



Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE MINUTES - JULY 22, 2026 DAN ROMEO, CHAIR

MEMBERS PRESENT: Ms. Block, Mr. Burtis, Ms. Denton, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Romeo

ALSO ATTENDING: Chairwoman Watts; also see attached list

Chair Romeo called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. and the previous meeting's minutes were approved.

1. DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES, CHILD WELFARE: Amy Cunningham, Commissioner

a. INFORMATIONAL: Overview of Foster Care

- All of child welfare is regulated by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS); rates and categories all regulated and stipulated, with OCFS as the oversight entity; no Department discretion in the rates and numbers
- 2026 budget amount in this account was \$57 million; 2025 spent \$60.5 million; forecasted to spend about \$64 million this year, based on projected rate increases not known right now, when or if they will come through
 - About 55% reimbursed by state and federal reimbursement sources; 35 million and about 28 million of that goal
 - No personnel, mileage, or supplies in this account; specifically for the care of the children in foster care
- 607 children in foster care on a recent report; 581 as of this morning; fluctuates five to 10 on any given day depending on the report and the day
 - Slight decrease in general over the past six to 12 months; more children discharged to permanency than taken into foster care
- Within those big buckets:
 - Regular foster boarding homes, children go into a home and live with foster parents, with their bio siblings and with other foster siblings; different categories of those types of homes
 - DCFS-certified foster homes, not all counties certify their own homes; a lot of the larger counties do, while most smaller counties contract with voluntary agencies, which certify and maintain the foster homes
 - When a child comes into foster care, the Department looks to its own foster homes first; if no home is available, an array of other agencies can be called with the

children and the needs; agencies mostly have therapeutic-level homes with higher training levels

- Residential placements:
 - Group homes
 - Respite: a child can go from a foster home to a respite group home for a week or two
 - State-certified programs for youth who are sexually trafficked or at risk of becoming sexually trafficked; only a few in the state Empower Programs
 - Supervised independent living programs, for older youth in care whose goal is transitioning to adulthood on their own
 - QRTPs, qualified residential treatment programs, the institutions of regular residential foster care
- Of the 607 children, 493 in homes: 290 in DCFS foster homes and about 203 in voluntary agency homes; about 114 in some sort of residential placement
- Rate structure for foster homes broken out by level as well as age; the first level, regular foster care, the only one broken out by age, zero-to-five year olds, \$33.36 per day

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Romeo: Can you repeat that number?
- Ms. Cunningham: \$33.36. All of these rates are on OCFS's website, all of the foster care rates and all of the voluntary agency rates, and they update them regularly; I can provide you with the website

Presentation continued:

- Zero-to-five year olds: \$33.36 per day, about \$12,176 a year; six-to-11 year olds: \$39.75, approximately \$14,500 a year; seven up to 21 year olds: \$40.17, about \$14,662
- Special rate for a higher level of need, a particular diagnosis, or closer supervision; requires documentation such as a psychiatric diagnosis; \$71.99 a day, \$26,276 a year
- Exceptional rate, a step above, higher medical need or supervision, or a situation where a child cannot be around other children and needs one-on-one supervision; \$109.11, about \$40,000 a year
- Extraordinary rate recently implemented by OCFS, believed last year; \$132.76, just under \$50,000 a year; a foster parent would not be able to work with this type of child, usually medically fragile and needing round-the-clock care
 - Only one of those rates currently within the system; an opportunity to keep a medically fragile child in a home versus a residential program

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Kelly: The rates have all increased recently, right?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, they increase every year; it has been about 6% recently. If we go back to when the budget really started increasing in foster care, there was a class action lawsuit against OCFS saying the rates were not sufficient to care for children, so there was a pretty substantial bump in the rates maybe three to four years ago
 - Also due to that class action lawsuit, some counties did not pay the full rate to foster parents; they used an income-based structure, taking the foster parent's income into consideration

