

**TOWARD AN  
ORGANIZED SYSTEM OF CARE  
FOR  
RHODE ISLAND'S CHILDREN, YOUTH AND  
FAMILIES**

The Report of the  
Rhode Island System of Care Task Force  
**Executive Summary**

**January 2, 2003**

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## *PREFACE*

The Rhode Island System of Care Task Force was charged to design a full system of services that will provide effective supports and services to children and their families. Looking beyond the current configuration of services, departments and providers, the Task Force worked to design a system that builds on the strengths of children, youth and families through the most effective use of finite state resources.

This System of Care for our state's children, youth and families is a vision. It is a proclamation of shared goals and a desire for better outcomes. The importance of this vision to our state and its future served to induce all three branches of government into its preparation. Critical to the lives of our most vulnerable citizens, Rhode Island's Legislative, Executive, and Judicial bodies are each charged with distinct governmental functions relative to our children and youth. By participating in this planning process, no branch of government has sacrificed any of its authority, power or obligation. Constitutional checks and balances set the context for this vision and comprise the legal foundation of governmental responsibility which may not unilaterally be abdicated. In this new Rhode Island System of Care, if each and every child and family is to succeed, all three branches of government must be vigilant in fulfilling their distinct roles in the lives of children, youth and families.

Integral to any effort on behalf of children and their families is understanding the role and authority of distinct government bodies.

The Family Court has the statutory authority to oversee and implement all the duties as enumerated within Chapter 1 of Title 14, Chapter 11 of Title 40 and any other statutory charge as outlined within Section 8-10-3 of the Rhode Island General Laws.

The Department of Children, Youth and Families has the statutory authority and responsibility to mobilize the human, physical, and financial resources available to plan, develop, and evaluate a comprehensive and integrated statewide program of services designed to ensure the opportunity for children, youth and their families to reach their full potential, including prevention, early intervention, outreach, placement, care and treatment, and aftercare programs. The Department is the single authority to establish and provide a diversified and comprehensive program of services for the social well-being and development of children, youth and their families. In furtherance of its purpose, the Department of Children, Youth and Families cooperates and collaborates with the Family Court, other public and private agencies, and the federal government in the development and implementation of comprehensive programs to support children, youth and their families.

The Office of the Child Advocate, created in 1979, is statutorily charged with protecting the rights of children in State care. RIGL § 42-73-7 grants the Office of the Child Advocate the authority to take all possible action, including, but not limited to, public education programs, legislative advocacy and formal legal action, to secure and ensure the legal, civil and special rights of children.

While the Task Force made very effort to design a comprehensive System of Care, recognizes the challenges inherent in the implementation of any systemic change. Further, the Task Force recognizes that a body of law exists, both state and federal, which comprises the underpinnings of child welfare, juvenile justice, and children's behavioral health services. This report, its recommendations, and implementation plan must be viewed within that framework.

## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

This plan for an Organized System of Care for Children, Youth and Families is one that has been evolving for more than two decades. During this span of time, the system has grown -- with each attempt at crafting a better plan to ensure that children and families receive the right services to meet their needs. However, during these past 20 years, the growth has been biased in favor of residential treatment to the detriment of the development of community-based capacity that supports and engages families as partners in the helping process with children. We have not sufficiently invested in prevention or early intervention to identify and meet the needs of children, youth and families. There has been a paucity of data to guide better decision-making.

This plan finally establishes a foundation to act from national research and local knowledge. This report mandates a stronger, more urgent commitment to prevention and early intervention and education and, importantly, places a deep emphasis on ensuring an organized system of coordinated services and care.

