costs
25 could be covered by whatever, but we couldn't get

COVID tests for the kids because we didn't have insurance, so we had to pay them out of pocket. And when the kids were moved, they didn't give them the insurance, so the new foster mom texted me to ask me for the insurance card because the agency was not giving it to them.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: So, you had the insurance card or the agency had it but they just didn't communicate that?

FERNANDO CANTELI DE CASTRO: Yeah, so I had to send them myself to the new foster parents after weeks.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Uhm, and there was some - you said also in the testimony, I don't think it was you, I think it was your husband who mentioned that there was allegations against the agency around homophobia. Could you talk to me a little bit more about that? Because that to me is concerning because like I said, I had a hearing on that and as you can hear, the Commissioner also said that that is something that's not tolerated. And so, for me that is also really important to kind of highlight, especially because we have such a high number of LGBT youth in the system and if we have an agency

that are doing homophobic things, that's a huge problem for me.

FERNANDO CANTELI DE CASTRO: Yes, so the very first time that we reported this to the agency itself was to the case workers manager in November of 2023. Nothing came about. Then when the first set of false allegations by the agency against us were filed in April and May of 2024, ACS actually made note in their final report when they were explaining why those allegations were unfounded that we had voiced concern to them about the fact that we were being targeted for being gay.

So they put it in their reports, but no one reached out to us. No one reached out to the case worker. There was nothing that took place in -

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And I remember because I was part of the interview but when I saw the footage, uhm, the ACS worker admitted that it was - that the agency was doing this because of that and you guys had it on a recording correct?

FERNANDO CANTELI DE CASTRO: Yes, that is correct.

EVERSON LADSON: Yeah, this is the Office of Special Investigations, which actually responds to

all investigations into foster families. It was a whistle blower from within that department who told us that everyone basically knew that we were targeted for being gay and that they weren't willing to do anything about it. Who also said by the way, that the allegations were going to continue, which is what exactly we're seeing now.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And how many allegations have been brought up against you guys thus far?

FERNANDO CANTELI DE CASTRO: Eight - seven.

EVERSON LADSON: Seven.

FERNANDO CANTELI DE CASTRO: All from the agency or the birth parent?

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: So there all from the agency and the birth parent, all seven, okay.

EVERSON LADSON: And I'm excluding from my testimony anything related to the birth parent. I want to make it very clear that we are not a foster parent who are opposed to birth parents. We definitely believe in reunification.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And Lyn, Ms. Lyn, you spoke about the birth parent of your grandchild. They were reunified with her and then she did the same thing

again. You have to talk into the mic. When they got taken away again, were they given back to you?

LYN LAMADRID: No.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Okay, can you tell me what happened?

LYN LAMADRID: Two and a half years later she did it again and at that time, the courts did not see the value in my son. Didn't see the value in that, so what they did was, they told me I would have to deal with her now to see my grandson. For two years, I didn't see my grandson. And then I did and then one day I got a call saying she left - now she has two children she left and so, they found my grandsons brothers aunt. They found the aunt and she took my grandson in.

Just recently after one year of going back and forth, after the same judge a few years ago, kept on trying to get the mother to take the children, my grandson is now with my son. He just got custody of his son and the other child is with the aunt but the mother won't release custody of that one, and she has a third child but not in care. They allowed her to keep the third child but I was not allowed to BS but I was not allowed to see my grandchild for over two

1 years and my son was not allowed to see his son for a
2 while, for a long time. We tried, we did it the
3 right way and then I said, the last time that I've
4 been virtually in court, I said we're going to be
5 back around in this and I know when he was with me, I
6 put him on a schedule. I had him, I noticed he was
7 on the spectrum. It was during 2020, 2021. I got
8 him six evals virtually. He got services. Me and my
9 sister taught him how to sign and say more. We had
10 all these things and then I didn't see him for two
11 and a half years and then when I saw him, he didn't
12 remember me. And even though now he's with my son,
13 he doesn't know who I am. He doesn't know anything
14 from when I had him.