- Onondaga County has never done that and has always paid the maximum state aid rate; we think it's an important value add to our children
 - A lot of counties saw an even larger increase in their foster care budgets because they went from not paying 100% to paying 100%, plus the additional jump
- Mr. Kelly: Is there data, not only from Onondaga County but statewide, in terms of these rate increases having the desired effect, whether that's increasing total volume of placements available?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes and no. It's not great data; it's kind of showing statewide that it's a struggle, we're seeing reduced numbers of foster parents
- Mr. Kelly: Are we able to meet the existing need? How do we capture the pool of available children versus how many places we have available?
- Ms. Cunningham: I'm going to get into that
- Mr. Romeo: I have a question about the rates, that 6% growth you were talking about. Is there a built-in growth going forward?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, there's always built-in growth; I believe it's a flat 6%, that's how they budget it. It's not always 6%, and we don't know what it's going to be; the state provides the increases
- Mr. Romeo: Are some increases just based on how they're feeling about the budget that year, and others based on CPI or inflation?
- Ms. Cunningham: The rate increases are usually tied to cost of living and cost of services, and that is built in now

Presentation continued:

- Of the \$64 million total, \$32.5 million is for children in foster homes, DCFS or voluntary agency; money going to the foster parents directly for housing, food, clothing, general care of the child
- About 114 children and youth in different levels of residential care, about \$20 million of the \$64 million; substantially costing more than the foster homes
 - CSE placements from the schools' committees on special education also in this budget line: if a school and the CSE committee find they cannot meet a child's needs in the classroom based on education law, they refer them to a school placement; county pays 50% of those placements with zero management, not on a caseload, not in foster care; simply a transaction
 - 15 placements in the 2025-26 school year, 22 the previous year; about \$4 million in the current year 2026; fluctuates between \$3.5 and \$6 million because the programs have five years to bill, there might be no bills and then a bunch, a low number of kids and a \$6 million bill, since schools bill retroactively

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Romeo: You talked about how they don't have to be in foster care, so it's just every child in our county? Does that include CPSE, preschool special education, as well?
- Ms. Cunningham: No, just CSE
- Mr. Burtis: Just back to foster care, I appreciate being focused on the numbers as far as how much we pay, but tell me if I'm wrong, that's not the main driver, as far as "you're not paying me enough to do it, so I'm not going to do it"?

- Ms. Cunningham: No, absolutely not. There are so many things we could talk about in terms of foster care; the data I have today is to explain the numbers and what's driving them, and I'm very happy to discuss beyond that as well. We have great foster parents that are doing it for the right reasons; they want help and they do extra, above and beyond

Presentation continued:

- Beyond CSE placements, the adoption subsidy and the KinGAP subsidies also in the foster care account within that \$64 million
 - Goal always reunification, kids most successful at home; where the Department must go to court and terminate parental rights, or there is a kin relationship or guardianship, the foster care rate continues until the youth is 18 or 21, with subsidies continuing to those families
 - Adoption subsidy projected at about \$15 million this year, to families with adopted children and youth whose cases the Department no longer manages; ongoing connections, and adoptive parents continue to foster, but no case management over the adopted; fully permanent, part of that family
 - KinGAP: another way to attain permanency without terminating parental rights; a kin or fictive kin, a relative or a close family friend, takes on full guardianship and management of the familial relationship, deciding visitation, with full medical and educational decision-making rights; about \$5.3 million

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Romeo: In addition to the 15?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, just over \$20 million to support ongoing permanent placements, adopted and kin

Presentation continued:

- Miscellaneous: just under \$6 million; the account capturing everything else it costs to raise a child, including:
 - Summer camps
 - Extra school clothes
 - Prom dresses
 - Birthday gifts
 - Christmas gifts
 - Sports
 - Special equipment
 - Medical equipment, such as hearing aids
 - Any after-school activities
 - Driver's ed
 - Religious or cultural items
 - Any bedding
 - Transportation
 - Lodging for family or parents, for visitation with a relative out of state, helping them get here and stay in hotels

- Voluntary agencies paid for one-on-ones: a child in a residential placement really needing extra support, in order to not disrupt that placement, gets an extra contract for a one-on-one for a certain amount of the day
- Rate covers housing, food, and everyday clothing; anything extra to be paid for the child comes out of this account, ensuring normative experiences within the foster home