Rhode Island's organized System of Care for Children, Youth and Families is built on the strengths of families and communities, the successes of past initiatives, and is responsive to the challenges of the past. It is a system that is operationally feasible, financially realistic and supported by broad consensus. This system is the strategic instrument for moving the State closer to the four outcomes embraced by the Rhode Island Children's Cabinet and other key state and community leaders:

- ❑ **All Children Entering School Ready to Learn**
- ❑ **All Youth Leaving School Ready to Lead Productive Lives**
- ❑ **All Children and Youth Safe in Their Homes, Neighborhoods and Schools**
- ❑ **All Children Living in Families that are Self-Sufficient, yet Inter-Dependent**

Within the pages of this document, there are three critical interwoven themes:

- ❑ **Family-Centered Practice;**
- ❑ **Prevention and Education; and,**
- ❑ **Promoting Best Practices.**

The fundamental values at the core of this plan are recognition and support for the role of the family as the primary caregiver for children, and that the optimum interventions for any individual child and their family are those most proximate to home with the full resources of the community made available to that child and family. This Plan also recognizes that "family" includes biological parents, adoptive families, extended kinship networks, legal guardians and temporary fostering families.

The Organized System of Care provides all families and primary care-givers ready access to the resources necessary to meet their child's developmental needs. The system has mechanisms to redirect cost savings from reduced reliance on restrictive and expensive out-of-home placements to community-based prevention and intervention services. Included among these resources are those that meet the basic needs of all children for healthy development, as well as special resources to meet the unique individual needs of children with disabilities and social, emotional, and behavioral disorders; children who have been abused and/or neglected; youth involved with the juvenile justice

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system; and, young women, whose unique pathways into the juvenile correction system, and their special strengths and needs, have only recently come into view.

This plan envisions the Rhode Island System of Care as one built on principles of best practice and evidence-based results. Past experience has shown that government and private resources have continued to establish and support programs which show little evidence of positive outcomes for children, youth and families. This in turn has led to inadequate resources available to quality programs and services that provide promising or proven results. For Rhode Island's System of Care to make effective use of finite resources, all components of the system must follow best practice principles and ensure that each child is served in the most integrated and least restrictive setting appropriate.

The strategies laid out in this blueprint for an organized System of Care are focused on ensuring strong structural supports at the state level in order to assist care system development and ongoing quality improvement within communities. There are recommendations for necessary and critical changes to establish effective structural support. Among these recommendations are:

- ❑ **Revising the structure and authority of the Children's Cabinet** as the state level body coordinating the funding systems among all Departments providing services to children and families;
- ❑ **Enhancing the Children's Cabinet's lead role in forging collaborative relationships with communities** in order to increase the effectiveness of local strategic planning for services for children, youth and families;
- ❑ **Increasing the pool of child and family service practitioners;**
- ❑ **Focusing on resource maximization strategies** that recognize that the System of Care requires both public and private resources working together to meet the health, social, emotional, behavioral, mental health and educational needs of children and families;
- ❑ **Focusing publicly supported services on priority populations;**
- ❑ **Developing community-based Comprehensive Care Networks** to ensure continuity of care and services that are accessible and proximate to the communities in which families live;
- ❑ **Developing a planning and evaluation capacity within the Department of Children, Youth and Families**, to track and measure services and treatment to ensure that a child is in the most integrated and least restrictive setting appropriate to the child and to evaluate the outcomes of each setting; and
- ❑ **Ensuring public accountability.** The improvement of the System of Care will ultimately hinge on our ability to effectively evaluate program performance and system outcomes, and to use these evaluations to improve practices. It is essential for the Children's Cabinet to strengthen mechanisms to collect data consistently across Departments.

Within the chapters of the report, representatives of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of state government; provider organizations; families; advocates; and public policy stakeholders have collectively and diligently focused their attention toward the development of an organized System of Care. It sets forth a comprehensive plan that will allow flexibility and growth as the System of Care continues to evolve to address the changing needs and challenges of children and families in the years ahead.

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For a copy of the full report of the RI System of Care Task Force, please visit one of the following websites:

RI Department of Children, Youth and Families: [www.dcyf.state.ri.us/docs/](http://www.dcyf.state.ri.us/docs/)

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