

# Rockland County – Family First Readiness Story

## April 2020

Over the past decade, the Rockland County Department of Social Services has quietly and dramatically changed its organizational culture to achieve better outcomes for children and families. These changes have put Rockland County ahead of the curve in meeting the goals established by the Office of Children and Family Services to implement the Family First Prevention Services Act, federal legislation that aims to keep children safely in family-based settings whenever possible, preferably with their own families.

As of March 30<sup>th</sup>, Rockland County has only 7 percent of its foster care population in congregate care. Twenty-eight percent of the children in foster care are placed with kin. With a very low rate of overall foster care, Rockland County is not only ready for Family First, but uniquely positioned to take on future policy and practice changes.

This report tells the Rockland County story, including five critical elements that have led to Rockland County's ability to keep children safely at home whenever possible, engage kin and non-kin foster families for children in care, and utilize congregate care only as a rare and temporary placement option for youth in unique circumstances.

### Rockland County Context

Rockland County is the southernmost county west of the Hudson River and the third densest county in New York State outside of New York City. With a population of 325,000 estimated in the 2018 Census, Rockland County is growing throughout its five towns and nineteen incorporated villages. The majority of the population is White (77.5%), 13% of the population is Black and 17% of the population is Latino. As of the 2010 Census, 9% of the residents reported speaking Spanish at home.

## Five Critical Elements to Reform

Rockland County leaders, supervisors and frontline workers consistently cite five concrete changes over the last decade that have enabled the county to improve outcomes for children and families.

1. Making Decisions as a Team
2. Engaging Family and Youth
3. Embedding A Strong Model of Supervision
4. Prioritizing Racial Equity and Cultural Competency
5. Leading with Clear Messaging

# 1 Making Decisions as a Team

Rockland County has instituted multiple teaming processes that have helped to increase communications and improve decision making within the child welfare agency. Today, multiple teams are embedded in the fabric of Rockland County's practice. But it wasn't always like this. As one supervisor put it, *"In the past, we were used to making decisions in isolation, based on one person's judgement. Now the teams bring shared accountability to the work and we get multiple perspectives on a situation. Decisions are less rash and more thoughtful now than they were before."*

This team approach shows up across all internal work streams and includes:

- **Removal board** – Held bi-monthly, the removal board supports child protective services and the legal team in decision making about whether a child can stay safely at home or whether a removal needs to be made. The team brainstorms ideas and solutions and helps bring different perspectives to the table, particularly for cases that are not straightforward. Removal board cases are "blind", meaning the team does not know who the family is, their race, or other identifying information. This helps to ensure that bias about families of color or those with intergenerational involvement in the system does not play into the final decision about removal.
- **Permanency reviews** – This team regularly examines progress with permanency, and helps Children's Services staff brainstorm barriers to reunification, adoption and Kin-GAP for individual cases. This team also discusses the well-being of the child in care and what services or supports they need to thrive.
- **Multidisciplinary teams** – Two multi-disciplinary teams convene around cases that involve commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and sexual or physical abuse. Given the complex trauma associated with these situations, the team includes other disciplines, such as probation, mental health, the District Attorney, victim services, etc. These teams convene monthly and/or as soon as possible after a child has been identified as abused or sexually exploited.
- **Case conferences** – These conferences occur every time a case transfers to a new unit to ensure there is continuity for the child and family, and that staff in the unit that is taking over the case understand the needs of the child and their family.

Communication and joint decision making have strengthened the internal culture of the child welfare agency, but it is also critical for partnerships with other agencies that have a role to play in supporting families and preventing systems involvement. The most compelling example is the Multi-Agency Collaborative for Safe and Healthy Youth (MACSHY), launched by the Rockland County District Attorney in 2013 to respond to the need for services for children and youth with across systems with serious emotional disturbances (SED), serious mental illness (SMI) and/or trauma.

MACSHY employs System of Care (SOC) principles in its service delivery, which is operationalized through the Partnership for Safe Youth Center (Partnership), a co-location center housing staff from the County's Department of Mental Health (DMH), Department of Social Services (DSS), Department of Probation (DP), and the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The main goals of the Partnership are to identify at-risk children and youth early, help them progress in school, and ensure they can safely remain in the community.

The benefits of the Partnership include the ability to easily share information, coordinate services and care, and provide families seeking services an easily identifiable contact for information and referrals.

An executive team of the stakeholders meets monthly to streamline resources and remove barriers to successful provision of frontline services. This system of care is not only powerful for families, but also ensures that the individual systems are able to work together to implement new changes. This forum was especially helpful in planning for and implementing timely cross-system adaptations needed to respond effectively to Raise the Age, Family First and Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) Legislation.

