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Upstream City: Child Welfare Systems Should Be Allies, Not Leaders, in Transformative Change

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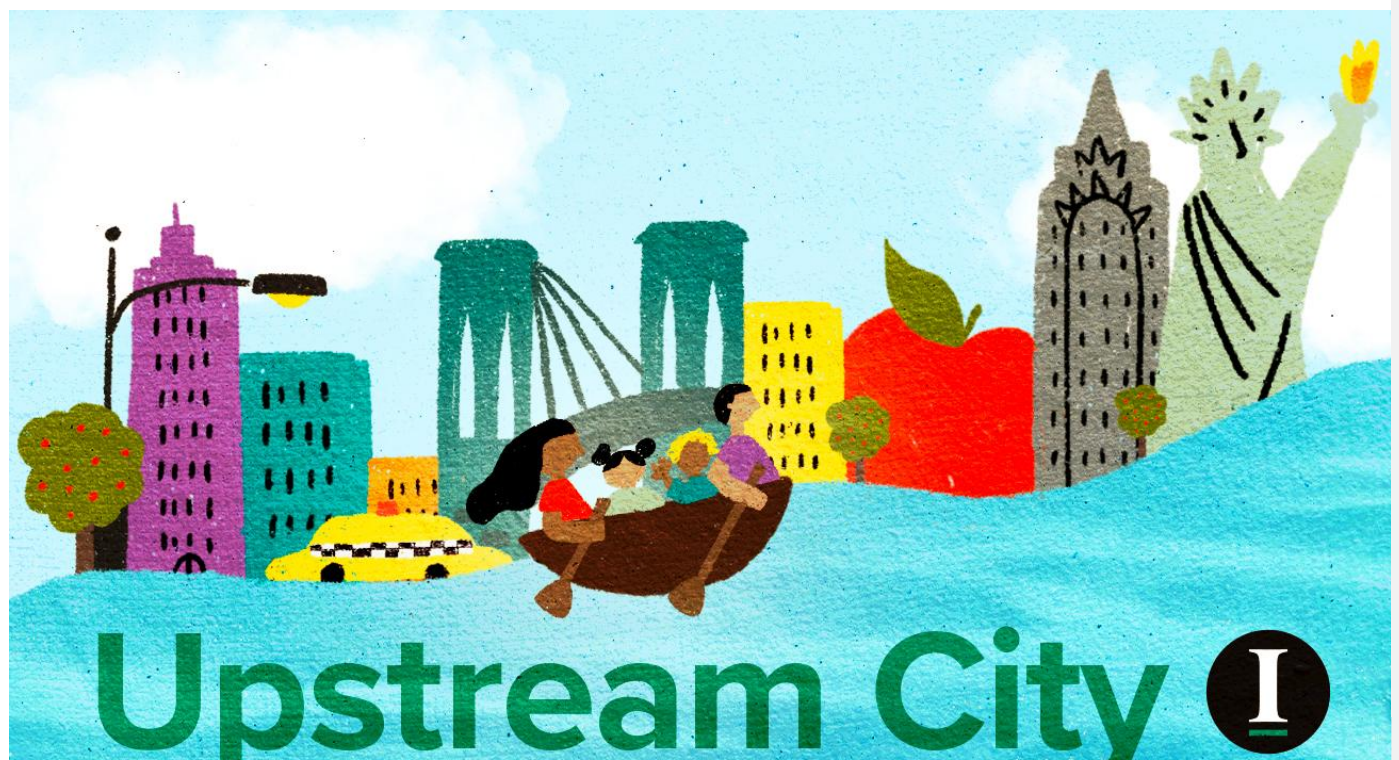


Illustration by Christine Ongjoco.

At a City Council [hearing](#) this month about the budget of New York City’s child welfare agency, Council member Gale Brewer questioned the wisdom of a proposed \$4.3 million cut to “family court mental health services.”

That’s the name for mental health evaluations contracted through the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), which have long been [viewed as flawed](#).

“Our hypothesis is that families would like to get access to mental health evaluations outside of the court system, outside of what they perceive as ACS,” Commissioner Jess Dannhauser explained.

“But why not take the \$4.3 [million] and allocate it to what *is* needed?” Brewer persisted, insisting that ACS expand other programming for parents.

The worldview behind these comments is common: That child welfare systems are wholly responsible for families in crisis. No matter that New York City has a [billion-dollar mental health care](#) system that parents can access. Legislators want to know, what is ACS doing?

The pressure that politicians and the media heap on child welfare trickles straight down to parents, exacerbating dynamics of coercive control already inherent in a system that operates with the implicit threat of family separation. As a mother [wrote for Rise](#):

“For a long time, I wanted to tell my preventive worker what we were going through. But fear made me say everything was fine. Once ACS enters your life...you fear that your children might walk out the door and never return. I even promised to buy my boys gifts if they just behaved when the worker came.”

You would think that, by and large, child welfare systems would want to resist this pressure. So it’s curious to see a nationwide push — fueled by foundation dollars and embraced by some system leaders — to expand their roles and responsibilities. Ambitions to transform into “[well-being systems](#)” put child welfare agencies at the intersection of two enormous,



Nora McCarthy

impossible demands — to fundamentally restructure poverty conditions, and to “co-create” authentic community-led programming for family support.



It's time to change how we support kids



To be clear, an “upstream” approach should not be an argument for expanding the size or scope of child welfare systems.