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Romeo: How are those determined to be paid out? Do foster parents apply for them, or is there criteria? How does that work?
- Ms. Cunningham: There's criteria for some; the summer camps have a set \$400 a camp, and there's a chart with some identified expenses, but it's mostly the caseworker working with the family and identifying the child's needs, and then filling out a request that gets paid off the case. It's not so narrow that something we've never heard of before would be a no; there's just an approval process
- Mr. Kelly: Could you expand on case management with regards to things like medical care, mental health services, early intervention?
- Ms. Cunningham: In terms of medical care, we have a very unique partnership with Enhance over at Upstate with Dr. Blatt; that's our foster care clinic. It is the only clinic in the state, possibly one of the few in the country, that functions in partnership with Child Protective Services and child welfare, and all of our foster children go to Enhance. It's right over in the new Nappi building, and Dr. Blatt has been doing it since, I think, the early '90s
 - There's a psychologist on staff, and they have access to all sorts of mental health resources, behavioral health resources, and referrals from that office. We do have foster parents that get a little frustrated that it takes too much time to bring the foster children there, because they are so thorough and spend as much time as needed, the initial visit can be up to two hours at times, to really work with the children and the foster parents, and they encourage the parents of origin to be there as well
 - There are very specific medical care guidelines from OCFS; one of the manuals is the healthcare manual, which is pages and pages. If we didn't have Enhance, our caseworkers would have to manage that: the initial screen and every single required item, which is more than a general pediatric visit, across multiple pediatricians and offices. Because of this relationship, that is taken off their plate; they must ensure the child is going and being seen, but Enhance knows all the regulations, knows what needs to be done, and does all the follow-up
 - We also have the partnership with the Child Advocacy Center; we have a CPS investigation unit over there, not a foster care unit, but all of those services, counseling, mental health, advocacy, are available to our children in foster care
 - Mental health is also part of our department, so when we have a child or youth with higher or specific mental health needs, our child welfare team and our mental health team can collaborate and do multidisciplinary meetings and wraparound services; it's very helpful having everybody in the same department at the same table
 - When a child is placed in a voluntary agency foster home, our caseworker has a little bit less of a role because there's a case manager within the agency, and the agencies have their own integrated services and supports; our caseworkers are responsible for seeing those children

quarterly, whereas for our own homes it's monthly, because the agency is having the ongoing contact, managing the case, doing the referrals, and making sure they have the mental health services

- Mr. Kelly: And all under the OCFS umbrella, correct?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, the mental health and the voluntary agencies are OCFS; their certifications often include a nurse or a nurse practitioner on staff as well
- Mr. Romeo: A couple of questions on this topic. You had talked about how people express frustration about the delay at Enhance, do you know what kind of delay it is to get children in there?
- Ms. Cunningham: It's not a delay; it's that once you're there, it takes a long time
- Mr. Romeo: Is there any delay in getting children in there?
- Ms. Cunningham: No, we get them in within 24 hours usually, or within a business day
- Mr. Romeo: If there's ongoing healthcare needs, they have to go there as well? With the mental health piece, is there any kind of requirement for foster families to get children mental health services? If the child has been getting mental health care, do we say you have to continue those?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, we would continue whatever they're doing; if they were currently working with a therapist and that makes sense, we would continue. As part of the intake at Enhance they meet with the psychologist there to go through the current medical and mental health needs and the ongoing plan
- Mr. Romeo: Given the situation they're in, where they've just been put into foster care, wouldn't we assume that all children in that situation would need it and get it for them?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, it is traumatic just to be in foster care. That's why they work closely with Dr. Saletsky at Enhance to identify the level of need and support, and he is always there to see the kids as they come in
- Mr. Romeo: With Enhance, if the child has a medical issue and the foster parent wants to send them somewhere else, can they, as long as they're still meeting those check boxes?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, many of them go to see specialists; it's part of the Upstate continuum of care, so they will refer them to whatever is necessary
- Ms. Denton: You mentioned summer camp; I was curious about daycare, if that's available and covered
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, daycare is available to all foster parents as part of the childcare block grant and DSS; it's been a little tricky with the wait list, but we have been able to continue to fund all foster parents that need daycare
- Ms. Denton: So it's funded separately from the \$33
- Ms. Cunningham: That's separate; that's not in there. One-off babysitting would come out of the miscellaneous account, but not general daycare
- Mr. Romeo: Are there any restrictions on that? If you're a stay-at-home mom with five kids and one of them is a foster child, are we able to provide daycare?
- Ms. Cunningham: They still need to fall into the childcare block grant; they have to be employed
- Mr. Romeo: The self-employed count as employed?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes
- Mr. Kelly: I know both the administration and this body have recognized foster care as a major priority; daycare is one thing we've been able to invest in to support people willing to help these

