



Office of Children and Family Services

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

SHEILA J. POOLE
Commissioner

March 31, 2020

Darlene Ward
Welfare Research Inc.
14 Columbia Circle
Suite 104
Albany, NY 12203

Dear Ms. Ward:

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) has received the Citizen Review Panels' recommendations to strengthen and support our child welfare workforce. OCFS shares the panel's commitment to workforce development and recognizes that a strong and healthy workforce is key to the safety, permanency, and well-being of New York's children and families. To that end, below are measures OCFS has taken to strengthen and support the child welfare workforce.

To support competitive wages for New York's human services workforce, OCFS has included a *Staff Retention Factor* in each of the past three Maximum State Aid Rate (MSAR) packages. This consists of a 3.25 percent increase to Direct Care staff costs above and beyond the standard two-year trending of staffing costs. Inclusion of the *Staff Retention Factor* is intended to support wage increases and minimize staff turnover. OCFS will continue to assess this and make recommendations through the MSAR process. The NYS Licensed Social Worker Loan Forgiveness program is funded and administered by the Higher Education Services Corporation. OCFS supports this integral program designed to increase the number of licensed social workers working in critical human service areas, including but not limited to child welfare or communities with multilingual needs. Any state-funded expansion of this program must be done within the context of the state budget.

In 2018, OCFS was part of the Governor's Health and Human Services Workforce Workgroup. As part of that work, OCFS formed and lead a committee that created and recorded "hold messages" for the NYS Human Services Call Center. The messages encouraged individuals to consider careers in health and human services, including child welfare, and callers were directed to the Department of Labor website for a listing of job opportunities.

In response to staffing concerns expressed by executive directors at the 2017 Voluntary Agency Summit, OCFS established the Child Welfare Workforce Recruitment and Retention Workgroup in early 2018. Membership included representatives from local departments of social services (LDSSs); voluntary foster care agencies (VAs); OCFS; the Council on Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA); the State University at Albany, School of Social Welfare; and the non-profit sector. The group identified several strategies to address the workforce crisis: Children's Corps, which uses a three-pronged approach of recruitment, training, and

support to improve recruitment and retention; the utilization of exit and stay surveys to understand turnover and retention factors; and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute Workforce Development Framework. These strategies were presented at the 2018 Voluntary Agency Summit. Additionally, in early 2019, OCFS hosted a statewide webinar for LDSSs and VAs that focused on the use and retention benefits of a stay survey.

OCFS has expanded the scope of the work to include recruitment and retention challenges specific to LDSSs. The Caseworker Recruitment and Retention Workgroup was established in 2019 to develop data-driven strategies to improve caseworker recruitment, selection, and retention. Because LDSS commissioners identified civil service testing as a recruitment barrier, representatives from both state and local civil service were members of the workgroup, as well as LDSSs, and the University at Albany, School of Social Welfare. The workgroup focused on three key areas: testing, qualifications and competencies, and a statewide media campaign. Currently, the NYS Department of Civil Service is seeking subject matter experts (SMEs) from LDSSs to review the content of the examinations and questions used both for the Social Welfare Examiner exam and the entry-level Caseworker Series. The SMEs will work with civil service to review existing items and write new items as needed. The purpose of this re-examination of current testing is to ensure that available tests focus on the skills and qualifications that these positions require.

The goal of the statewide media campaign is to elevate the image of child welfare workers and recognize the important work they do. This campaign is scheduled for release during Public Service Week, May 3 –9, 2020. OCFS is creating a media toolkit that can be customized by county. A prospective applicant will be able use an online interactive map that will directly link them to individual county websites. The toolkit will also include a Real Job Preview video and provide information regarding available positions. OCFS will also work with the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI), which has established a national media campaign.

During a recent presentation at the New York Public Welfare Association's (NYPWA) 151st Annual Winter Conference, workgroup members provided updates and ongoing efforts. During that presentation, attendees were also reminded that the caseworker exam was decentralized, thereby allowing candidates to test on an ongoing basis.

Promoting worker well-being and enhanced supervision to address burn out, a leading factor of turnover, is a top priority for OCFS. In 2017, OCFS rolled out a new Child Welfare Foundations Program training curriculum. This program was built on the premise that supervisors provide three functions of supervision: administration, education, and support. Recognizing that supervisors play a critical role when onboarding new workers, OCFS created an online supervisory toolkit to support that role. The Toolkit provides resources to help supervisors assist in the training and development of new workers.

Numerous training opportunities are available to supervisors to help them coach and support the workforce. OCFS continues to look at these training opportunities to assess the impact and identify the correlation between worker stress and turnover. KEYS (Keys to Excellence in Your Supervision) training is available to all child welfare supervisors and is required for child protective supervisors. KEYS thoroughly reviews the three components of training introduced in Foundations (administrative, education, and support) and emphasizes the importance of each component. KEYS focuses on the understanding and the importance of the parallel process – the way supervisors interact with their staff will translate to how their staff will interact with the families being served. In addition to the toolkit available to supervisors, KEYS training offers tangible tools supervisors can use with their staff that emphasize critical thinking and appreciative inquiry.

OCFS continues to explore ways to highlight how rewarding a career in child welfare can be and supports workers as helpful/change agents. OCFS is currently learning about models that can encourage family engagement and ensure appreciative inquiry is done with every family that has contact with OCFS. The goal of this work is to invigorate the workforce to decrease child welfare turnover and increase family engagement.

As New York State prepares for the implementation of Family First, our workforce is crucial to the safety, permanency, and well-being of our children and families. I appreciate the recommendations provided by the panels and will take them under advisement as OCFS continues its work to build a strong, stable, and professional workforce.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Poole', written in a cursive style.

Sheila J. Poole
Commissioner