16 And it took him awhile but now he's verbalizing
17 and he's thriving. He's in school. He's doing well
18 and I just I'm grateful. I am grateful but I am also
19 upset because had the court just listened when I said
20 she was not equipped to do this, we would be here
21 again. Had somebody listened, my grandson, it broke
22 my son's heart. It broke my heart. My grandson
23 said, he still sees his mama and visits and that's
24 not even, she's not even consistent with that but he
25 has come home and said, I want to see my mom but my

mom doesn't want to see me. And we continue and I say, yes, some parents deserve their kids back. I am never going to say no but I also say and I know Children's Village says return to parent. That's what our moto is but not every parent needs - We need to stop doing damage to kids.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah and I think that's what it is right? I think especially when you have loving people. So, one I just want to again say thank you guys for fighting for these young people. It's extremely important and also rare right? We have a grandma fighting for her grandson and we have folks who are fighting for their foster children and please understand that it does matter. Whether you believe it or not those kids will remember that you fought for them when no one else did. They'll remember that their grandmother stood for them and is fighting to see them, and even in this hearing today, because so many young people feel like they don't have a voice and so, I really appreciate the fight. Like, and thank you because I think also just highlighting some of the things that I was trying to even say at the hearing that what is happening on the ground is not necessarily what the vision is and then

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EVERSON LADSON: We have our license until the 22nd of March. The agency that licensed us notified us shortly you know as all of this was going on that they were closing our home because the specific reason is type of home not needed.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I'm sorry, excuse me?

EVERSON LADSON: The specific reason that our home is being closed is because type of home not needed.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Okay, well, that sounds interesting because as we heard today, we need and we're trying to do more recruitment for parents and specifically LGBTQ parents because we had a hearing and Ali Forney is going to be up here next so they'll also talk about how we need more of these homes open because we have such a great need in RHY community. So, that actually really peed me off.

So, I'm going to stop asking questions here and I will definitely follow up and thank you guys. Continue to fight. Do not stop fighting for these young people. Do not. I appreciate it and whatever I can do to be supportive, my staff is around somewhere so please connect with them as well. Thank you to this panel.

I will be asking the next panel to come up, Galloway, Kearny Coghlan, Charles Budnick, and Sharon Brown. Whoever can start. Thank you.

GALLOWAY: Good afternoon Chair Stevens and the Committee on Children and Youth. My name is Galloway, I'm the Advocacy Manager at the Ali Forney Center, the nation's largest organization dedicated to serving unhoused LGBTQ youth. Today, I am here to talk about an urgent attention to the discrimination and systemic failures that LGBTQ youth and foster parents are facing within the New York City Child Welfare system.

As you've already heard today, foster parents are experiencing this. Would love to connect to you because ACS and OCFS has come to us. We're trying to figure out how we can get more LGBTQ foster care parents, yet we're shutting them out. So, we're definitely going to talk about that but we've seen so much discrimination in the last year from SCR and ACS workers on homophobia and transphobia and we need to talk about the accountability and the insufficient trainings, the workers are compounding that trauma onto those queer and trans youth. I want to highlight though since June, we wrote this paper and

1 we have been meeting with ACS to talk about these
2 needed changes, and these are some ways that we've
3 started to work with them already. We've included
4 and established a division of child protections for
5 LGBTQI point people. We've established it and
6 started to facilitate best practice trainings and
7 developed a prevention plan for families and they
8 designated an RHY point person in these division of
9 child protections. That's great but we got more work
10 to do. I want to highlight the things that we need
11 to get done. First, we got to create a policy
12 reform. They have not updated the policy reform from
13 ACS since 2012. So, we need to make sure that LGBTQ
14 youth are included in that and we need - we want to
15 recommend that we structure this system to using a
16 red, yellow and green flag to ensure that workers
17 respond appropriately, so this is really checking
18 those workers.

19
20 Secondly, we need to have a tailored mental
21 health services so LGBTQ youth in the foster care
22 experience higher forms of depression and anxiety so
23 we need a partner to fast track those. Third,
24 affirming family therapy, comprehensive education
25 programs and lastly just want to highlight the

legislation we're supporting, which is Intro. 56, Intro. 81 and Intro. 52. Again, I'm here to talk further about these needed changes but want to make sure others have time so thank you all.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you so much.

