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**FOR ELECTRONIC DELIVERY**

January 3, 2024

Dear Joint Legislative Audit Committee Members:

As the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) goes through the sunset review process, I write to share policy priorities that will support the safety and well-being of children and families in our state. These are priorities that the Children's Action Alliance (CAA) champions every day, and we respectfully request your support for these priorities as you seek to address safeguards and solutions that help children thrive.

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**Strengthen Prevention Approach and Services**

Far too many families have their first encounter with DCS not because abuse is present, but because they are experiencing instability with basic necessities such as poverty, hunger, child care, and housing. Arizona has an opportunity to build in greater services and support that safely prevent these families from separation. In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act was passed with bipartisan congressional support to reduce the number of children removed from their home by providing new federal funding for prevention services. CAA applauds DCS for finalizing a prevention plan and obtaining its approval from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2023. Continued focus on unlocking federal and other funding for mental health and substance use services, parenting training, and other prevention services in support of vulnerable children and families to allow them to safely stay together is vital. Additionally, some states are working to redefine what constitutes neglect

and maltreatment in order to distinguish between the types of intervention that are most appropriate.

### **Ensure Safeguards for Children in Care**

CAA appreciates the significant time and effort invested by the Auditor General in evaluating how consistently safeguards are established and implemented to keep children safe once in the custody of DCS. CAA agrees that safeguards must be designed and adhered to in order to prioritize child safety alongside safe and timely family reunification. Recognizing the importance of providing timely and transparent information to courts, and ensuring foster and adoptive parents are adequately and routinely vetted for safety risks is critical to the integrity of carrying out the DCS mission to protect children.

### **Support Grandparents and Kinship Caregivers**

What we know in our hearts is supported by data, when kids cannot safely live with their parents, their success is best supported by a known and caring family member or other kinship caregiver. Arizona has made important strides with bipartisan leadership to better support grandparents and other kinship providers, but more can be done to create equity between kinship caregivers and non-kinship foster parents. Additional advancements are recommended for payment and support to kinship caregivers, who are more likely to be an older adult and live in poverty. Arizona can also do more to support children cared for by kin who are not part of the child welfare system. Many times, these “informal kinship” arrangements prevent children from entering foster care. Nearly every other state makes a modest “child only” TANF benefit available to children being raised by kin. Arizona eliminated this benefit for children in informal kinship care during the great recession. It is time to acknowledge the important role that informal kinship caregivers play in safeguarding children and preventing the need for foster care by restoring “child only” TANF for informal caregivers.

### **Support Young People Transitioning Out of Foster Care**

Ensuring support for young people in foster care such as access to identification, a driver’s license, higher education, job training, health care and housing can especially help support their safety and success as they transition to adulthood. In 2022, the legislature took bipartisan action to reduce barriers to maintaining their health insurance through the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS). Once this change is approved at the federal level, youth who have changed addresses will no longer unnecessarily lose their health insurance, and instead will maintain it until their 26<sup>th</sup> birthday. That same year, the legislature also increased the independent living stipend, which supports young people ages 18 to 21 who participate in extended foster care, from \$715 to \$1,200 a month. This adjustment supports their transition from foster care to independence and is vital to helping young people make ends meet as the cost-of-living skyrockets. CAA recognizes the

importance of these practical solutions, and encourages additional solutions to support youth, especially as they exit foster care, including direct cash assistance, affordable housing, and career pathways that support stability.

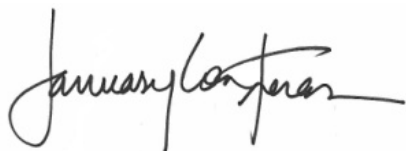
### **Reduce Racial Disparities**

In 2021, data showed that by age 18, 63.3% of Black children in Maricopa County will face a child welfare investigation.<sup>1</sup> This is a pattern that is alarming and requires immediate will to change. CAA recognizes that DCS began taking new approaches in 2021 to increase transparency and disrupt this historic pattern, including instituting protocols designed to reduce racial disparities. CAA is especially encouraged by DCS's participation in Arizona's Thriving Families, Safer Children Initiative and the planned-for Cultural Brokers pilot, which has shown promising results in reducing racial disparities in child welfare entries in other jurisdictions. Fidelity to the new protocols and continued innovation to remove bias in child welfare investigations is urgently needed.

The mission of DCS has consequential impacts for children and families in Arizona, and more progress is needed. Important advancements have begun happening under the leadership of Cabinet Executive Officer David Lujan, including many of those mentioned here. CAA appreciates the commitment that Mr. Lujan shows for the well-being of children and families as he carries out these important duties.

Thank you for your consideration of this input. I am available to discuss these issues at your convenience. Additionally, you and your staff continue to have access to Molly Dunn, CAA's Director of Child Welfare.

Sincerely,



January Contreras  
President and CEO

CC: The Honorable Governor Katie Hobbs  
Senator Warren Peterson, Senate President  
Representative Ben Toma, Speaker of the House  
Representative Lupe Contreras, House Minority Leader  
David Lujan, Department of Child Safety  
Andrew Sugrue, Office of Governor Katie Hobbs

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.2106272118>