

Enhancing Economic Mobility

New York City's Child Welfare System Overlooked & Undercounted



The Urban Policy Lab is Milano's oldest and largest client-centered course. Students in the lab work in teams to advise clients in government and the nonprofit sector on pressing policy and management issues. Working under the supervision of a faculty supervisor, students research the issue, identify possible solutions, and analyze them. The students present their recommendations to the client in a formal briefing and then submit a written report incorporating client feedback.



The NYC Administration of Children's Services (ACS) ensures the safety of children through three branches: The Division of Child Protection, the Division of Prevention Services (DPS), and the Division of Foster Care. Through the DPS, ACS contracts non-profit agencies to provide case management and crisis intervention services to 20,000 families across New York City in instances when there have been allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. These agencies provide services, ideally in under a year, to ensure families meet safety and permanency goals.

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NYC Administration of Children's Services, Division of Prevention Services, Community Based Strategies
From: Kerry Sesil, Kate Neifeld, Yani Peña, Ana Prada Uribe
Subject: Enhancing Economic Mobility within New York City's Child Welfare System
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Central Policy Issue

Given that poverty underlies most child welfare cases in NYC, how can ACS' Division of Prevention Services increase economic mobility for families within the system?

Background

The NYC Administration of Children's Services (ACS) ensures the safety of children through three branches: The Division of Child Protection, the Division of Prevention Services (DPS), and the Division of Foster Care. Through the DPS, ACS contracts non-profit agencies to provide case management and crisis intervention services to 20,000 families across New York City in instances when there have been allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. These agencies provide services, ideally in under a year, to ensure families meet safety and permanency goals.

Most families served by ACS live below the poverty line. In 2017, the ten community districts with the highest rates of child poverty had four times as many child welfare investigations than the ten districts with the lowest concentration of child poverty.¹

Through a recent procurement process, ACS established new contracts, which can be renewed every 3 years over a ten-year period. ACS phased out GPS and replaced it with a range of evidence-based models aimed at addressing the complex and intersectional challenges, such as poverty, that families within the system face. Seven agencies will adopt Mobility Mentoring to promote economic mobility through 5 main components: Family Stability, Physical & Mental Well-Being, Financial Management, Educational Attainment, and Employment & Career goals. While Mobility Mentoring has proven successful over five years, it is difficult to implement in a shorter time-frame. ACS is committed to understanding the successes/challenges of Mobility Mentoring while evaluating alternative approaches to fostering economic mobility. Ultimately, any alternative must support child-safety and well-being.

Methodology

Our team aimed to understand the challenges families served by ACS face, the successes and shortcomings of Mobility Mentoring, and effective alternative models that promote economic mobility. To do so, we conducted: 1.) interviews with experts in the fields of economic mobility and child welfare, 2.) an examination of program reports, and 3.) an extensive literature review on poverty, economic mobility, and successful approaches to addressing both. We first conducted a lengthy review of EMPATH's Mobility Mentoring program to better understand its evaluations and adaptability to a NYC child welfare context. We then identified alternative approaches to promoting economic mobility, based on insights gathered from interviews and case studies. Our team conducted interviews with representatives from city agencies and nonprofits such as EMPATH, COFCCA, and Economic Mobility Corporation, and captured case studies from Pew Charitable Trust, Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, and Mathematica.

Criteria

1. *Effectiveness:* What is the estimated increase in income or earnings?
 - a. Measured by the **dollar amount increase** in income or wages within 12 months
2. *Sustainability:* Will the increase of income be sustained after one year?
 - a. Measured by the likelihood that the model enables continuous income; answered '**yes**' or '**no**'
3. *Feasibility:* How dependent is the success of an alternative on low-turnover/staff stability?
 - a. **Low, Medium, or High** (low dependency=the alternative's success is minimally impacted by staff turnover, whereas high dependency=the alternative's success is highly affected by staff turnover)
4. *Evidence-based:* To what degree is the model based on suitable research and evidence?
 - a. Measured as Low / Medium / High.
 - i. **Low** - No internal or third-party evaluations of the model exist;

¹ Butel, Angela. "Child Welfare Investigations and New York City Neighborhoods." *The New School Center for New York City Affairs*, June 2019.

- ii. **Moderate** - Only evaluated internally with no third-party evaluation; the agency cannot implement the model in accordance with the evaluated model.
 - iii. **High** - A third-party evaluation demonstrated positive results; the agency can and will implement in accordance with the evaluated model.
5. *Cost*: Estimated expenses of program implementation
- a. Measured in dollars, based on annual cost to ACS.

Alternatives

1. **Modified Mobility Mentoring**: Given that most successful iterations of Mobility Mentoring occur over 5 years and ACS cases average 9 -12 months, our first recommendation is a modified version of EMPATH’s Mobility Mentoring model. Agencies will provide family case management paired with one of the model’s pillars - financial coaching. These two components most directly support ACS’s mission and, based on case studies, are most likely to demonstrate positive impact in a relatively short period of time.
2. **Child Allowance**: Child allowances reduce material hardship and promotes economic mobility. ACS could pair family case management with monthly \$250 per child cash infusions to families living in poverty threshold. Case managers would provide resources on financial literacy, establishing bank accounts, budgeting, and saving. Families can use this resource to cover necessary expenses, such as child care.
3. **Workforce Development**: This alternative is based on the widely successful Project QUEST model. ACS would cover the costs of job training programs in high-demand industries. While ACS would ideally connect individuals to one-year programs, that will not always be feasible. Credentials gained through the model would increase earnings for the household, encouraging upward mobility for the family. The model also provides a range of support to ensure families complete the programs.

Analysis

	Modified Mobility Mentoring	Child Allowance	Workforce Development
Effectiveness	Up to \$1,000 (Year 1 benefits), \$1,990 (Year 2 benefits + income)	\$9,000 (Year 1) \$0 (Year 2)	\$1,500 net (year 1 incl. benefits) \$4,770 net (year 2 incl. benefits) \$6,498 (year 3) **\$2,500 (in benefits year 1-2)
Sustainability	Yes	No	Yes
Feasibility	High Dependency/(Low Feasibility)	Low Dependency/(High Feasibility)	High Dependency /(Low Feasibility)
Evidence-based	Moderate	High	Moderate
Cost	\$10 million	\$16 million	\$17 million

Final Recommendation

We recommend ACS implement a Child Allowance. Modified Mobility Mentoring does not directly increase wages or income for families in a year, but may support income mobility in the future. It is highly dependent on staff stability and a strong rapport between the mentor and participant, which is difficult to maintain in the child welfare context. Given the time-constraints and stress inherent in the child welfare system, agencies will also have a hard time implementing in accordance with the evaluated model. The Workforce Development alternative does not produce significant measurable income improvements within the first year, but is likely to support sustained overall income mobility. It takes at least two years, on average, to realize these income improvements. The benefits of workforce development are not contingent upon staff stability and the model, based on the extensively evaluated Project Quest, is supported by third-party evaluations. However, given the constraints within the child welfare system, it may also be difficult to implement to fidelity. The Child Allowance model provides much needed income to families living in poverty and struggling with crises, and enables them to cover costs that support health and child care. While the model does not provide any immediate solution to address long-term income stability, research indicates a cash-infusion can increase labor productivity by reducing stress in caregivers. The successes associated with a child allowance are independent of a relationship with staff. ACS, in partnership with non-profit agencies, could easily implement the model in accordance with evaluations and see tremendous impact without sacrificing efforts to promote the safety and well-being of children.