

**Testimony of Linda S. Spears, Commissioner
Department of Children & Families
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways & Means
March 26, 2019**

Good morning Vice Chair Friedman, Representative Garballey, and members of the committee. My name is Linda Spears and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Children & Families. Thank you for the opportunity to update you on the important work of the agency, our accomplishments and current priorities, and the Governor's Fiscal Year 2020 budget proposal.

As many of you know, DCF embarked on an ambitious and unprecedented reform effort in September 2015, and set out to rebuild and stabilize the agency from the ground-up. I will begin today by sharing with you the strides that we have taken towards reform and the milestones we have reached in it, none of which would have been possible without sustained support from Governor Baker, Secretary Sudders, and you, the Legislature. On behalf of the Department, thank you for lending us your support, and for sustaining it.

In partnership with the Legislature, the Administration has added more than \$180 million to the Department's budget over the past four years. The Governor's FY20 budget proposal adds an additional \$43 million to the DCF budget, supporting an overall increase of more than 600 new staff since 2015. Increased funding has allowed these reforms to move forward.

Equally imperative is the tremendous work of my staff. Although initiatives may originate in a particular office or unit, it takes the combined efforts of everyone in the agency to put them into action.

Prior to my appointment as Commissioner, I co-authored the Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) quality improvement report. The CWLA report, which was released in May 2014, called for updating and developing new policy, reducing caseload, increasing management oversight, strengthening clinical practice, establishing a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) team, and ensuring staff are licensed and adequately trained.

We as an agency continue to follow and build upon the CWLA blueprint. I would like to highlight a few key achievements over the last year:

- In December 2018, the average weighted caseload was 18.13 to 1, with an average of 15.3 families assigned per ongoing social worker. This is down from an all-time high of 22.33 to 1 in June 2016. It is also the third lowest caseload since January 2015, when the Department first implemented its new caseload/workload standards, adjusting the formula for how cases would be counted. Importantly, we've sustained lower caseload ratios for more than a year, and caseloads for the last five months of available data were all below 19:1 on a weighted average. Weighted caseloads of 18:1 or lower remain our target for all staff.
- In January 2017, the Department hired 15 foster home recruiters. Through their hard work, the Department closed calendar year 2018 with 300 more unrestricted

foster homes than we had prior to the recruiters' arrival. They are working hard to grow our community of foster parents, representing the Department at over 2,500 community events, information sessions and private functions over the last two years.

- At the same time the Department is working equally as hard to support our current foster homes. In the last year we held our second round of annual regional foster parent forums, increased the number of foster parent support groups statewide, and launched a statewide e-mail list so we can provide foster families with important updates and benefits in real time. I am excited for the 2019 debut of an Intranet Portal where foster parents can access information and communicate with each other 24 hours a day.
- Between September 2015 and September 2018, the number of kinship foster homes increased statewide, by 16%. Increasing our kinship homes is just as important as increasing our unrestricted foster homes, as research tells us that initial placements with a family a child already knows are the most stable and successful. Last year, I shared with you the encouraging results of the early stages of our family find/kinship pilot, which designates one social worker in an area office to locate relatives who may be suitable foster parents right at the moment of intake. These social workers have jumped in with both feet and their efforts resulted in a 56% improvement in initial kinship placements in 2018. For 2019, we are expanding the pilot from 5 to 14 offices statewide.
- Adoptions increased 22% from FY17 to FY18, as we added staff in our regional adoption units, and recruiters brought on more pre-adoptive parents.
- We have honored our commitment to treating our policies as living documents. Before this administration, it had been many years since policies were previously updated. Three months into 2019, we have already updated and implemented 2 policies: Children Who Are Missing or Absent, and Foster Care Review.
 - The Missing and Absent Children Policy now provides more guidance on run prevention and includes protocol for all children involved with the Department, not just those in placement.
 - Foster Care Review is a federally-mandated meeting of biological families, foster parents, DCF staff, and community volunteers to examine case progress and plan for the child's future after Departmental care, whether that is reunification, adoption, guardianship, or lifelong connections. This year's updates to the Foster Care Review policy are the first since 2008; they create more procedural uniformity and emphasize permanency planning at every review, particularly for teenagers.
- Finally, I am pleased to be able to say that 100% of DCF social workers are licensed, an increase from 54% in October of 2014.

These accomplishments stem from the first phase of our Agency Improvement Leadership Team or, as we call it, AILT. We have used the AILT model since September

2015 to address complex challenges more efficiently and to help drive cultural and organizational change within the Department; under it, we've gathered our team of Central Office staff, regional directors, and other managers from the field to discuss and focus on priorities for agency improvement. AILT meets every single week.

For Phase II of AILT, we have identified 4 new priorities of improvement and have dedicated internal working groups for each: permanency, placement stability, social work practice, and services for intact families.

The **Humanizing Social Work Practice** group is developing strategies to strengthen clinical practice and emphasize responsiveness to toxic stress and trauma in our daily work. This will be accomplished by embedding practices that can help reduce trauma when children are removed from home and improving the quality of child visits. Treating families with respect and understanding the family struggles that contribute to child abuse and neglect, must be inherent in our agency culture.

One of the most awesome responsibilities of a child welfare agency is to stabilize children in a permanent, loving home as quickly and safely as possible. The **Timely and Appropriate Permanency Outcomes** work group is taking a hard look at current policies and processes around reunification, adoption and other permanency plans to see where we can be more efficient.

