MEMORANDUM
To: All Staff
From: Joette Katz, Commissioner
Date: Thursday, April 21, 2011
Subject: Relative Placements

As a Department, a core value of our work is to empower, strengthen, and collaborate with families. A major component of a family's resiliency is its ability to develop and mobilize relative and natural supports during times of need. Even the strongest individual requires assistance at points throughout his or her life. There is no greater resource than a family.

All too often, we see the dramatic negative consequences of when a parent's needs outweigh his or her ability to safely care for a child. Being removed from the home can be one of the most traumatic and life-altering experiences of a child's life. It is at this very moment when a child most needs to be with people he or she knows and trusts, and who will be able to lessen this emotional trauma.

In my short tenure with the Department, I have made the placement of children with relatives a top priority. This issue has been widely discussed internally, with our community partners, throughout media interviews, and with the legislature. It now time that we solidify an even greater focus.

We must fully embrace the mindset that first and foremost, children removed from their homes are placed with relatives. Research shows that, overwhelmingly, children placed with relatives experience much more positive results over the long term, including:

- Greater stability and less placement disruption
- Better prospects of staying together with siblings
- Stronger connections to the community
- Greater or equal safety
- More timely permanency

It is our obligation to do everything possible to keep children within the family system. To this end, I am making it the expectation that all children in our care be placed with relatives and the exception that they go into non-relative care. In other words, to use language with which I am most familiar, the presumption is that they be placed with relatives. This is a culture and a norm that the children need us to adopt and operationalize immediately in our practice.

Early in our casework, we must begin to identify relative and natural supports with families. These resources can be accessed to assist in stabilizing a family and become part of our case planning process while we are providing in-home supports. It is fundamental to our work that these same individuals can be utilized in a time of crisis to provide a home for the child. We cannot stop asking about, pursuing or encouraging relatives to become a resource -- and we must hold ourselves accountable for the outcome of our efforts.
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In keeping with this greater reliance on family resources, the Office of Foster Care and Adoption already has improved procedures to assess and approve relative providers more quickly, and in more comprehensive ways. These efforts include the following:

- **The Foster Care Division enhanced its ability to conduct emergency walk-through requests by designating "emergency" staffing.** Now there should be minimal waiting time within which to conduct an initial check of a relative's home that allows a child to be placed with a family member.
- **The waiver process has been changed for relatives who may have a technical issue that appears to prevent them from being licensed.** We have moved from a "risk averse" model to one in which we are more fully assessing the current abilities of a relative to provide care and not solely focusing on their past history. Less emphasis also has been placed on the physical structure of homes, sleeping arrangements, and income levels.
- **The process to have a waiver approved has been made much simpler.** A waiver no longer requires the oversight of multiple people, and final approval now stops with the Foster Care Director.
- **A comprehensive database is maintained showing how many requests to license a relative the Foster Care Division has received, how many were approved, and requests pending with the stated barriers to licensure all being documented.**
- **Each month, the Regional Directors receive data on the percentage of their children who are placed with relatives and the number of times they have requested the Foster Care Division to conduct a home visit in order to approve placement.**

We are establishing a *culture* that values and relies upon the inherent strengths within families. This culture will become a reality for children, however, only when we insure that children routinely are maintained within their family system even if they cannot remain in their own homes.

Thank you for all of your efforts, and please remember that our children deserve the benefit of these best efforts and practices.