Given that child welfare agencies struggle with their core mandate to keep or return children home, it's bizarre and even risky for agency leaders to diffuse their roles. It's also wrong to imagine that a “well-being system” can be built off of funds from the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, which only covers services for families labeled “candidates for foster care,” a stigmatizing category that should not be recklessly expanded.

New York City is decades ahead of this movement and its experience can serve as a cautionary tale. For 20 years, ACS has [invested millions](#) in crisis services to bring down foster care entries, and since 2017 it has built out a well-being portfolio (over parent opposition). Now, however, city and state leadership appear open to pursuing an upstream approach that's quite different: to begin to “right-size” ACS' role and to find ways to be an ally to community-led change rather than try to lead it.

When Good Shepherd's Family Reception Center opened in 1972, brimming with “courage and optimism,” it hosted family nights, teen nights, camping trips, a community advisory board, legal assistance, educational coordinators, mental health treatment and “a community person who went around trying to find resources or otherwise develop them,” as [city fixture Sister Paulette](#) put it at a [2019 forum](#) on the history and future of New York City prevention.

“No uniform case records!” she remembered joyously. “We were able to really give families what they need.”

Yet those heady days soon smacked up against tough negotiations with the state. When it came to scaling a prevention system, “it was a classic example of the tradeoffs of getting, frankly, massive government support, but then, you’ve got to pay the piper,” recalled Jim Purcell, former director of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, at that same forum. “Fixing a refrigerator, cash assistance; they were literally afraid that the city and the counties would refinance every child service other than public schools through preventive funding.”

The upshot was that child welfare functioned as a means test. As with Family First, families had to be determined “at risk” and submit to a safety assessment and monitoring to get support.

AN “UPSTREAM” APPROACH SHOULD NOT BE AN ARGUMENT FOR EXPANDING THE SIZE OR SCOPE OF CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

By 2007, the majority of families in prevention [came through referrals](#) from ACS, not the community. Then came a shift to clinical, evidence-based programs. In a 2019 concept paper, ACS described the first programmatic goal of prevention as “monitoring.” Advocates responded by [calling on ACS](#) to “publicly resolve the contradictions” between its threatening role in families’ lives and its intention to expand the role of prevention to promotion of well-being.

It did not. When the agency announced expansion of its Family Enrichment Centers, [parents protested](#).

Now, following on reports from [Rise](#) and the [Narrowing the Front Door Work Group](#) that both argue for a curtailed ACS and expansive city investment in families, that demand is starting to be explored as policy.

After an Assembly hearing examining primary prevention last fall, Assembly Member Andrew Hevesi and Senator Jabari Brisport backed a new [Child and Family Well-Being Fund](#) that would purposely route state dollars away from child welfare and into small community groups in highly impacted neighborhoods.

Nearly everything families need so that setbacks and challenges don’t become crises is unavailable through public systems. Tutoring. Back-up babysitting. Meals during a

corrective to the constraints on preventive dollars, going to organizations that, like the Family Reception Center 50 years ago, offer neighborly care. Importantly, a workgroup anchored by parents impacted by child welfare designed it, and funding decisions would be made by community advisory boards.

The city's deputy mayor for human services, Anne Williams-Isom, and ACS Commissioner Dannhauser also have formally begun exploring the paradox of ACS itself running programs to prevent ACS involvement. They have committed to exploring where to best house primary support programs that ACS now oversees — such as the Family Enrichment Centers — to address the reluctance or fear families may have accessing them. Still in a very preliminary planning stage, this collaborative project with the Narrowing the Front Door Work Group represents a willingness to consider a stronger perimeter around ACS' role.

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Much more is necessary to “right-size” ACS. The agency can act as an ally through transparency. As it expands CARES, the city's differential response program, and its redesigned Beacon preventive programs in some of the city's school-based community centers, ACS should share detailed information about the resources and services parents ask for so that better access can be planned upstream. Both of these programs should function as tests of a new perimeter — and how families' contact with it can drop. ACS can also publicly examine how it is spending flexible dollars, like city tax levy and federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds, that could be shifted out of the system, especially as money from the Family First Act flows in.

In any decentralizing approach, there's always a risk that diffusion can lead to a lack of accountability or to spending cuts. It's political brokering that keeps new approaches funded, and in the absence of ACS, this work will require high level championing as it becomes part of NYC's core equity and community development strategy. Certainly, we've witnessed how funding for community mental health programs and housing to replace psychiatric hospitalization has never materialized. Another danger is that “community” is an ill-defined term that can be bent until it's broken. Real work will need to be done to better define and develop practices that **resist tokenization** and marginalization.

But the risks of a ballooning “well-being system” are likely higher. Child welfare systems can’t be wholly responsible for families in crisis. ACS has much to figure out about how it can do its core job while reducing trauma, limiting surveillance and respecting parents’ rights. It doesn’t need to be distracted by figuring out how to get cash and care to families so they never touch child welfare at all.

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A promotional banner for Social Current. The top section has a light gray background with three blue circles of varying sizes on the left. The main text 'let's amplify our impact' is in a large, dark blue font. Below this is the Social Current logo, which consists of a blue wave-like shape followed by the text 'social current' in a bold, dark blue font, and the tagline 'Activating the Power of the Social Sector' in a smaller, lighter blue font. The bottom section of the banner is dark blue and divided into four quadrants by a white grid. The top-left quadrant contains the text 'Engagement Packages', the top-right 'COA Accreditation', the bottom-left 'Consulting Services', and the bottom-right 'Learning Solutions'. A light blue rounded rectangle with the text 'learn more' is centered horizontally across the grid.

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