When children can no longer safely live in their family homes, we must find the best match possible, whether it is with a relative, a foster parent, or, for children with therapeutic needs, in congregate care. **The Appropriate, Stable and Well-Supported Placements** work group is building on the foster parent recruitment and retention initiatives from the first stages of our reform, while devoting new energy and focus to expanding the Department's use of kinship placements; developing stronger working relationships with our foster parents; and providing more resources and support to help foster parents who cope with the emotional toll of serving in this role

As I mentioned before, I am very proud of the enthusiasm and creativity of our foster care recruiters who have brought on a net gain of more than 300 foster homes. Along the way, as we have tracked our efforts, we know we need to cover much more ground in some areas of the Commonwealth and we have hired three additional recruiters to do so. Recognizing the needs of Hampden, Berkshire, Worcester, and Barnstable Counties in particular, we've added our additional recruitment capacity to the Department's Western, Central, and Southern Regions.

But we all know it is not enough to simply add more homes. Foster parents put their hearts and souls into caring for our children. Doctor's appointments, therapy, soccer practice, school conferences, visits with parents and meetings with attorneys are all part of a typical day and they need and deserve all the support the Department can give. We will continue to build on our new communication channels, which I described earlier, and strengthen our support system for all foster parents.

Importantly, we will be enhancing resources for kinship foster parents, who don't necessarily have the same grasp of the system as foster parents trained by the Department. In the fall, we received a \$300,000 grant from the federal government, and we are using it to hire two staff to help develop programming for kinship foster parents, including a specialized training, new informational materials, and a website.

At any given time, DCF serves approximately 80 percent of children at home. In these cases, our primary role is to connect families to services that help parents meet their children's needs and develop skills to keep them safe. Depending on the family, services may include behavioral health or substance abuse treatment, in home therapy, parenting classes, parent coaching, employment assistance or help with accessing financial resources.

The **Safe and Appropriate Services to Intact Families** work group is evaluating the Department's utilization of services, across the state, to better understand existing strengths and needs, while also examining our current practice to ensure that parents have a voice in the planning and decision making, when it comes to the services they receive. This work group is also developing new tools and processes for Area Offices to leverage in their regular clinical meetings to better coach and mentor staff, with the goals of improving critical thinking skills and decision-making on cases.

Additionally, the Department is engaged in a significant effort to redesign how ambulatory **behavioral health** care is delivered in the Commonwealth. In collaboration with other EOHHS agencies and the Secretariat, we are working to create a treatment system that presents a no-wrong-door point of entry with same-day access, integrates addiction and mental health services, provides community-based crisis response, meets the unique needs of children and youth, and upholds consistent evidence-based standards. Work is underway to align payments and policies to streamline licensure, credentialing, and regulations. Over the next year, we will engage closely with stakeholders, including consumers and advocates, providers, plans, and other experts.

BUDGET OVERVIEW

All of this work would not be possible without the Administration's steadfast commitment and belief in our mission to keep kids safe.

Governor Baker's FY20 budget recommends funding for the Department at just over \$1.05 billion, a \$27 million, or 3%, increase from FY19 projected spending and \$43 million, or 4%, above the FY19 GAA. The budget continues the demonstrated commitment by this Administration to our agency and our mission of keeping children safe and families strong.

Please allow me to highlight some of the items funded in Governor Baker's FY20 budget:

- For **Staffing & Hiring**, H.1 includes continued support for the significant investments in staff at DCF since 2015. This investment includes more than 600 new employees over the last four years, including social workers, social worker supervisors, and social worker technicians, as well as area program managers and additional staff to provide appropriate management oversight and support.
- Given projected **placement caseload** trends, the budget also has \$4.9 million in additional funding for placements, including \$1.6 million for costs associated with leap day in FY20.

- The Budget includes \$2.7 million above FY19 projected spending to support expansion plans underway to enhance the existing statewide network of **Family Resource Centers** begun in FY19, with costs annualizing into FY20 to a \$5 million increase over two fiscal years.
- Unlike prior administrations, the Baker-Polito Administration has increased the daily stipend for foster parents annually since taking office. The budget includes funding for a 2% increase to **Foster Care Rates** and clothing allowance rates effective July 1, 2019. I can't stress enough how highly we value our foster parents. Foster parents are a supportive presence as children navigate reunification or the adoption process. They do what every parent does — help with homework, tie shoelaces, drive to medical appointments and take them to museums and beaches. They provide an environment where kids can simply be kids and there is nothing better for children going through tough times.
- The budget also includes \$2.2 million to support a **Residential School Rate Increase** of 2.63%, to support increases in tuition costs for children in the Department's Care and Custody placed in residential schools across the state.

CONCLUSION

I remain firmly committed to advancing the work you and the administration has enabled us to do. Our strategy of addressing longstanding issues incrementally through the AILT process has proven to be the right fit as we strive to make sustainable systems and cultural changes. We continue to evolve as a data-driven agency, working in lockstep with Information Technology to increase capacity and with our Office of Management and Budget Analysis staff, now in their second year of leading a 6-week institute to train our field staff to use data as a management tool.

In conclusion, I want to thank you again for this opportunity to present this testimony and for your support of the Department of Children & Families.

Child welfare is difficult and critical work. Every day, our dedicated and hard-working staff navigates a complex array of safety and service needs and makes decisions that keep children safe and families strong. Social workers are working with children and families with far more complex conditions. While home removals have decreased, children and youth are in our care for longer periods. This summer, in partnership with SEIU/Local 509, the Chapter President and I together visited nine offices that are struggling. The issues are different and the remedies are different. But, we will continue to work together on behalf of some of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children and youth.

From social workers to attorneys to clerks to managers, they approach their responsibilities with tremendous grit and heart, showing struggling families there are people who truly care. I am grateful for each and every one of them and their selflessness in serving to the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.