

1. **Welcome and Introductions**

Eric Brettschneider, Executive Director, and Anthea McLaughlin, Associate Executive Director~ welcomed participants and thanked everyone for joining ACT for this very special Oversight Meeting. Mr. Brettschneider introduced Andrew White (Director of the Center for NYC Affairs, Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy at the New School) who was the host of the meeting and who presented a special welcome and greeting:

Mr. White welcomed everyone and began by sharing a few of the many achievements of William C. Bell, Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services and ACT Co- Chair. He spoke of a New York City resident named Julia whose child had been placed in foster care. While her child was in care Julia struggled with having to travel long distances to see her children for weekly visits, having no privileges like seeing her children privately during those visits, and lack of caseworker follow-up on needed services. Julia's children have been returned to her. They are now teens and she feels that nothing can make up for the time that was lost and the pain that was inflicted. The system has changed in response to stories like Julia's and today nearly all siblings are placed in the same foster home. Through preventive services families are kept intact even when a report is made. Every effort is made to avoid separating families--- instead families receive services.

Mr. White further mentioned that Commissioner Bell encourages young people and families to participate and have their voices heard in policy decisions and implementation. He has created and supported a vast amount of supportive programs for families.

Anthea McLaughlin shared the format for the day (in contrast to how traditional ACT meetings are run). ACT has a fourteen-year tradition of meeting with the oversight committee. Every quarter we meet with partners, both public and private. Today's meeting is different because it is a celebration William C. Bell-- "His legacy will live in and lives on with ACT." Ms. McLaughlin stated that Commissioner Bell's contributions have been great and ACT will work to sustain the gains made by ACS under Commissioner Bell's leadership. More children are receiving preventative services, more young people have vocational options, fewer children are in the foster care system and neighborhood based placements have been increased. "You are a gift to the children of New York and a blessing to ACT."

Presentation to the Commissioner

Mises Perez

Moises Perez, Director of Alianza Dominicana, shared how his wife and Commissioner Bell went to Social Work school together and how he heard great stories of this man even before he was Commissioner. Commissioner Bell understands communities because he lives in "the community" and knows the sights and smells of our homes. The mission of ACT emphasizes that work should be done at a community level. We still need people like William Bell in New York City working to strengthen our communities---another part of the country will now benefit from Commissioner Bell.

Mr. Perez shared a quote from a book of meditations: "if you can do a job in a way that allows you to keep free of distractions and keep your spirit undamaged, and if you can find fulfillment in what you do, then your life will be happy. No one can prevent that." Next he presented Commissioner Bell with the gift of a colorful Dominican Carnival Mask that is used to keep evil spirits away. The mask was presented as a symbol of protection for Commissioner Bell in his future endeavors.

Eric Brettschneider next shared how Commissioner Bell inquired if it was legal for him to take his office door with him to Seattle. This didn't seem like a good idea so Mr. Brettschneider, on behalf of ACT, presented to the Commissioner a large framed photograph of his office door with the ACT staff seen behind the glass and the quote: "with you, ACT."

Commissioner William C. Bell: Thanked Moises and ACT for the gifts. He shared a conversation that he had with Ann (Associate Commissioner Williams-Isom), who told him not to cry as he was standing up, but he found it difficult not to. The saying from the Massi Tribe, "Kasserian Ingera" (How are the children?) is something that embraces everything child welfare should be. The response is "Sapati Ingera" (The children are well.).

In the book about Antione Fischer the question is asked, "Who will cry for the children?" Commissioner Bell asked, " Who will make sure that the children don't cry alone? Who will make sure that the lives [of the hurting children] won't [continue] to be the same?"

Commissioner Bell shared with us the key elements to running a child welfare system:

- Political will- an elevation of the issues in child welfare. [We must] find a way to ensure that the political will is there in order to be successful.
- Competent leadership alone is not enough. The people in the agency are not the problem--over two thirds of the staff have been employed by the system for many years (as ACS employees and staff of the three agencies ACS once was). When he joined the agency in 1994 there were many levels of management but no accountability.
- Data Driven Accountability- must always be in place. This allows us to put people on the spot, which is sometimes necessary.
- Continuation of Neighborhood-based Services- There are strong communities in this city and we must continue to support them.
- Inclusion of all relevant voices-Children, parents and foster parents, advocates (including the ones that have opposing views) must be asked what works (and doesn't work) for them. [Child welfare] has to be about the children and their families.
- Unrelenting push for raising the bar of success -We have to become the consciousness of the government. At some point we have to stop abandoning our most vulnerable citizens. We must stop waiting for money to show up and start doing [what needs to be done].

We cannot say we have done a great job with children simply because we have gotten them through maturation. We need to believe: "Even though I didn't give birth to the child it is still my child." We must provide services for young people who have aged out of the system. Adolescents are not our enemy; they are children who do not accept as much advice as they need and we must reach out to them.