KEARNY COGHLAN: Good afternoon. Thank you. My name is Kearny Coghlan and I am a Policy Fellow in the Family Defense Practice at Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem.

As family defenders, we are often in the position of seeking accountability from foster agencies but we can't do that without City Council's help. We know that these agencies receive over \$600 million from ACS, yet it's astonishingly hard to get information on these contracts or the data that they collect. We are asking the Council to support transparency and data and evaluation to provide accountability to families and to facilitate stronger oversight by the Council.

The parents we represent had their children ripped away from them because of speculation that the children are at risk. The children are then put in foster placements where rates of disappearance, abuse and trafficking are shockingly high but their parent

To our knowledge there is no audit to ensure foster placements use these funds for the benefit of the child. We also know that foster agencies steal

survivor and disability benefits from the children in their care. This was raised at a hearing last spring and we still don't have answers on where that money is now.

It is a massive conflict of interest when foster agencies are tasked with monitoring themselves, or when ACS, their contract provider who never doesn't renew contracts is meant to monitor them. There needs to be data that is publicly available and easily accessible so that the people of New York can see what's really going on. Thank you to the Committee Members and the Chair for your time and attention in this matter. I'll be submitting written testimony with more detailed recommendations.

CHAS BUDNICK: Good afternoon Chair Stevens. My name is Chas Budnick, I work at the Brooklyn Defender Services.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Just pull your mic down a little bit please. Thank you.

CHAS BUDNICK: Okay, thank you. Within the Family Defense Practice, which represents parents in Article 10 Abuse and Neglect cases and specifically, I work in our preserving family bonds team which focuses on late stage foster care cases and

1 termination of parental rights violence, and I'm here
2 to talk about some disconnect. The you know, the
3 Chair recognized that there have been some
4 disconnects between what was said about policy today
5 and what's happening on the ground. We see that case
6 planning lacks alignment with the law. You know that
7 the law says that the first obligation, states first
8 obligation is to provide parents with the assistance
9 necessary to reunifying and to support kinship and
10 return to parent. We're not seeing that happen and
11 we're seeing that case planning is not aligned with
12 social science. That children need security to feel
13 safe and loved and to know that the world is
14 predictable and at least make sense. At the person
15 to whom a child is attached is a person that they see
16 meeting their needs and that parents opportunities to
17 do that within the system is severely restricted and
18 is not reflective of their capacity or their desire
19 to do so.

21 That children can be provided with security
22 through a stable connections to extended family,
23 friends, neighborhoods and schools, and that from the
24 custody context, when there is significant conflict
25

between caregivers, that becomes a problem that's internalized for children.

And so, what we would like to see is that case planning stays in foster care temporary and brief. That there is an actual move to implement the policy of least restrictive visitation. That if there is a removal, there should be consideration of the duties of parenting that can still be performed such as school pickup and drop off, attendance at curriculars, involvement of parents and their children's medical and mental health and educational needs, and an ongoing voice in how their children are doing and an opportunity - and it's an opportunity for agencies and foster parents or resource families to ally with parents for the best needs of children. We're also asking that case planning become collaborative and not about ultimatums. That you know agencies are uniquely positioned to make sure that these connections between providers for children and other you know schools and places that they're encountering are connected to parents. That they have access to that information and that they're sharing that information with resource families and we think that this will be something that will

promote the best interest of children and we're asking that case planning be reactive and proactive and that from the beginning from removal, there is planning for reunification.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you.

CHAS BUDNICK: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And you could submit that so we could also follow up as well.

CHAS BUDNICK: Thank you.

SHARON BROWN: Hello, my name is Sharon Brown. Before I start, I would just like to say remember Israel, defend Israel -

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Could you please make sure you stay on topic. Thank you.

SHARON BROWN: Yes I will. Release the hostages. Let people go. Okay, the foster care system, the way it is set up now is just to take children out of the homes and to - instead of reunification, they try to keep the children, have them adopted and things like that. But as it was testified, the monies for the children are abused and not given to the child or used for the child. They are out there without the proper garments for the weather and things like that. Their education, different things like that is not

1 taken care of the way the parent would. I think that
2 the foster care system can use some of the funds that
3 they have and use that if the parents, especially,
4 specifically, has a problem with money. The foster
5 care system could use that to fund the parents, not
6 that they would really be foster care for their own
7 children but they could technically -

9 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Give them additional
10 supports.