- kids, and I know there have been examples with lead remediation as well. Could you speak to that and any other programs in place to support the foster care infrastructure throughout the county?
- Ms. Cunningham: We have partnered and have a pot of money for the lead infrastructure. Part of foster parent recruitment is a lead assessment of the home, and if a foster parent's home has lead in it, we have a pot of money that can fast track them to get that remediated
 - On the process for becoming a foster parent, there are DCFS foster homes and there are voluntary agencies; speaking mostly to the DCFS process. There are tons of agencies and we contract with any and all of them; those contracts all have a \$3 million cap, which we don't usually need. Anytime a new voluntary agency is certified, or anytime we find a new placement in state or out of state with an entity we haven't worked with, we will contract with them, so it's an ebb and flow of who we have contracts with; right now I believe we have about 30 of them
 - Mr. Romeo: What's the benefit of the contracting versus hiring our own?
 - Ms. Cunningham: The voluntary agencies have the residential placements as well, and it's a volume situation; a lot of voluntary agencies have more of the therapeutic or specialized foster homes. We have 243 certified foster homes, and we use the voluntary agencies as a supplement to those
 - Mr. Romeo: Because we use so many voluntary agencies, are we working on building our own capacity so that we wouldn't need a contract?
 - Ms. Cunningham: Not necessarily; they meet two different needs. Our foster homes are often for the regular-rate children who don't have a higher level of need, a pool of foster homes we work with regularly, and the voluntary agencies tend to be more specialized, with therapeutic homes and the higher levels of care; we don't have the infrastructure right now to do that in house
 - Mr. Romeo: But we're not trying to get to that?
 - Ms. Cunningham: No, it's actually a cost savings to have the voluntary agencies do it, and it's efficient and more successful

Presentation continued

- Website fostercare.org; contract with Hillside for all of our foster care recruitment and initial certification activities
 - Tabling at events, recruitment events, and family school events; out in the community handing out flyers; have a Facebook account and are exploring other social media to recruit
 - Regularly speak with current foster parents to see if they have other families to refer
- If an individual or family is interested in fostering, they call the number or the website, call Hillside, or call our offices and we get them in touch with Hillside
 - Website has a decent overview of the initial general steps
- Application, online or paper, includes a self-assessment; clearances:
 - Staff exclusion list through the Justice Center at the state and the state central register for any child abuse and neglect history
 - Must have a medical exam and physical, a driver's license, show proof of pet vaccines and rabies if they have pets, show income verification, and complete a lead inspection
- If they meet the initial criteria, they can start the training
 - 10-week in-person session at various locations to receive the initial certification

- Once a family is a foster family, there are ongoing supports: support groups, additional training opportunities, and activities for families, all coordinated through Hillside
 - Once certified, come into our home finding unit within child welfare, a unit of four to five caseworkers and supervisors that work regularly with the foster parents
- Don't have caseloads of children in foster care investigations, have caseloads of foster parents, and are the in-house resource for the foster parents
- For kinship placements, or relative foster care, first thing we always do when a child comes into foster care is try to find a relative willing to support the child and the family
- Proven that kids' outcomes are better when they remain with family
 - Fast track to becoming a certified foster parent for relatives; initial certification can be done within a day or two, then 12 months deadline to complete all of the trainings
- Hillside also has specialized trainings and will do one-on-one support, because it's often a different structure and relationship than general foster parenting
 - Hillside does events and tabling, an event at the Crunch game every year, and at the Mets game plus flyers, handouts, and canvassing
 - Incentive here in Onondaga County: if a foster parent takes a sibling group of three or more, they all receive the special \$71.99 rate regardless of the needs of the children
 - Incentive to keep sibling groups together, because it can be challenging and maybe a little scary to take on three to five children at once

