



THE COALITION FOR ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Community Briefing with New York City Administration for Children's Services Commissioner John Mattingly and Asian Pacific American Leaders

On February 1, 2008, the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF) convened a Community Briefing with Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Commissioner John Mattingly and Asian Pacific American (APA) led and serving community based organizations (CBOs). Twenty-eight CBO representatives met with the Commissioner and six high-level ACS staff members to discuss child welfare issues facing the APA community of New York City.

The goals of this landmark community briefing were to:

- Raise awareness about issues facing APA families in the child welfare system.
- Provide an opportunity for Commissioner Mattingly to speak to APA CBOs about his vision for ACS.
- Provide a forum for APA CBOs to address child welfare concerns directly to the Commissioner and ACS staff.
- Promote an ongoing partnership between APA CBOs and ACS.

ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN COMMUNITY

The APA community continues to grow steadily in New York City. APAs are diverse in cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, immigration patterns, and socioeconomic statuses. This diversity has proven to be challenging to ACS, New York City's child welfare system. At nearly 960,000, the APA community currently accounts for over 12% of the City's population. *Connecting the Dots*, CACF's third report on child welfare, highlights the following needs:

- The total number of families in the New York City foster care system has decreased by 50 percent in the past decade, but the percentage of APA families in this system has increased during that same time.
- Of the over 70 CBOs contracted by ACS to provide child abuse preventive services, only 5 target their services to the APA community, and they primarily serve the Chinese community.
- There are no APA foster care agencies in the City.
- In a survey of service providers, 82% cited language barriers and 69% cited cultural barriers as issues in serving APA families. 78% wanted to conduct more outreach to APAs.

ACS POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND RESOURCES

The mission of ACS is to ensure the safety and well-being of the City's children. ACS's goals are:

- No child they come into contact with will be left to struggle alone with abuse or neglect.
- No family who needs and wants help to keep their children safe will be left without help.
- Every child they come into contact with will get the help s/he needs to be healthy and achieve his/her full educational and developmental potential.
- No child in their care will leave us without a caring, committed, permanent family.

Safeguarding Our Children



ACS Commissioner Mattingly & CACF Executive Director Wayne Ho

The Commissioner explained that ACS is engaged in an ongoing system-wide process to improve the delivery of child welfare services. In March 2006, ACS released its safety plan, *Safeguarding Our Children*, to 1) strengthen the performance of provider staff by measuring results, 2) sharpen investigatory skills and decision-making, and 3) strengthen the child safety focus of ACS, provider agencies, and CBOs.

During the briefing, Commissioner Mattingly shared that the system no longer removes children for lack of support, and focuses now on prevention in order to keep families safe and together. The foster care population is much lower than at its peak levels in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Currently, there are about 17,000 children in care, compared to the peak of over 49,000.

Commissioner Mattingly emphasized the importance of child welfare practice. In addition to understanding the laws, policies, and regulations governing the system, child welfare workers must understand how to *practice*, which includes dealing with many different kinds of families and treating each situation as unique. Good practice requires attention to detail and sensitivity to

factors that include, but are not limited to, family dynamics, child development, and cultural differences. Child safety training and practice reforms are helping frontline workers understand the signs for different kinds of problems families may face. This is an ongoing process that involves continual assessment of practices on the part of all parties involved in child welfare work, including child protective staff, supervisors, and contracted agencies.

Changes have not only occurred at the frontline. A new feature at ACS is the introduction of ChildStat, a weekly meeting with the Commissioner, deputy commissioners, and directors. At these meetings, two field offices present cases for review by ACS staff. This initiative has revealed challenges and best practices for ACS.

The Commissioner explained that ACS is also looking to bridge gaps between city agencies. For example, ACS has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Education (DOE) to provide foster care agencies with access to school records.

Community Partnerships Initiative

The Commissioner described the Community Partnerships Initiative (CPI) as another step to integrate communities into child welfare practice. It is based on the idea that working together, ACS and the communities they serve can protect children better than ACS working alone. Each of the 25 ACS Service Planning Areas, which are based around a group of the city's Community Districts, formed "Neighborhood Networks" consisting of ACS and community providers in order to help children and families in their neighborhoods. Eleven Neighborhood Networks, identified as high-need, emerging communities, received \$150,000 each to pilot CPIs.

Commissioner Mattingly discussed that for ACS to succeed in its mission, it must have the support of local communities and collaboration with CBOs. As a government agency with limited reach, ACS needs to partner with organizations with a history in serving the community. These organizations have a better ability to connect families in need with resources that will prevent ACS from even getting involved. CPIs are therefore asked to establish a network of resources within communities that include child care providers, health and human service organizations, and contracted preventive and foster care agencies to coordinate early responses to families in need. CPIs will also be focused on recruiting foster families within the neighborhood.