11 SHARON BROWN: Give them additional supports.
12 Now, the ACS a lot of times we've heard bad things
13 about the ACS. They've allowed things to happen to
14 children so when they step in, I'm going to applaud
15 them now because I don't believe that children should
16 be in homosexual homes. So, I agree with the
17 agencies and what they have done and stated, and for
18 everyone that's fighting for there to be LGBTQ
19 parents, there's me and many of us that are going to
20 fight to try to stop that. The agency has spoken.
21 They said they do not want it. They have made the
22 decision based on what this nation stands for. We
23 are a Jewish Christian nation. We call it Judeo
24 Christian. That just means Jewish Christian and that
25 is our values, no homosexuality. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you for your testimony. So, well one, I want to say that we do support everyone, especially the LGBTQ. They are a part of our community. We will continue to fight for them and ensure that equity is happening and make sure that we have those homes available but we respect everyone's views, but Lyn, I would love to make sure that we connect you with this family who you know I know Ali Forney has done amazing work and want to make sure that some of my biggest supporters and are working with this family to figure out some solutions. Because as we know, there is a need, a report that Ali Forney put out last year around the need for LGBTQ families to be foster parents and we talked about what that looks like at a hearing in September. So, we want to figure out how to make sure that we're connecting those families. But I also wanted to just ask a question around the transparency. I know you said that you were looking to have more transparency. What would that look like as far as what are the things you feel like is not available to you that you need so that you can get access.

LYN LAMADRID: I mean, one thing we'd love to have is access to the contracts between ACS and the foster agencies. We find a lot of times they're sort of passing the buck between ACS and the agencies of who is responsible for what.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Have you foiled to get access to the contracts, or is that - they have not been able to provide it? Was it redacted?

LYN LAMADRID: I think in some cases we have but there's so many that it just like, it ends up being a huge thing to get done and if we could collaborate with City Council on that I think it would make it a lot easier of a lift so that it's not like a game of Wack amole.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah.

LYN LAMADRID: You know the other thing is I think there's some significant challenges with ACS being the one to produce the data on foster agencies. I have looked through a lot of the reports. It is hard to sift through what is actually happening, especially in the weak points and not have it be just like uh, let's pat ourselves on the back sort of report. And I am grateful that the system is improving and that numbers are getting better but

there's still a lot of issues of concern and there's things that we hear in our clients stories that isn't being reflected in the data.

So, it's hard to tell how pervasive that is if ACS and the agencies aren't collecting data on those things. And we don't know that because we don't have the data.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Okay, I would love to connect you with my Chief of Staff who is here so we can set up some time to talk about what those transparencies would look like and figuring out how we can make the process a little bit easier and streamline it moving forward. You know always are looking to make sure that things are transparent because that's what it should be right. These are taxpayers money so we should be knowing how it's spent.

So, thank you to this panel and thank you for your testimony. That concludes the in person portion of public testimony. We now move to remote testimony. If you are testifying remotely, please listen for your name to be called. Once your name is called, a member of the staff will unmute you. You

may start your testimony once the Sergeant of Arms starts the clock and queues you to begin.

First person on Zoom, Pedro Gonzalez.

PEDRO GONZALEZ: Good afternoon Councilwoman Althea Stevens and to everyone in the Committee. My name is Pedro Gonzalez. I'm a father of Hope Gonzales and Sophia Gonzalez. Subsequently I have had experience with ACS now for six years. I do want to note to Jess Danhausser and to the ACS team that the processes between the foster agency and ACS have streamlined. That's been more smooth. Visitation has been much more streamlined. There hasn't been any concerns with that and as far as the communication goes, it's been very some tough conversations that were had to have but were necessary to drive the case forward. It seems that the family does recognize that the courts as well played a vital role in keeping reunification, which is something that you know I previously discussed with your office.