Questions/ Comments:

- Mr. Romeo: I have a quick question on Hillside. You talked about contracting with the other homes for capacity and specialty purposes, what about Hillside? That sounds like stuff that we do normally, right?
- Ms. Cunningham: We have two of them, because the actual foster home recruitment and initial certification is a separate contract; it's not in the foster care line. It's \$414,000, which pays for all the Hillside employees, the events, and the trainings. And then Hillside is also a voluntary agency with its own certified therapeutic foster homes
 - Another thing about voluntary agencies: when a child is placed with a voluntary agency, the family receives the daily rates discussed, but the agency also receives an administrative rate, which varies with state approval; it can be as low as \$30 a day for a regular foster home
 - Or might be \$70 a day for a therapeutic home, because there are more services involved and more people on staff at the agency working with the family, such as skill builders. That cost is then reduced within our staff, because they're not managing the case as intensely, the higher cost comes with a reduced workload on our side
- Mr. Romeo: So it's like a double rate, because the rate goes through the foster parent and the admin. So with Hillside, with the promotional piece and the recruiting piece, we don't think that we can do that better?
- Ms. Cunningham: Really, that's not the core skill set that our child welfare caseworkers are receiving. We do have a unit that specializes in that, but I think the focus should be on the actual child welfare process and placement, the court appearances, and working toward permanency, making sure the family has all they need. That is kind of a side entity that is cost effective, and they do it better

- Mr. Romeo: You had talked about how they communicate with current foster parents and get feedback. How do we then get that communication from foster parents? Do they send it to us, or do we have our own processes?
- Ms. Cunningham: The home finders are meeting with them regularly to talk about the families and any challenges, and they bring it back to a supervisor and administration. Foster parents have all of our contact information, and we get calls regularly with questions or to talk through a situation. We also have concern meetings from time to time if an issue has come up, we get everybody around the table, talk through it, and take recommendations for improvements
- Mr. Romeo: Given the situation where we need more foster families, have we reached out, aside from Hillside, to ask foster parents, you've been in it; what could we do to have you tell your friends to come?
- Ms. Cunningham: It's informal and ongoing, anybody who works in child welfare is always talking about it
- Ms. Block: Speaking around that, as far as the home finders, could you speak a little more about that role? What does a caseload look like?
- Ms. Cunningham: We have 243 certified foster homes and I believe four home finders in the unit, so those are split up between the four to five caseworkers. They do re-certifications regularly, stay up on trainings, identify any additional needs, and document everything in the system if there's a family unit change; they work regularly with a much larger caseload of foster families than a child welfare caseworker would have of children
- Mr. Kelly: That was one of my questions, it sounds like there is a recertification process for the foster parents
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, ongoing
- Mr. Burtis: Of the 243; I call them special people, is that a good number? Looking back, was it higher or lower than 243, and in the future, what do we think that's going to be?
- Ms. Cunningham: It's not a great number; we always want to see it going up. It's hard to say whether it has been higher in the past, because in recent years we've really pushed the kinship and kin certification, and that has increased the number. A relative can take custody of a child without being a certified foster parent and wouldn't show up in these numbers; they would receive cash assistance from DSS for that placement, which is not as much as the foster care rate, which is why we put the certification push in
 - It culturally shifted around 2018-2020, we really want to keep children with families, versus the past thinking that it might be better to pull the child completely away from even the extended family.
 - Research has shown that is not at all ideal for positive outcomes for the child. As that culture shift happened, the number of certified foster parents went up, but that was because of the certified kin that normally would not have been certified. So no, not a great number, and we would like it to be higher
 - There is new federal legislation that is encouraging the state has to report to the federal agency what it is doing, and the push is to increase the number of foster homes available across the country for children
- Mr. Kelly: What's the typical turnover? Is it this percentage of kids get adopted, this percentage age out, how does that process go?

