

**Governor's Council on Pathways from Poverty:
Public Hearing on the Department for Children and Families (DCF)**

Summary of Recommendations from September 9, 2014

- DCF needs to listen to the voices of youth and parents
- DCF needs to reach out and get feedback from direct service staff
- Specifically for ESD, funding for regions should be reviewed and allocated at the appropriate level, based on need
- Review data about children in custody and open cases and use that information to make critical decisions
- Apply a more common sense approach to our interpretation of HIPAA guidelines- member of a team need to have access to information to be effective
- Establish and use a universal release of information in order to foster more collaboration
- Technology systems across the Agency are terrible- we need to prioritize building and supporting those systems, (Early Childhood CIS system as an example)
- We need to be able to access and use that shared information from the IT systems - ESD allows certain providers to directly enter into the ACCESS system which is extremely helpful- providers need to be able to access systems to share information about children
- Build on the CIS model to avoid duplication- use that as the basis for further integration; expand it into school age programs
- Information sharing needs to include all partners- AOE especially need to be included
- Build better accountability across the system- if agencies aren't successful, why fund them? Move towards an outcomes based approach
- Make it a priority to build positive relationships with families – focus on the quality of interactions, not the quantity
- Focus on technology, technology, technology
- A list of interested and involved stakeholders in child protection issues needs to include law enforcement, judiciary, etc.
- FSD caseloads need to be reduced- direct line staff are overloaded with responsibilities; they struggle with policies and procedures and different interpretations of those – there is too much time spent on crisis

- We need to move the system to a prevention focus so that kids don't have to experience abuse before we work with them- can we expand the Strengthening Families demonstration project to school age children?
- The Agency should move away from a fee for service model for service delivery
- DCF needs to improve the communication between Family Services and foster parents, particularly when there is a plan for reunification with biological families
- Work to ensure that meetings are more efficient and coordinate the multiple partners involved in a child's life
- Increase the amount of communication between social worker and family time coaches- it is often clear that the coaches haven't talked to the social workers before meetings and the messages get mixed
- Improve your data systems – the public is looking for transparency in tracking success and failures related to reunifications
- Increase the number and frequency of follow up visits following reunification- there should be follow up visits at 3 months, 6 months and at 1 year to ensure the child remains safe and protected
- Increase the resources dedicated to supporting families along the path to reunification to increase child safety- in one example, the family coaching agency couldn't provide the supervision for visitation in real life scenarios (home-based settings with normal life stressors in the mix) so biological parents couldn't get the practice they needed before their child was returned to them
- Create a system to prioritize/weigh cases more appropriately based on intensity of the cases to determine the appropriate caseload amount
- Implement coaching for foster parents to help them better address issues that may come up for the children in their care
- Understand that most foster parents have full lives and outside jobs, ensure that social workers are better coordinating meetings and responsibilities so that foster parents can better manage their time
- Guardian ad Litem (GAL) system- they should be paid to guarantee more commitment and time for them to visit children, pay attention to their needs and share info with legal counsel
- Technology should be used to help with scheduling team meetings; could help a lot with scheduling conflicts, sharing info and agendas and accountability

- There is a Coordinated Service Plan (CSP) process in statute (Act 246)- invigorate it and use it more frequently for cross agency teaming ; let's not lose the structures that work, we should enhance them
- Need to create understanding among system and service providers to understand and work together
- We need to address the lack of available resources and the capacity of social workers
- Build proactive and engaged state systems – the focus on prevention should be agency wide and across other state entities like AOE- DCF can't do it alone
- We need to focus on children's mental health as a component of child protection and safety
- We need to make the standards for investigation clear and available to the public
- We need to create clarity about what is happening when kids are removed and communicate that, particularly to educators and schools as they continue to see children each day and can support them
- There is significant work around transparency that needs to be done
- Need to address the issues around substance abuse for families
- Need to be aware of the need for mental health supports for kids and families when there is stress and trauma
- Create bundled rates vs fee-for-service rates so we can treat the whole family
- Establish better and more comprehensive communication systems - all info related to safety concerns should be shared with team members
- All family members, including grandparents, should be considered a part of the “team” around children
- We need to increase the monitoring of biological parents when violent convictions have happened- they need to have access to treatment and support
- Need to address the public concerns about case closures and inconsistency in that practice; make it clear as to when and why they are closed; particularly to those that report the suspected abuse or neglect
- We need to get more creative with parent engagement; explore Dr. Hudziak's work
- Ensure that schools know which DCF district offices they connect to and create a link between each school and the DCF office to ensure communication
- Review the need for new social workers in the FSD Burlington district

- Review the standards for initiating an investigation; one call should be enough to generate an investigation
- Include families, including concerned extended families, in the team and process around an investigation
- Address the need for extended families to be privy to information about the safety of children; sometime investigations do not offer concerned family members information about the safety of a child
- Examine the laws around visitation for grandparents during an investigation
- DCF need to go back to speaking for children, not for parents
- Focus on ensuring the safety of a child first, even if it means removing them, then consider the family and the necessary family work to reunify a family
- Increase the frequency of the assessment following reunification (60 day assessment)- they should happen more often after reunification to ensure child safety
- DCF needs to be the voice of the children
- Information should be public when there has been abuse and neglect in a home
- Address the DCF understaffing- currently teachers prioritize their concerns/reports because there is not confidence that something will happen
- Need to increase staffing resources
- Ensure that teachers hear back once they make a report- they need to know so that they can better support those children
- Include teachers in any teaming approach around child protection for individual children
- From an ESD perspective - improve technology; need to tweak policies and the data isn't available to help us make necessary decisions
- Beef up trauma expertise in AHS and across the board- specific to DCF, you lost positions that focused on trauma-informed training and TA- this type of position would assist case workers to feel confident in delivery trauma informed services - put dollars into that
- Create a pool of discretionary funds in ESD on a local level to address immediate needs- flex funds to be used beyond the policy and procedures
- Address the lack of consistency in interpretation of rules and practices in ESD from district to district

- AHS needs to focus on the need for safe and affordable housing - think differently about this – focus on brick and mortar and creating more housing stock
- Identify a lead service coordinator to ensure cohesion in family plans, especially related to the requirements that families need to meet to get back on track, integration is critical
- Ensure that the individual is determining the goals in their own service plans to promote empowerment
- Remember that "change happens at the speed of trust"; need to build trust within the system to create the opportunity for change - focus our time on building that trust so that we can create better outcomes
- Ensure more involvement of social workers in the lives of children in foster care; make sure that get the chances they need to succeed
- Make sure that kids in foster care are heard by their social workers
- Improve communication between DCF and the community to better protect young children
- Investigate all reports; don't depend on a level of severity to initiate an investigation
- Let youth speak for themselves
- Parents aren't being heard; find a way to bring their voices into the discussion and considerations about their children
- We need to address the structure and foundation related to how we do business
- Adopt a more holistic approach for parents involved with DCF- give them the info they need to parent their children- more resources need to go into parenting classes/education