I want to do recognize that ACS has been pushing more for reunification with families and maybe in certain cases, it's not the best outcome for the children. It just varies by case by case basis, but

I do want to note that ACS in the 2024 year has improved and I also want to thank the foster agency as well, Children's Aid Society for being there during my time of need and greeting. I recently lost my mother I want to say on December 29th. She was laid to rest on January 8th. One of the biggest parts of the conversation that I had with her prior to her passing was about you know parenting and what's in the best interest of the children and you know, driving the reunification process forward.

Obviously, I have Ms. Komonis(SP?) here with me as well. She wanted to say a few words but as far as it goes, right now it's looking like the case is headed to a right direction. We're about to go post disposition on the case. I would like to make a few suggestions for ACS. Moving forward, one of the concerns is because of the families past history with ACS involvement-

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

PEDRO GONZALEZ: It could be a trigger for possible investigations being opened in the future. We do recognize that the processes have been much more streamlined and much more proficient as far as the latest allegations. They were unfounded, so I do

want to thank the Office of Special Investigations as well as OCFS and the Child Protection Office for ACS.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Well, thank you. Thank you. I'm sorry, time expired but thank you so much. I am so happy to hear these positive updates. I know you've been very consistent at being at hearings and advocating for your rights, so I'm really happy to hear that there has been a turn for the positive in your case but I do want to remind you we do have something in my office. So, please drop by the District Office, you and your wife. I know my Chief of Staff has been in contact with you, so make sure you stop in and condolences to you and your family regarding your mom and we'll continue to pray for you both. Thank you.

Next, we have on Zoom is Davene Roseborough.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

DAVENE ROSEBOROUGH: Yes, it's Davene Roseborough. Yes, my name is Davene Roseborough, I'm a parent advocate at the Center for Family Representation. Thank you Chair Stevens, the Committee, and City Council for giving us this opportunity to testify.

CFR is a citywide assigned indigent defense provider for parents who are facing ACS prosecution and the one that I had in Queens, Richmond County, CFR is also conflict provider for parents representation in the Bronx County. CFR employs an interdisciplinary model of representation. Every parent is assigned an attorney, social worker, a staff member and these members are supported by a paralegal supervisor and parent advocate.

CFR helps families prevent and navigate family police and investigations and works zealously to reunite families who are separated by the foster care system. We know that family safety and wellbeing can be achieved without surveillance prosecution and separation. We dream of testimony of the other defense offices, calling for additional data to improve transparency, accountability to promote family integrity. At CFR, we often see that families are separated and children are placed into the foster care system, fundamental questions about safety are replaced with questions around compliance. As the impacted parent, myself, raised in a foster care system, I have been punished about the compliance with the agency and it's used like this was the

agency you cared about the most. Often the focus was placed on the moves that the agency was trying to enforce when I asked them towards the workers rather than the services I completed and the determination and drive I had in meeting the needs of my children in addressing any safety concerns. This ended my process with obtaining my children back in my care.

At CFR we see countless other families experience the same thing. [DROPPED AUDIO 02:54:57]- [02:55:08]

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Are you still there? Well, thank you for your testimony. I don't know if were able to get her back but thank you for your testimony.

I call the next on line Zoom Tanesha Grant.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Okay Ronald Richard. Ronald Richard, you may begin. Okay, if there is no one else in the room that would like to have an opportunity to testify but which to do - if someone who is in the room who would like to testify but please if you wish to do so, please raise your hand. Okay, great, seeing no one else who wishes to testify, I would like to say thank you to everyone who came in today. This is a very important issue to

me and honestly, I think that we are moving in the right direction but we're not there yet and so, we'll continue to push forward and work with ACS around transparency and making sure that providers are doing what they need to do and understanding how do we shift the culture that has often been in a different direction for so many years. But I would like to thank the Commissioner for coming today and answering questions and Stephanie as always who works so hard to prepare for this hearing and thank you to all of the advocates and families who continue to fight for the family. Wait, she's back? Davene Roseborough, is she back?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: She can finish up. You're not going to start from the top. Is she back? Alright, well, she's not back. She's frozen still. Well Davene, I'm very sorry, we'll have you submit it but with that, I would like to adjourn this hearing. Thank you. [GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date March 7, 2025