Improved Outcomes for Children

The Commissioner explained how Improved Outcomes for Children (IOC) is a comprehensive reform effort that will include major changes in foster care, residential living, and preventive services. Aiming to strengthen preventive efforts with families and to increase the

number of children successfully served, IOC was launched in Summer 2007 and is currently being piloted in 9 foster care agencies and 5 preventive agencies.

IOC includes several new initiatives:

- Family team conferencing that involves families in planning for their future.
- Clearer lines of accountability to improve decision-making concerning children and families.
- Targeted technical assistance for contracted foster care and preventive service agencies.
- Foster care financing reforms that support flexibility.
- Performance monitoring and measurement to improve the quality of services and accountability on the part of contracted foster care and preventive service agencies.

The Commissioner remarked that these changes aim to hold ACS and contracted agencies more accountable for setting goals and achieving results for children and families. IOC will set clear benchmarks and produce tangible results for child welfare practice throughout the system. He emphasized that IOC is a model for the future of child welfare.

ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN COMMUNITY CONCERNS

After the Commissioner's remarks, APA led and serving CBOs asked questions and provided recommendations to the Commissioner and his staff. CBO leaders raised many issues facing the APA families and communities that they serve.

Disaggregated Data



Emira Habiby Browne (far left), Center for the Integration and Advancement of New Americans

The CBOs explained that without disaggregated data on ethnicity, it is difficult to assess the extent of child welfare needs in the diverse APA community and to plan effective prevention programs targeted to

specific ethnic groups and language needs. The Commissioner acknowledged that disaggregated information on the 40 APA ethnic groups is currently unavailable through ACS because of the current configuration of the information system overseen by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS).

Language Access

The CBOs described how English is not the first language for many APA families. Language barriers contribute to a lack of understanding of child welfare laws as well as ACS policies and procedures. When these families come into contact with ACS, they have difficulty communicating with ACS and contracted agency staff. These language barriers can lead to children being inappropriately placed and families struggling to find appropriate services. Commissioner Mattingly explained that ACS procedure permits all staff and preventive service agencies to have access to an interpretation service. Whenever ACS comes into contact with a client whose first language is not English, this service should be utilized. Both in-person and over-the-phone interpretation is provided. This includes callers to the State Central Register and inquiries to ACS.

Partnership Challenges

The CBOs stated that many CBOs have a strong reputation in the community and have built trusting relationships with families. CBOs may not be contracted by ACS to provide child welfare services but are often asked by families to assist them with child welfare issues. Some CBOs are not entirely familiar with the child welfare system themselves and have faced challenges when trying to work with ACS staff. For example, a service provider at a local health clinic tried to reach the ACS caseworker and supervisor for two weeks to no avail. Commissioner Mattingly shared information about the ACS Office of Safety First, which provides immediate assistance to organizations that have concerns about an open case. The Office of Safety First is very much interested in doing more outreach to community organizations serving the APA community.

Community Education

The CBOs explained that many APA families are recent immigrants and are not familiar with child welfare laws or even the concept of a government-operated child welfare system. APA families have an increased risk of coming into contact with ACS due to family practices that may conflict with child welfare laws. APA parents also may not know where to go for help in times of crisis. While ACS has made some effort to reach out to the APA population, a few strategies have confused families. For example, one community member saw advertisements in Chinese newspapers to recruit foster parents, but the advertisements were in English. The Commissioner stated that the Family Permanency Services Division would like to work with CBOs to improve targeted outreach to APA and immigrant communities. This includes forming additional ACS/CBO partnerships and supporting CBO outreach activities.

Community Partnerships Initiative

The CBOs were supportive of the principles behind CPI, but significant challenges have emerged during the pilot phase. Participating in CPIs takes a significant amount of staff time, and many CBOs have limited resources and capacity to fully participate in CPIs. CBOs that are currently participating in CPI pilots also asserted that accomplishing the CPI goals will require additional funding. The Commissioner shared that although funding for individual CPIs may not increase, total funding for this initiative will increase after the pilot phase because each Neighborhood Network will have a CPI. ACS is working to identify the challenges of the CPIs thus far, taking in community concerns, and planning to improve upon this model in the upcoming Request for Proposals (RFP).