- Ms. Cunningham: As of right now, we have 76 kids with the goal of adoption out of the 581 in care, about 13%. Not all foster parents who adopt stop fostering; some continue, some stop, so there's that general turnover, and some foster parents age out of foster parenting. We have been averaging bringing in about 15 to 20 new families a year, and maybe a similar number coming off the books. The number aging out, I can't remember exactly, but it was under 30
- Mr. Kelly: And those 76 kids you referenced are those in-house, within the foster unit, or outside adoptions?
- Ms. Cunningham: Those are children in foster care where we have gone through the court process to terminate parental rights, and the goal for permanency is adoption; most of them have good pre-adoptive families, and it's the general court process of getting them across the line
 - There is a lot of good information on the OCFS website: all of the rates and all of the voluntary agency admin rates are posted there, they change fairly frequently and spreadsheets are emailed every time they're updated.
 - There are also several guides and manuals, and the links can be shared: the child protective services manual, which is very informative and explains the eligibility criteria for the different levels of rates and what foster parents versus the Department are responsible for; the health services guide that Enhance takes care of; an adoption services guide; a kinship guide; a home finding guide; and a foster parent guide
- Mr. Romeo: To follow up on the earlier question about kinship and going back to the family, how is the decision made that it's best for the child to go back to the family, given the complexity of what that might mean? Who's involved? Does the foster parent get to be part of that discussion in terms of what they've been seeing?
- Ms. Cunningham: There's all the case management and casework that happens, and ultimately it's the judge that decides everything in these cases; the recommendations are made. When a parent's rights have not been terminated, they need to meet the minimal degree of care to basically have their child, which is pretty low for most people's standards
 - All the information is gathered; there are ongoing permanency hearings every six months where the caseworker gathers information about the parents, the services they've done, letters about contacts from all the service providers, and all the letters for the child, mental health, physical health, school, how the child is doing, and input from the foster parents. Everything is summarized in reports and presented to the judge
- Mr. Romeo: You brought up the courts making that decision, how is the foster parent involved in the court process? Are they completely hands off?
- Ms. Cunningham: After a child has been with a foster parent for a year, they have what's called standing, so they are able to speak, to have a voice, to be involved in the decision making and present their views
- Mr. Kelly: I know a major issue through the pandemic was the volume of cases and getting them through family court has that largely normalized? Are we able to proceed with the cases that we have?
- Ms. Cunningham: They're still backlogged in certain areas, due to staffing or otherwise; the termination of parental rights petitions are kind of the last thing left, which we're working through very diligently. We have a great group of almost fully staffed attorneys now, and they're working really hard with the judges to move things along

- Mr. Romeo: Is the termination of parental rights situation when a child is removed from a home and then it's attempted to terminate the rights?
- Ms. Cunningham: Parents have 15 to 22 months to show they're making improvements; that's the timeline where we're technically required to petition to terminate parental rights if there's been no movement. There are severe abuse cases and abandonment cases where you don't need to wait, but most are 15 to 22 months, and we're going on a couple of years of a child in care when we move down that path
- Mr. Romeo: Say in a 14-month period, we can remove a child from the home, put them in foster care, and then 14 months later just say they're going back. How does that work?
- Ms. Cunningham: No, again, that would be the judge. The parents have services they're court-ordered to do; if they're engaging in services and visitation regularly and making progress, you go back for the six-month permanency hearing and the 12-month permanency hearing
 - If at 12 months the caseworker says the family is doing really well, completing all their services, and bonding during visitation, we can make a recommendation to return, and the judge can return; we could also not make a recommendation based on different circumstances, and the judge could still return
 - There is an opportunity to return a child home on what's called a 10-day notice: if it's between permanency hearings, two to three months after one, with the next three months away, but the family is ready
 - A 10-day notice can be sent to all parties, attorneys, and judges; if anybody objects, a court appearance is called, and if everybody is good with it, the child is returned. It's all based on the service timeline and the progression; every case is different
- Ms. Denton: To sign up to be a foster parent and support that decision, you mentioned respite. Can you go into more detail on what that is and what it entails?
- Ms. Cunningham: There are foster parents that do specifically respite. If a foster parent has a business trip or a long weekend planned, the foster child can go to a respite foster home while the foster parent is away. Or if it's a child that needs one-to-one supervision regularly and the situation is exhausting, the foster parent may need a break, and the child could go to a respite for a few days or a week. It's flexible to the needs of the foster parents
- Ms. Denton: If they're using that a lot, is that a concern?
- Ms. Cunningham: I think there is only a certain number of days, but that definitely would be something we would pay attention to
- Ms. Block: What are our current resources for respite in the community?
- Ms. Cunningham: We have the foster home respite, and we work with Elm Crest for the mental health respite; Hutchings has a respite and there are different programs we can use outside the DCFS system, OMH and OPWDD have some respite, so we use those services as well
- Mr. Romeo: When you say foster care respite, what is it?
- Ms. Cunningham: Certified foster parents who provide respite
- Mr. Romeo: So we send foster kids to other foster parents. My question is, post-2020, with caseworkers and courts and everything else in terms of delay; you mentioned the court system might say okay, wait another three months. In terms of timeline, especially when we're talking about a kid younger than five, months can be a big deal. Is there anyone allowed to have a check on the system? Can we hold the courts accountable, or can parents hold us accountable? There seems to be a lot of delay while everybody's trying to figure it out