## 2 Engaging Family and Youth

Staff in all units acknowledge that the philosophy in Rockland County DSS has changed to be much more family focused and strengths based. This philosophy of family and youth engagement plays out in multiple arenas:

- **Engaging families in prevention through Family Assessment Response** – Perhaps the biggest change at Rockland County DSS was implementation of the Family Assessment Response (FAR) practice. Rockland historically unfounded approximately 80 percent of

*"We used to be much more punitive. Now we meet families where they're at. They have to buy into it for substantial change, and our solutions won't work for them if they can't identify their own issues and service needs."*

all CPS reports that came through the State Central Registry. This is about 10 percent higher than the New York State average of 70 percent. The County attributed this difference to having a strengths-based approach to protecting children. The County data, however, highlighted a concern of having a low rate of engagement into voluntary services for families with unfounded reports. After surveying community providers and families, it was confirmed that there was a widespread fear and

misperception that Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement meant "CPS was going to remove my child." FAR made sense to improve family engagement into services earlier

and build a more trusting relationship with the public. To support implementation, the County conducted a publicity campaign to introduce the FAR strategy and how it allows caseworkers to partner with families to improve safety in a much less punitive or “scary” manner. They showcased data points like their low indication rate, low recurrence rate and having one of the lowest placement rates in NYS, to counteract the fear. They also used data to talk transparently about the need for cross-system interventions to improve outcomes for over-represented populations (i.e. Blacks and Hispanics) and underrepresented populations (i.e. Ultra-Orthodox).

*“We want to make sure they go home to a stronger family. We have to give them the tools to be successful with their children.”*

Over time, the FAR intervention has given the County a more engaging way to work with all families, while paying special attention to the equity in the percentage of FAR cases being offered to Black and Hispanic families. It has also significantly improved engagement of an underserved and insular population, the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Only a handful of counties in NY are implementing FAR, yet Rockland County has found it to be a critical pathway for families who need some extra support to keep their children safely at home.

- **Engaging kin through full disclosure of options meetings** – Another example of family engagement is that kinship caregivers are provided a full explanation of the legal options available to them when they step in to care for children who can’t safely stay with their families. The full disclosure meetings allow kin families to receive clear information on what it means to be in a direct placement (which does not require bringing the child into custody) versus becoming a kinship foster parent. Rockland County is committed to allowing families to make a decision about the placement that works best for them and tries to avoid making judgements about which option they should choose.

*“Full disclosure is all about giving families a choice. We can’t make that choice for them.”*

For families that prefer to take Direct Custody, Rockland has streamlined the process for applying for Non-Parent Caregiver (NPC) benefits to expedite the Temporary Assistance application process. Additionally, they moved direct custody cases out of preventive services and assigned them to foster care workers with the expectation that the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) timelines and diligence of efforts would be parallel to the services being provided to foster families. While the NPC stipends are less than the foster care payments (especially for sibling groups), and direct custodians cannot choose Kin-GAP unless they become approved as a kinship foster home, Rockland is committed to ensuring that other supports are consistent with what foster families receive.

- **Engaging voluntary agencies through oversight of congregate care placements** – Over the last decade, Rockland County has reduced the number of children in congregate care, and for those children who do end up in a congregate care facility, have become much more hands-on to ensure they are getting what they need. For the few children who are in congregate care, county staff insist that family therapy is provided and that the family is involved.

*"We used to place when there was a court order or families said they could no longer handle their teens. Now we ask more questions. We don't give families that out."*

- **Engaging older youth** – Rockland County has become an enthusiastic proponent of youth leadership and youth voice to help the county strengthen its approach to meeting the needs of older youth. Through a contract with the Children's Village's Bravehearts program, the county provides youth leadership training for a DSS Youth Peer Advocate (a young person with lived experience with the child welfare system), and youth currently in the system. Young people receive support to advocate for changes that will help other young people currently in the system. Prosocial activities, stipends and leadership opportunities are some of the strategies that are being utilized to build on young people's strengths and provide them with meaningful skills for the future.

*"In the past, we helped people fix problems, but there was no planning, no looking ahead and no ability to look at patterns; we were all just waiting for the next crisis to erupt."*

### 3 Embedding a Strong Model of Supervision

Intensive efforts have been made to develop the leadership and managerial skills of managers, supervisors and senior caseworkers (succession planning) through participation in the KEYS model of supervision pilot with New York State. As a result of these skills, staff were well positioned to adapt and lead the cultural shift needed to meet the requirements of recent legislative changes. *"The supervision model brought a new level of professionalization that we hadn't experienced before,"* said one supervisor.

