

Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF)

Pivot to Prevention

Safety is our goal

The mission of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) is to partner with families and communities to raise safe and healthy children and youth in a caring environment.

We are responsible for supporting children and their families involved in child protection, behavioral health, and juvenile justice.

Our practice approach to fulfilling our mission is *child-centered, family-focused, and community inclusive*. Child safety is our number one priority; child safety at home, child safety at school, and child safety in the community. We provide services in the context of the family knowing that children grow best in families. We don't accomplish our mission alone, but with the support of many others in our communities.

Over the past few years, the Department has received a great deal of attention. Tragedies that have occurred with our very young children; concerns around decisions about which families need us the most and how and when to intervene. Concerns that the system has been ill-equipped to provide the appropriate oversight to youth living in institutional care, ensuring their safety and mental health needs have been met. And, concerns about whether we've done our best work keeping youth and staff at the Training School safe and ensuring that the youth there, through good programming, have hope and opportunity when they leave.

Since becoming the Director more than a year ago, we have refocused our efforts on child safety as our number one priority. We have:

- restructured our front door so that a more robust screening process is in place and we are working to finalize our set of standardized tools for assessing safety and risk;
- opened the door for families to be able to access to behavioral health services before a crisis occurs and DCYF involvement becomes necessary;
- reached back to our communities to reopen dialogues and conversations about what's happening with our children and how we can better work together;
- rebuilt infrastructure within the department so that we have better oversight of our youth living in institutional care; and
- took a risk in March and piloting a new methodology for licensing foster families that brought more than 180 new potential foster families to us.

As a result, we have more children living safely in families than we ever have before because of the improvements we've made in our work. The number of children living in institutional care has continued to decline now by more than 20% since fiscal year 2016. And the number of children placed out of state has remained at an all-time low of around 40 children. We have increased the number of licensed foster families by more than 30%.

In addition, we:

- addressed safety and security issues at the Training School and added new programming for our youth. Our census is the lowest it has ever been owing to the work of staff and providers on ensuring youth are not held at the Training School any longer than necessary;
- continued to work on understanding the effectiveness of services through approaches like Active Contract Management where we work closely with our contracted providers on establishing and monitoring performance metrics for how services are delivered and the outcomes for our children, youth, and families;
- resolved a longstanding lawsuit and negotiated a set of performance metrics that will help guide continued improvements in practices fundamental to child welfare and necessary to support good outcomes for children and families; and
- reinvested in technology including updating our existing data systems and providing our staff with mobile devices to help them manage their time in the field.

Speaking of our staff, the most important asset of the department, we have:

- continued to fill frontline vacancies as they arise and we will remain uncompromising about this;
- hit the reset on professional development including re-establishing our relationship with Rhode Island College to support our training efforts;
- began Leadership Academy for Middle Management, a robust leadership development program focused on skill building around leadership, staff supervision, and using data to guide practice; and
- strengthened the Peer Support Team. New members are being recruited and trained under a nationally recognized model and working on a menu of wellness activities for staff to help address secondary trauma.

Over the past year, we have received a lot of valuable feedback about our work and Rhode Island's child welfare system and how to make it better. As we move forward, we are dedicated to zeroing in on prevention efforts so that vulnerable families and children receive the support they need when they need it. To be clear, the considerations around this are farther reaching than DCYF. What we do in our state to first address serious mental health and substance abuse issues, family violence, and poverty in our communities matters most in the lives of families and children and whether they reach the doorstep of the Department. In addition, our families and children of color who are most adversely impacted by these issues must be the constant lens through which we judge our successes and our failures.

Moving forward, the Department will focus on 5 Key Areas:

- **Child and Youth Safety as Public Health Issue**
 - Our partners at Kids Count do a great job every year putting data together about the state of our children. We will be using this data and other department data to continue meeting with and supporting individual communities as they use this data to further establish and strengthen locally-based interventions that capitalize on the strengths of their residents and resources;
 - We will be advocating with our state partners across Health and Human Services to use cross-system data to understand and respond to our shared priorities particularly around the economic instability of many of our families, substance abuse, mental health, and the needs of parents of very young children; and

- We will be using media outlets to share information about prevention related outcomes and as a way to define child safety as a public health issue and not a solely a DCYF issue.
- **Establishing a Stronger Network of Prevention**
 - We are creating a Behavioral Health strategic plan that includes a clear plan for equality in access to services, increased mentoring services, and the elimination of voluntary relinquishments;
 - We will be implementing a team-based decision-making process that fully incorporates family voice;
 - We will improve communication with our school partners around responding to families in crisis; and
 - We will develop a strategy for ensuring families impacted by addiction, particularly opioid addiction, are fully connected to services starting by reestablishing a substance abuse liaison in the department.
- **Continuing to Ensure a Competent, Stable, Diverse and Accountable Workforce**
 - This includes:
 - reorienting our work away from a criminal focus to a health response and establishing enhanced training on social determinants of health for staff;
 - ensuring there is ongoing diversity in hiring and promotions; and
 - expanding employee career paths.
- **Fiscal Soundness**
 - We are working to maximize all opportunities for federal funding including:
 - implementing additional actions to leverage Title IV-E and Medicaid funding; and
 - analyzing the new Family First Act to determine how best to leverage this policy shift to strengthen prevention funding.
 - We will ensure a robust process is in place for determining budget priorities and a plan that allows for shifts in funding to occur when priorities change.
- **Effectiveness of Services**
 - We will be completing our study of the Training School effectiveness as an intervention including an analysis of long term outcomes for youth who spend time at the Training School and in comparison to youth who spend time in other types of community placements and determine next steps in planning based on the results of this evaluation.
 - We will be expanding our Active Performance Management process to all DCYF contracts.
 - We will devote time to eliminating redundancy in processes and paperwork across the department.