- Ms. Cunningham: It's definitely recognized at the state level. There was just a commissioners' meeting on Monday with the state commissioners, and the OCFS team has actually pulled in OCA, the Office of Court Administration. There has always been a work group on hard-to-place youth and the kids getting stuck in hospitals and hotels and we have not had a kid in a hotel in over a year, and we intend to keep it that way
 - That has been a missing piece in terms of coordination; the courts are always working on their own improvements too, but at the state level, bringing them together helps solve not only the lack of residential programs but how to improve the court system with the current resources to move along faster
 - It is still a volume issue getting cases through the court system; the judges are booked pretty heavily and our attorneys are never sitting in their offices doing paperwork. It is definitely being looked at and worked on, and the attorneys are the ones that can move things and file motions
- Mr. Romeo: For a kid under five to lose a year, or months even, it's just wild. I have a couple of fast-round items. We had heard about the car seat safety thing; is that addressed?
- Ms. Cunningham: Yes, we have ongoing trainings; I just saw an email yesterday about another one being offered. Caseworkers are now required to be trained in car seats, and that training is being provided to our volunteers as well; that was something really helpful that was brought up
- Mr. Romeo: I had heard, if we send a child to a foster family, about getting the things they might need, like clothing; how do they get that? Where can they get it?
- Ms. Cunningham: At initial placement they'll receive vouchers for clothing and food, and then it becomes part of the daily rate after, unless it's something special, like a prom dress or a uniform for a specific school. Ongoing clothing is part of the daily rate
- Mr. Romeo: That initial voucher, what does that look like? How does that get paid out?
- Ms. Cunningham: It's a paper voucher that they take to Burlington; we have a relationship with the store and they can spend there, and we have that with Wegmans as well. I know they've been working on some other stores
- Mr. Romeo: Why those? How did we come up with those?
- Ms. Cunningham: It's been historic. We've tried over the years to do Target or Kohl's, I believe, and just trying to work through the steps on the financial side, we have not been able to come up with a solution
- Mr. Romeo: Is that on our side or from, like, Target's side?
- Ms. Cunningham: From both; they don't want to take the paper vouchers; I believe they wanted credit cards, and we can't have one credit card and share it. It's been challenging. We also have some general Visa gift cards, so if foster parents say there's absolutely nothing at Burlington that a child can wear, or they need something specific, they can go anywhere that is most appropriate for that child
- Mr. Romeo: This was just a thing that was brought up, what about the parents or family of the child? What information will be accessible to them about the foster family? I think about it as a safety thing, because I heard that for travel, they needed to give a specific location to the family about where they were traveling
- Ms. Cunningham: If a foster child travels, yes, they need to; I don't think it's specific addresses, just where they're going, and we often have the parents sign off first

- Mr. Romeo: The concern was if a specific address was given; I assume that addresses and super personal information aren't given, it was just the travel

2. **COUNTY LEGISLATURE:** Nicole Watts, Chairwoman

a. DISCUSSION: Proposed ADA Committee, County-Wide Accessibility Standards and Oversight

