

FY 2022 Budget Testimony

NJ DCF Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer, MSW

Good afternoon, Chairman Sarlo, Vice Chair Cunningham, and members of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, and thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Murphy's proposed FY 2022 budget for the New Jersey Department of Children and Families.

After a year unlike any other, it's certainly a nice change of pace to be able to join you today, in-person, to discuss how our department is meeting the needs of New Jersey's families, not just through the COVID-19 pandemic, but with a forward-focused vision of transforming into a child and family well-being system that goes well beyond the challenges our families face today.

Through this Administration's continued investment in child- and family-serving programs and services, and the dedication and compassion of our Team DCF workforce, New Jersey has stepped up its supports during the COVID crisis without losing sight of our strategic vision – that all New Jersey residents are safe, healthy, and connected.

Before we begin to review this year's proposed budget, it's important to place today's proposed investments within the context of the Department's response over the year and a half to the child welfare challenges posed by COVID-19.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed and challenged all aspects of living and working in New Jersey.

Families, many of whom have never been connected to or involved with New Jersey's child welfare system, were experiencing new and profound stressors – economic challenges from lost wages; being disconnected from their natural supports, family, friends, or faith-based communities; challenges in balancing the demands of work against the demands of family as children transitioned to remote schooling or childcare centers were closed.

Food instability and housing insecurity were vastly exacerbated by the pandemic. We all experienced grief and loss – whether due to the loss of a loved one, or loss of any sense of normalcy.

As stressors mounted, families struggled. Reporting of child abuse fell off the cliff, as children, removed from the most prolific reporters of abuse and neglect – teachers, school counselors and primary health care providers – faced maltreatment, unseen and unheard. Incidents of domestic violence began to spike.

Faced with these conditions, NJ DCF acted swiftly and decisively to support and stabilize families in need.

We quickly transitioned our workforce of 6,600 public servants to work from home, continuing to support families while protecting our vital Team DCF members.

We mobilized regional response teams from staff volunteers, who continued to investigate the highest priority cases in-person. These teams were equipped with all the personal protective equipment they needed to remain safe in the field, and to keep our families safe when an investigation was taking place.

In partnership with the Department of Human Services, we launched emergency child care programs for our state's essential workforce, and developed health and safety guidelines, backed by CDC recommendations, to be able to get our State's network of child care centers back online as quickly as possible.

Faced with stark reductions in the number of CPS reports to our child abuse hotline – down nearly 60% in April 2020 when compared to the previous year – we stepped up public education and awareness, launching a “Social Distancing Shouldn’t Mean Social Isolation” campaign on social media. We also addressed issues of BIPOC mental wellness, LGBTQ+ depression, and promoted resources for child and youth behavioral and emotional health through the state’s Children’s System of Care.

We increased communications with our providers, relaying real-time changes to policy through the increased use of blast emails and provider Zoom sessions four times a week in the early days of the pandemic. We launched a weekly Teams broadcast, accessible to by all members of Team DCF, that continues to connect our staff to valuable information from the Central Office.

We launched a telehealth system within our Children’s System of Care in a matter of weeks that probably would have taken years under ordinary circumstances. We secured the safety and health of workers and residents in our State’s congregate care programs by distributing PPE and issuing data-backed regulations and communicated with these programs daily about their ongoing and shifting needs.

Our community partnership programs began distributing food and supplies to families in need within their respective communities, and our Professional Center in New Brunswick transitioned into a statewide hub for the distribution of PPE to child- and family-serving programs, and in-state and out-of-state donations to support our families. On behalf of the families we serve, we have collected and distributed thousands of donations from charitable organizations and individuals who were in a position to help.

That’s just a small snapshot of the work that has happened at DCF in the last 12 and a half months, and I encourage you, if you’d like a more detailed view, to please check out the NJ DCF Safe Work Playbook. This is a living document, compiled and continuously updated by our staff, to chronicle the work that we’ve done over this past year, initially created to document our response to the pandemic, and to provide a record so that, if we ever have to face something like this again, we will be fully prepared with a plan that we know works.

Our Playbook has become a model of preparedness that has informed efforts in other departments and other states. Members of the Senate Committee have a print-out of the most recent edition as of March 2021, but for members of the general public who are interested, or for the most up-to-date information, the playbook is available on our DCF homepage – nj.gov/DCF.

