



**House Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services  
L.B.B. Recommendations for Department of Family and Protective Services  
February 24, 2009**

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Chairman Zerwas and members, I am Eileen Garcia-Matthews, Executive Director of Texans Care For Children. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony today. Texans Care for Children is a statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated exclusively to the children of Texas. We look to our broad base of community-based experts—our partners who together represent thousands of Texas children—to inform our work and help us in developing our legislative agenda. These partners have empowered Texans Care to mobilize coalition groups to work together towards common solutions to the difficult conditions many Texas children and youth face and to assist local communities in advocating for their own children's needs. Our areas of focus are: family economic security; infant, child and maternal health; children's mental health; child welfare; and juvenile justice and at-risk youth.

The economic realities for the state of Texas today are much better than those of many other states and vary greatly from the revenue decline in Texas' recent past. Today, Texas does have cash on hand—the Comptroller has identified a \$2.1 billion immediate cash balance, in addition to our Economic Stabilization Fund, which has a projected balance of \$9.1 billion. Further, the federal government has taken action to help states with dollars for children's health insurance and economic stabilization. This will allow our state to make much needed investments in social services for our next biennium. Particularly, through investment in social services that directly impact children, our state will be taking a stance of prevention rather than being reactive, allowing for greater prosperity for all Texans.

We wish to provide public comment on the following items as they relate to the highest priority legislative recommendations that Texans Care has developed in conjunction with our state-level and regional partners for the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature:

**1. Reduce CPS caseworker caseloads to national standards by increasing retention of workers and hiring more workers, including a salary increase and “hire ahead” practices.**

The Department has clearly identified what its caseworkers need in order to better serve children on their caseloads; please fund this critical function appropriately. DFPS projects in its LAR that conservatorship caseloads will decrease to 32 by the end of FY 2009, which is a significant and positive decline from

conservatorship caseloads of 45-47 going into the last legislative session. This caseload decline also moves the state closer to the Child Welfare League of America recommendation of 12-15 cases per worker and the national average of 24 cases. Fully funding the base budget and exceptional item #4 (Direct Delivery Staff to Meet Federal Standards) is necessary to maintain the lower conservatorship caseloads that CPS is achieving. Doing so would decrease caseloads for kids in the state's care to 30 by FY2011 and allow the Department to meet the federal standards which we have failed and been fined for in the last two federal reviews.

The base budget and exceptional item #4 address the staffing need for which exceptional item #14 (Address Recruitment and Retention) is also a necessary support. Further, the HHSC Consolidated Budget includes a request to increase the salary of CPS workers by 10%. Though a salary increase alone will not solve the Department's retention problem, it is one helpful component of a multi-pronged approach. DFPS needs to stabilize its workforce through reducing turnover and promoting retention so that staff can indeed realize the benefits of lower caseloads by spending more time with each of the children on their caseloads.

**2. Invest in improved transitional services for youth aging out of foster care by allocating state funds to match community funds for local youth transition centers and by developing an array of supportive housing options for youth in transition.**

Texans Care is currently collaborating with other stakeholders who work with youth aging out of care to determine the most pressing areas of need for this population. We support the Department's prioritizing of youth in transition as an exceptional item and will be in dialogue with the Department about the best way to use the funds requested.

**3. Invest in research-based and best practice prevention programs, including in-home visitation programs, STAR (Services to At-Risk Youth), and CYD (Community Youth Development), with additional funding for rigorous evaluation of effectiveness and return on investment for all state-funded programs.**

Texans Care fully supports the modest 10% increase for Services to At-Risk Youth and the Community Youth Development program in Exceptional Item #11. Texans Care hears from our partners in both the child abuse and neglect arena as well as in juvenile justice about the need for increased community-level prevention resources.

Further, we note that in the agency's Alternative 10% Reduction scenario, they propose an across-the-board cut in prevention programs on the order of 64% reductions to each program. And in response to the request for cutting the current budget by 2.5%, DFPS has proposed cutting \$8.2 million from prevention, terminating existing contracts as of March 15, 2009 and not entering into new contracts for the rest of the year. We understand that the Alternative scenarios are provided at the direction of legislative and executive leadership, not at the agency's initiative. However, part of the message that Texans Care For Children and many of our advocacy partners consistently deliver is that prevention is the most critical investment the state can make. It is cost-effective in fiscal and human terms, and is the last funding that should be cut if this state is to effectively protect its children and invest in its human capital. Only last session did prevention funding recover from cuts made in 2003, though there has been no progress in prevention funding since that time in spite of population growth and inflation. We understand that DFPS is obligated to propose a 10% reduction, but we do not support a cut in prevention funding as the way to achieve that reduction.

#### **4. Provide more resources for kinship care placements.**

There are two items in the DFPS request to support kinship placement. Kin placement, when safe for a child, is a best practice, and the Department has made great strides to place children with family when possible and safe. Kinship care also has a disproportionate benefit for children of color and is a pillar of CPS' disproportionality initiative. First, the Department has responded to the newly-passed Federal Fostering Connections Act by proposing Exceptional Item #2 to create a subsidized guardianship program for youth who would otherwise be in long-term foster care, turning 18 and leaving the state's care with no "forever family." Texans Care urges the Legislature to allocate state resources and draw down the available federal resources to get youth out of long-term foster care and into a truly permanent family placement.

Secondly, Exceptional Item #7 would allow CPS to keep up with caseload growth for children placed with kin rather than with an unrelated foster family, in a shelter, or in a residential treatment center while in the temporary conservatorship of the state. With the increased use of kin placements comes an increased need for resources to support kin, who do not receive the payments that foster families receive to care for a child. The relative caregiver receives a one-time \$1000 payment to get the child/children settled, and \$500/year/child for basic needs. Without Exceptional Item #7, DFPS will not have the resources to keep up with caseload growth in kin care placements, which could promote a move back to unnecessary and more costly foster care placements.

#### **5. Increase in-home Family-Based Safety Services for poverty-related neglect and Intensive Family Preservation Services.**

Funding is in DFPS' base budget for Purchased Services (Intensive Family-Based Child Welfare Services) for the Enhanced In-Home Support Program, which tangibly addresses poverty-related neglect by allowing caseworkers to purchase goods and services or provide vouchers for goods and services to address an identified need in certain families to prevent removal of children from the household. This program was phased in during the 2008-09 biennium and needs full, annualized funding in 2010-2011 to achieve a very important outcome: keeping families together so that children do not unnecessarily enter foster care. Texans Care supports full funding through the base budget for this common-sense solution to poverty-related neglect.

Thank you again for your time and commitment. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or the staff of Texans Care For Children at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,

Eileen Garcia-Matthews

Executive Director

Texans Care For Children

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