



Testimony before the Senate Appropriations – Human Services Committee

Submitted by Jaime Russell on behalf of Children's Home & Aid

Good morning. My name is Jaime Russell and I'm the Program Director of Family Support Services with Children's Home & Aid. Thank you to Chair Feigenholtz for allowing us the opportunity to testify today. As an organization that began in child welfare 138 years ago and expanded to a multitude of family support programs, Children's Home & Aid is committed to seeing every child, every family, and every community thriving. With that commitment, it is crucial we focus our attention to tackle the root causes that require foster care as a response, including: economic insecurity, mental health, and substance abuse. We commend the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for the work that has been done to move towards prevention through their Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) planning. We support the investments that DCFS has made to support multi-system collaborations and enhance community-based partnerships as part of their proposed plan to implement Family First.

Through my work with the Illinois Pregnant and Parenting Youth in Care Home Visiting Pilot (IPPYC) and serving children and families involved in the child welfare system, I have seen the impact that evidence-based home visiting programs can have on strengthening families. We know that home visiting programs have been proven to prevent negative childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect and can decrease the risk of substance use later in life (Baizer, 2018). Children and families involved in the child welfare system, including those receiving Intact Family Services, have unique needs. Our home visitors can provide individualized support to parents and work alongside case managers. Recently, a home visitor has supported a youth in care, who is also a parent, while she obtained her GED, gained employment, and sought mental health counseling. The home visitor has helped her work on goals like potty training for her child. The home visitor has been with this youth every other week since 2018 and will continue to support her and her child once she is emancipated.

Through the IPPYC pilot and Erikson DCFS Early Childhood Project, we are learning how to adapt evidence-based home visiting programs to support these families. We know the Governor and DCFS understand the value of these services. Last January, the Governor announced a five-year plan to expand home visiting to all children in the state, starting with the most vulnerable populations— including children involved in the child welfare system. And, within their Family First planning, DCFS has included evidence-based home visiting programs such as Healthy Families America (HFA) and Parents as Teachers (PAT), to strengthen the parent-child relationship, build parenting skills, and build protective factors to prevent unnecessary entrance into foster care. Prevention focused initiatives within the FFPSA plan strive to engage entire families in prevention measures. As a lesson learned through the IPPYC project, while engaging fathers may be difficult to do if they are not in the home, it is an important piece of supporting the entire family. Therefore, we support any investments to better engage fathers as a preventative factor to entering foster care.

State investments in the Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) and Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) are crucial to ensure that we utilize family-centered interventions to keep children out of foster care, enhance familial healing from trauma, and build on nurturing parenting skills. In fiscal year 2021, as preparation for its Family First plan, DCFS expanded NPP and CPP in regions across the state. We fully support DCFS' continued investment in these interventions. Additionally, through our agency's utilization of Solution-Based Casework, we recognize the importance of casework practice centered on family strengths and engaging parents to identify and utilize their own plans for success. To begin their plan for success, families must have access to child care. We therefore applaud

DCFS' increased investments over the last few years for protective day care for families involved in Intact Family Services. Child care is an important tool in enriching children's development while providing support and a connection to a larger community of positive role models and resources for parents who are often socially isolated.

We know families that are at risk of entering the child welfare system have many needs, therefore it is critical to invest in programs that tackle the root causes of entrance into foster care such as mental health services, substance-use services, and anti-poverty programs. Many of these services are outside of what we typically think of as within the "child welfare system". Therefore, we recognize that strengthening families and ensuring the safety of children is not just the responsibility of one system and we commend any efforts that work towards collaboration across systems to support families. We stand ready to help the department in furthering prevention initiatives to ensure every child and family in Illinois can live up to their full potential.

Thank you again for your time and attention. Should you have further questions, you can contact me via email at jrussell@childrenshomeandaid.org or my colleague, Sarah Allen, at sallen@childrenshomeandaid.org.

Baizer, S., Isaacson, D., & Carpenter, T. (2018). *Stopping the opioid crisis begins at home*. Council for a Strong America. https://strongnation.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/409/8693f478-d803-4ce6-97d3-7a8cb7541b3a.pdf?1523649696&inline;%20filename=%222018-001FC_IL%20Opioid%20Report.pdf%22