The disproportionate number of children of color in the system must be reduced. Central Harlem, which used to have the largest number of children placed in foster care, is now ranked fourth because a group of people got together and decided that there needed to be a change.

New York City's Administration for Children's Services is considered a national leader and should continue to function on that level.

Commissioner Bell's prayer and hope is that New York City will continue to do the right thing by its children.

Panel Presentation and Discussion with the Audience

Moderated by Eric Brettschneider

Guiding questions for the discussion:

- What did you like about what has happened in Child Welfare and Neighborhood- i Based Services over the last 2.5 years?
- Of the many initiatives you are working on, which, in priority order, need to be sustained?
- What are your recommendations for how the gains made can be sustained?

Network Perspective: Helen Jordan, New York Urban League

- She recalled reading and using a newsletter years ago that printed William Bell's suggestions about parenting; In the article he states that persistence, patience, perseverance, and prayer are the key elements to parenting.
- Of the child welfare situation Ms. Jordan stated: There are not enough substance abuse rehabilitation resources in the community that offer families an option to stay intact this situation is changing.
- Networks: There are now fifty partners in the Brownsville/East New York Child Welfare Neighborhood Network including libraries, churches, ACS, New York City Housing Authority, HUD, consumers, and other stakeholders. In the network stakeholders come together once a month to discuss issues that effect child welfare in the community. The Network was recently able to assist a family in the community that had been trying to get mental health services for their six-year-old boy for nearly six months. A presentation by Interfaith Hospital provided the network with information about a mobile crisis unit. A referral to the unit resulted in services being brought to the child's home and the child was evaluated and treated.

Community Builder's Perspective: Brother Ed. Phelan, Highbridge Community Life Center .Families should always be the center of our attention.

.We must emphasize cooperation---there is something new about the idea of us all working together.

.We need to develop civic will.

.Representatives are being brought together to make changes in schools. [There are also incentives being offered to] encourage teachers who have left the system to come back and teach new teachers.

Funder's Perspective: John Courtney, Fund for Social Change

- Mr. Courtney is new to the funding world but he has been involved in the system almost as many years as Eric has.
- The Fund has met with administrative judge in family court; the court system is willing consider new initiatives---including the proposed creation of a part to address cases from high-needs communities;
- We are in a good position to continue to advance the gains we have made.

- We must continue to resist the days of the late 80's when communities were subject to intrusive interventions. We cannot allow the system to slip back to the "bad old days." It is extremely important to continue to use data as Commissioner Bell stated. It's about seeing communities progress.
- There will never be enough resources so we must use the resources we have in a better way. Parents, children and families must be supported.
- We must continue to fight for meaningful involvement of parents.

Collaborative Perspective: Nina Moreno, Agenda for Children Tomorrow

- The most important thing is political will. Because of Commissioner Bell's leadership there was an openness and willingness to hear our concerns and needs. It is amazing and unique to have an ear like that. Bushwick has experienced progress under his leadership and multiple system responses to homelessness has been the most significant and visible improvement.

Questions and Comments for the Audience:

John Mattingly, *Annie E. Casey Foundation*: The most impressive thing about William Bell is his willingness to carry the weight. We need to continue to have someone who is willing to carry the weight.

Doris Williams, Grandparent Empowerment Movement: Grandparents need to be considered and thought of more in building a responsive child welfare system

Garry Carter, *Jewish Board of Family and Children Services*: Political will is a resonating theme. The communities in which the children are being removed are not all of New York City but specific neighborhoods. We are a piece of a larger problem.

Moises Perez, Alianza Dominicana: Summer Youth Employment Programs have been cut; Young people, especially those between the ages of 14-21, have nowhere to go during the summer. Eight hundred and fifty young people attended a summer employment conference to express their concerns about the lack of jobs. It is a major crisis that will most likely not improve this summer. Moises repeated an earlier statement that if we do not fight for this we will be sorry in the end.

Ngosi Moses, Brooklyn Prenatal Network: We must remain righteously indignant about the state of our children and make sure progress does not stop. It is important to advocate for organizing at a community level. We must look at communities and ask ourselves: Are children going to be born healthy enough? We must create an action plan that will focus on communities where the infant mortality rate is rising. The infant mortality rate is a huge indicator of the many things going wrong in the community. The larger the number, the more problems a community is faced with.

Closing Remarks

Commissioner Bell and Eric Brettschneider

Eric Brettschneider closed the meeting with a thank you to Commissioner Bell from "The Middlemen". He stated that we will take the Commissioner's example to the streets.

The committee gave the Honorable Commissioner William C. Bell a round of applause and thanked him for his hard work and dedication.