Immigrant Community Partnership



Edward Ma (standing), Asian American Community Consultation Association

The CBOs expressed their support of the Immigrant Community Partnership Initiative (ICPI). Launched in July 2007, ICPI targets three of the fastest growing and highest need immigrant

communities in New York City – South Asian, Mexican, and West African. The CBOs explained the importance of working with immigrant-led organizations in order to develop innovative ways to help families from these targeted communities who are involved with ACS. The CBOs encouraged the Commissioner to expand ICPI to other APA ethnic groups, who would also benefit from community education and case management for families as well as cultural competence training for ACS staff.

Foster Care Family Recruitment

The CBOs recommended that APA children should be placed with families of a similar cultural and linguistic background. This reduces the trauma on the child, who is already going through a time of crisis. Placing children in the same neighborhood as their birth family is also preferred. However, there is a shortage of APA foster parents across all ethnic groups. The Commissioner stated that ACS will utilize CPIs to increase the number of foster care families within each neighborhood. One community member shared the story of a Korean couple who signed up to become foster parents but could not adhere to the daunting training schedule due to their work and familial obligations, so they had to opt out of becoming a foster family. Trainings are also not available in Asian

languages, preventing interested limited English proficient individuals from becoming foster parents. Commissioner Mattingly explained that there is an expedited training process for prospective kinship care families.

The CBOs further explained that many APA families live in homes that are not deemed adequate in space by foster care standards. The CBOs also recommended that foster parent recruitment must be targeted and appropriate for the APA community. Community members are often unfamiliar with the concept of foster parenting, so additional outreach and education is necessary. The Commissioner shared that ACS wants to work with CBOs to tailor their outreach to the APA community.

Bilingual Staffing



Agnelo Dias, Child Center of New York

The CBOs stated that turnover in the child welfare field is high and that bilingual staff is particularly difficult to hire. The wide range of languages spoken within the APA community exacerbates this difficulty. Also,

ACS salaries are higher than preventive agency salaries, adding to retention problems because CBOs lose staff to ACS. The shortage of bilingual ACS staff leads to linguistic and cultural miscommunication, which can lengthen and complicate cases. The shortage of bilingual contracted agency staff leads to increased caseloads and burden on supervisors, trouble communicating with clients, and ultimately, families who are unable to receive the services they need. The Commissioner explained that ACS is looking to increase the number of bilingual child protective and preventive staff and to coordinate recruitment strategies that do not place ACS and CBOs in competition for bilingual child welfare workers.

Preventive Service Contracts

The CBOs shared that there is an insufficient number of slots specifically targeted toward the APA community. While ACS recently added slots and allocated some slots specifically to meet language needs, many programs still operate at 100% utilization, and certain communities still do not have any language accessible service providers. The CBOs suggested that a strategic approach to the APA community is necessary to properly serve this growing population. Commissioner Mattingly stated that ACS would like to have contracted agencies be more reflective of the communities they serve in the upcoming RFP and would like to incorporate smaller

agencies into the process. The CBOs recommended that one mechanism could be subcontracting, wherein a lead agency can subcontract to smaller agencies to deliver services. The CBOs recommended that another mechanism could be forming collaborative groups that are not limited to geographical range; for example, a contracted coalition can be formed around the issue of parent advocacy. The CBOs also recommended that a third mechanism could aim to increase slots and distribute them according to need. The Commissioner acknowledged that another way to free up slots is to close cases more quickly, as preventive cases open for more than 18 months prevent other families from receiving services. However, closing of cases must be done while ensuring that family needs and child safety are met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commissioner Mattingly, ACS staff, and APA led and serving CBOs came out of the Community Briefing with a renewed commitment to collaboration and continued dialogue to addressing the needs of APA families. Some recommendations that emerged from the briefing include:

- ACS should start collecting data on the APA community which is disaggregated by language and ethnic group in order to understand community needs and plan for services.
- ACS should publicize that there is the availability of over-the-phone interpretation for staff of ACS and contracted agencies. To ensure this language line is effective, ACS should evaluate the interpreters' language skills and child welfare knowledge.
- ACS should collaborate with CBOs on community education. ACS can provide the content, and CBOs can provide the culturally appropriate strategies. Funding is necessary to develop a systematic approach for increased community education.
- ACS must identify additional funds to support CBO participation in CPI in order to increase success.
- ACS should work with APA led and serving CBOs to develop strategies to improve the recruitment of APA foster families.
- ACS and CBOs should work collaboratively to recruit and retain bilingual child welfare workers and to develop strategies to increase the pool of qualified workers.
- ACS should increase preventive services slots that are assigned to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of the APA community.

Funding generously provided by the C.J. Huang Foundation, Child Welfare Fund, Ong Family Foundation, Tribune Foundation New York, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.