- In reviewing the outside boards and commissions, noted that in 1999 what was called the Council for the Disabled went defunct and has not been active since; still a whole lot of opportunity and need for such a council to exist
- Looking to re-energize it under a new name, informed by the nomenclature of today and the multitude of lessons and knowledge gained over the 20-plus years since it was last active; to serve as an advisory council to the county, not only in enacting the ADA standards being put down by the state and general ADA compliance, but overall accessibility of the county
- Planning to relaunch the committee next session; coming to the program committees to ask how it might operate, particular perspectives, not necessarily names, that should be on it to make it successful and, for Health and Human Services, anything to bear in mind in building the committee, who sits on it, and what its role needs to include in the resolution setting it up

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Romeo: I'm thrilled that we're doing it; I think that's huge. I would think about diversifying the things they're trying to address: a facilities person if we're trying to adjust facilities standards, but also the training and workforce development piece, which is going to be very much cultural; how do we overcome the barrier and the gap that's there?
 - It would depend on the goals of the committee, and making sure there's somebody that can help on both ends. Obviously someone from the ADA community should be there to give that perspective, and also somebody in facilities or whatever task they're going to go down
- Mr. Burtis: I would start with goals, what's the function, how many people, and of course try to find the right people that would hit those goals; also put together a timeline and give yourself some expectations: I'd like this done by such-and-such a time, we have it together by then, and we meet when
 - It's a very deep subject, as Legislator Romeo said, there'd be a health piece, a facility piece, all kinds of bits and pieces, so I would work on the expectation part in the beginning before deciding who, besides the obvious, should be engaged and asked. We might have lots of ideas, but who's willing is what it always comes down to, in my opinion
- Ms. Watts: We've already gotten to speak on this in other committees. As I mentioned, if you have further ideas or suggestions on individuals you think would be a good fit, send them my way; we're looking to establish this committee in session in August and then appoint people to it the following month to get it up and running. As Legislator Kelly pointed out, this is the anniversary of the ADA this month
- Mr. Kelly: Did we look that number up?
- Ms. Watts: I can't say that I did, but I know that you're right; I'm not sure how many years
- Deputy Clerk Berg: 1990 about 36 years

Chair Romeo asked whether anyone had anything else before closing the meeting; Ms. Rooney asked to make a comment:

- Ms. Rooney: I sit in a lot of committee meetings, and it's impossible for the audience to hear. When we sat around the table, everybody could hear; for those sitting out here, it would be more valuable to sit in my office and watch it on YouTube, because even with the best intentions it's impossible to hear because of the acoustics
 - I just wanted to go on the record, I don't know if the other committees experience it, but every time I sit here it's really, really difficult
- Mr. Romeo: Thank you, sounds like the first thing the ADA committee can work on. Sorry for that experience
- Ms. Watts: We are working on that; there's a significant sound system challenge. We haven't replaced our sound system in, I believe, 20 years, which in the world of technology is quite something. We are actively working on temporary solutions, but also long-term solutions
- Ms. Rooney: In the meantime, is it possible to go back, where there's not that many people? There's plenty of seating to sit around the table where we could all hear; it was never an issue
- Mr. Romeo: I'll talk to the Chairwoman about what we do going forward
- Mr. Romeo: I'll end with a comment on what Legislator Burtis talked about, just how wonderful foster families are for taking in children, the burden that that is, but the joy they get out of it; their willingness and ability to do it is fantastic and helpful for everybody, so a shout-out and thank you to them

C. Adjournment

A motion was made by Ms. Denton, seconded by Ms. Block, to adjourn the meeting; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

Meeting adjourned at 10:07 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Respectfully submitted,
SPENCER BERG, Deputy Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: **HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**
DATE: **JULY 22, 2026**

NAME (Please Print)	DEPT/AGENCY/ORGANIZATION
<i>Kevin Corlett</i>	<i>CSEA</i>
<i>Jason Dean</i>	<i>Finance</i>
<i>Amy Cunningham</i>	<i>DCFS</i>
<i>Rosemary Avila-Ticio</i>	<i>CNY Works</i>