The KEYS supervision model adopted in Rockland County include three important components:

- **Education:** Strengthens skills of frontline practitioners by modeling culturally competent, self-reflective, evidence-informed, child-centered, family-and solution-focused practice;
- **Administration:** Improves the use of data to identify, manage and evaluate frontline practitioner performance, time, workflow and caseloads; and

- **Support:** Increases staff morale by enhancing job satisfaction and addressing stress, burnout and secondary trauma. It also focuses on professional development, including coaching and support to develop leadership skills.

Finally, the work around supervision and culture has helped top-level leadership better understand how to be more strategic in building teams that have the strengths necessary to do the work. *“We respect each other’s styles in a way we weren’t trained to do before,”* remarked one supervisor. One concrete example is the importance of having someone who is organized and analytical on the team, while also having someone who is expressive and skilled at engagement. Instead of being critical of these different styles, staff now understand and appreciate the role of each in strengthening the team.

## 4 Prioritizing Racial Equity and Cultural Competency

Despite having a majority white population, Rockland County, like many counties in New York, removes a disproportionate number of Black and Latino children from their families. The county has made diversity, cultural competency and racial equity a central priority and mission for the organization, and has put several strategies in place to try to address this, including:

- **Diversity in staff composition** – The County is committed to having staff who reflect the communities in which they are working. *“Having a diverse workforce helps us look at issues through different lenses. Different workers come up with different solutions based on their unique perspectives and strengths,”* said one worker. *“We look a lot more like the population we serve now.”*
- **Removal of language barriers** – Fifty percent of the staff at DSS are bilingual. This has made a huge difference in the ability of the County to engage the growing number of Latino families and help them address issues before a removal is necessary. Translation services for other families whose first language is not English are also helpful.
- **Race-blind removal decisions** – Rockland County has joined some other NY counties in “race blind” decision making, in which the race and identity of the family are not known and therefore can’t influence a decision about removal. *“We know that implicit bias has played a role in our decisions, and we’re trying to address this,”* remarked one program manager.
- **Cultural competency efforts** – The County is acutely aware of the changing demographics of the community and strives to understand the unique culture of new immigrant populations, as well as specific populations, such as LGBTQ young

people. Strategies to work with different racial, ethnic, and underserved groups include:

- Contracting for service providers of underserved communities, such as the Ultra-Orthodox and LGBTQ+ young people, to help staff be culturally competent, build trust, engage, and improve communication with these communities;
- Providing translation services when language is a barrier;
- Using data to drive ongoing conversations with staff;
- Providing training for all staff from a variety of perspectives and strategies regarding the impact of institutional and personal bias (i.e. Undoing Racism and expert trainers like Khatib Waheed, Joyce James and Tim Wise); and
- Delivering poverty simulation training.

## 5 Leading with Clear Messaging

The roles of leadership cannot be understated in Rockland County's readiness for Family First and other changes. The clarity about outcomes has helped staff prioritize their work, guide supervision, and monitor their ongoing progress in a meaningful way. Leadership is constantly putting the evidence before staff and pointing out where their efforts are working and where they are not achieving the best outcomes for children and families. While sometimes this messaging has to be done through directives, more often it is through efforts to engage staff and center the message on what is in the best interests of children.

The use of data is also front and center in this messaging, and staff are consistently analyzing the data to identify patterns and better understand the factors that may be influencing outcomes. This includes looking at data by unit to see where there may be practice issues getting in the way of outcomes or barriers to meeting timelines established in law or policy. By relying on hard data, the county can take some of the subjectivity out of the equation, target improvements where they are needed, and identify what the workforce needs to do differently to achieve a better outcome for children and families.

*"Everyone knows what's expected and there is crystal clear messaging about the outcomes we're trying to achieve."*

### Conclusion

The reform efforts over the last decade have enabled Rockland County to put in place the core elements that will be foundational to any new change that comes through the system, including the transition to Family First. Clarity from leadership about outcomes the county is trying to achieve, teams that work together to make decisions, a model of supervision to guide effective practice, and strong partnership with other agencies have been critical to achieving the outcomes envisioned under Family First and will be essential in guiding

future reform efforts. Such ongoing efforts include implementation of evidence-based programs, recruitment and retention of foster families for teens, and assurance that Raise the Age policies do not lead to a reversal in the trend to reduce overreliance on congregate care.

Perhaps most importantly, staff in Rockland County have a positive attitude about working on behalf of children and families in the county and are proud of what they have achieved.

This culture of teamwork, engagement, and a strengths-based approach to the work will help ensure that they continue to do positive things for children and families.