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SPEECHWRITING SAMPLE

**Commissioner Allison Blake
New Jersey Department of Children and Families
Testimony on Monitoring Period XVIII
Before Hon. Stanley R. Chesler, US District Judge for the District of New Jersey, June 8, 2016**

Good morning, Your Honor.

Seven months ago, we agreed to a process to end federal oversight of New Jersey's child welfare system. The Sustainability and Exit Plan acknowledges the enormous progress we've made and the vast distance we've traveled from the department we once were to the department we are today.

We've continued to maintain compliance with the eleven foundational elements, and the twelve measures identified for maintenance at the time the Exit Plan was signed. In addition, we have met the benchmark for fourteen additional measures this reporting period, thereby moving them into the "To Be Maintained" category. All together we've either achieved or maintained sixty-three percent of the Exit Plan's fifty-nine measures and standards. This is a strong measure of achievement within only seven months, particularly given that our 2015 performance was virtually complete before the Exit Plan goals had even been finalized and communicated to our wonderful staff.

But this morning, instead of focusing on achievements on numbers and measures, I'd like to discuss something I think is more profound and fundamental; something that directly influences how well we do our work to address the needs of children and families.

And that something is culture.

As the department prepares to celebrate its tenth anniversary next month, the most important change made to our state's child welfare system over the last ten years is to its culture.

Over the past ten years, we laid a solid foundation upon which we rebuilt our child welfare system; a task that would not have been possible without changing our culture.

This new culture has instilled a new perspective among our caseworkers; a new perspective that is making a difference in the lives of children and families.

You can see it in our system-wide embrace of family team meetings.

You can see it in our system-wide embrace of the case practice model.

You can see it in our system-wide embrace of transparency and accountability.

Beyond our work with families, you can see it in how we work with each other and our stakeholders. It's clear evidence that our new culture is accepted and embraced throughout our department.

And you can see it by how nimble we've become responding to the evolving needs of children and families.

For instance, by collecting and analyzing data, we discovered homelessness and housing instability are stubborn challenges for families repeatedly involved with the child welfare system.

So, we created, and then expanded, our Keeping Families Together program.

Keeping Families Together provides a housing first approach for child welfare involved families struggling with homelessness and other challenges. These families have close access to supportive services, including case planning and evidence-based and trauma-informed coordinated services.

We piloted the program in 2014 for ten families in Essex County. We later expanded it to another thirteen families in Hudson, Monmouth, and Passaic counties.

And, in partnership with the Department of Community Affairs, we recently expanded the program further, this time into Atlantic and Gloucester counties, which more than doubled the program's size.

We plan to expand the program yet again, this time to serve twenty-five families in Camden County.

We are monitoring the project closely and I'm optimistic it will help families break the multigenerational cycle of child abuse and neglect.

Data intelligence contributes to nimbleness. And by becoming a data-informed organization, we're able to identify and swiftly respond to the needs of families. Data identified the need for more intake staff in several local offices, so we added thirty-nine intake workers and seven intake supervisors between October 2015 and March 2016. Data is again showing us yet more intake workers are needed, and we expect to hire at least thirty-five more in the near future.

Another example of our nimbleness is identifying a need for, and moving swiftly to provide, evidence-informed trauma treatment and supportive services for child victims of domestic violence. This includes children involved, and those not otherwise involved, in the child welfare system.

Exposure to domestic violence can have lasting effects on children and their development. These children are at increased risk of experiencing abuse and developing emotional and behavioral challenges.

Early intervention with trauma-informed services is critical to a child's recovery.

For adolescents receiving an independent living stipend, we've made changes that make receiving and spending the stipend easier and more secure. Instead of mailed paper checks, our youth may now receive their stipend by either debit card or direct deposit. This means they no longer need to worry whether their check will be delayed by the post office or stolen from their mailbox. Their stipend is now securely and conveniently deposited directly into their bank account or onto a debit card, which they may use for purchases.

Your Honor, the progress we've made would not have been possible without dedicated and talented caseworkers. But to do their work effectively and efficiently, they need today's tools and technology.

That is why we have begun equipping caseworkers with Internet-connected tablets. Caseworkers can now complete and file reports immediately and access the NJ SPIRIT database without returning to the office. Whether sitting in their car or on a family's front porch, caseworkers have access to all the information they need. The devices save time and ensure our child welfare database is current.

We're also relying on technology to further performance transparency and progress accountability. With our department's support, the Rutgers School of Social Work recently launched the state's first website devoted strictly to child welfare data.

The New Jersey Child Welfare Data Hub provides the public regularly updated data on our performance serving the state's most vulnerable children, youth, and families.

It permits the public to interact with a variety of measures of child welfare system performance. The site allows users to produce customized charts, graphs, and other visuals of child welfare data, including investigations of alleged child abuse and neglect, child welfare service referrals, family preservation services, out-of-home care, and other important measures.

The site will be launched in two phases. Phase one, the Data Map, launched April 15, allows users to produce state- and county-level data visuals on select key indicators. Phase two, the Data Portal, set to launch this fall, will allow users to create queries within more categories, such as age, sex, race, and ethnicity, and filter selections to generate customized visualizations.

The new Data Hub reinforces our deep and active commitment to performance accountability and transparency, a commitment that we have worked hard to ingrain in our department's culture. Several years ago, we began posting on our website the Commissioner's Dashboard, a monthly report revealing both our strengths and opportunities for performance improvement. We have continued to publish additional reports providing broad data about our work and performance.

Sharing our data benefits all New Jerseyans, creating understanding and instilling confidence in how we work.

Our department is proud of the achievements we've made in the last ten years. Having reached our tenth anniversary, we are fully committed to yet further advancement and innovation and ensuring the wellbeing of our state's children and families, now and well into the future.

Your Honor, thank you for your time.