When facing a crisis of the magnitude of the COVID-19 public health crisis, it’s easy to become so focused on the crisis at hand that you fail to think beyond the present emergency.

But I’m happy to say that has not been the case at DCF.

While meeting families’ COVID-19 needs, we have been able to launch some far-reaching work with the goal of transforming child welfare in New Jersey.

We’ve continued to deploy anti-racist messaging, practice, and policies, and have launched a broad training effort to combat systemic and inherent racial biases within the state’s child- and family-serving system.

This training, led by national experts in child welfare transformation and anti-racist thought leadership, will be required for every member of the DCF workforce, myself included, and will be accessible to our provider communities as well, so that we can end the disparate treatment of families based on the color of their skin or their country of origin.

We've created an executive position to oversee Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts in our Department, and are building infrastructure to support enhanced program monitoring, more robust CQI processes, enhancements to IT and reporting systems and increased supports to families through a new Office of Housing,

In partnership with the new Office of Resilience and the NJ ACEs Collaborative, we have launched an ACEs Statewide Action Plan that engages the community, shares leadership, and moves New Jersey toward become a trauma-informed state.

ACEs are adverse childhood experiences which, if left unmitigated, can lead to increased likelihood for long-term physical, social, emotional, and economic health and well-being challenges, far into adulthood.

By shining a light on the impact of ACEs, we can promote healing-centered practice, and even begin to address some of the intergenerational challenges we see as a child welfare system around trauma and toxic stress being passed down from parents to their children.

We've continued to refine our case practice through the implementation of solution-based casework, collaborative safety, and data-driven decision-making.

We continue to support staff health and wellness and family voice, and I'd like to just recognize how proud I am of the contributions of the Office of Family Voice Youth Council, a formal committee of current and former foster youth who are having such an incredible impact on our policies, practices, and programming.

In recognition of the wonderful things happening within NJ DCF, Governor Murphy's proposed FY 22 budget continues to fund the operational needs of our Department, resulting in no loss of funding to the vital services and supports that our families rely on, whether during a pandemic or otherwise.

It invests additional funds into our Children's System of Care – totaling \$108M when combined with last year's investment – to increase provider rates, modernize and rebalance the system, and ensure that we have the resources needed to address children's emotional and behavioral health needs.

This funding could not come at a more opportune moment, as we continue to see the effects of social distancing on the mental well-being of children and youth who feel separated from their friends and normal routine.

We are in the process of working with the federal government to increase provider rates on the Medicaid platform, and to allow for greater professionalization within our System of Care provider networks, many of which are having a hard time retaining or attracting employees because of low wages.

This is part of the first increase in the Children's System of Care in approximately 15 years, and will result in a stable, statewide system for children and youth with mental health and well-being challenges; children and youth facing substance use issues and recovery; children and youth living and thriving with intellectual and developmental disabilities; and their families.

The Governor's proposed FY 2022 Budget also invests \$3M more in domestic violence and sexual violence programs, recognizing that support for these programs doesn't only affect the survivors of violence, but their entire families.

Our statewide network of domestic violence (DV) and sexual violence (SV) providers help survivors and their families heal and turn the corner on the violence they experienced.

They provide counseling, housing, and job supports.

As I mentioned earlier in my remarks, domestic violence in particular has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with victims being forced into untenable positions, isolated from supports and previously forced to quarantine with their abusers.

Our DV and SV programs have been working nonstop throughout the pandemic to provide alternative safe housing and supports for survivors of domestic violence, and this investment recognizes that more still needs to be done.

All told, Governor Murphy's proposed FY 2022 Budget gives NJ DCF the resources it needs, not only as a result of the pandemic, but also to continue the positive momentum we've experienced – prior to, and during the pandemic – to keep all New Jersey's children and families safe, healthy, and connected.

It represents an historic investment in making New Jersey a stronger and fairer place to grow and raise a family.

It's an optimistic and energizing vision for New Jersey that recognizes the value of child- and family-serving programs.

And I look forward to working with you all, in the Legislature and around the state, to continue our progress, to advance our transformation, and to improve the lives of children, youth, and families throughout New Jersey. Thank you for your partnership, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.