



November 1, 2019

Dear Colleagues, Partners, and Friends,

It is bittersweet to pen this letter as I depart from the Maryland Department of Human Services Social Services Administration. We have accomplished so much together for the children, families, and vulnerable adults of our state over the past four years. It has been an honor to be in service to Maryland, to Governor Hogan and Secretary Padilla, to each of you, and to every single person receiving services and supports from SSA and the Local Departments of Social Services.

I want to take this opportunity to thank each of you and highlight our key accomplishments, which will require your continued support and diligent efforts to sustain them going forward:

*Child Welfare System Transformation – Families Blossom\*Place Matters*

We built upon long-standing efforts to keep children safely in their own homes, reduce the use of congregate care, and improve the quality of services we provide. Families Blossom\* Place Matters includes a transformative vision for orienting our child welfare system to best meet the needs of children and their families and vulnerable adults. As part of our transformation, we also improved our continuous quality improvement efforts, developed an implementation structure including stakeholders at the decision making table, and increased the use of data to monitor progress toward priority outcomes, with all designed to improve transparency, accountability, and quality.

*Integrated Practice Model*

The Integrated Practice Model provides a roadmap for how we engage, team, plan, and work together with children, families, vulnerable adults, and with each other. We teamed with Local Departments and stakeholders to take the best practices from across the state and created a comprehensive approach. The Integrated Practice Model puts families and their support system at the center of everything we do.

*Prevention and the Family First Prevention Services Act*

Maryland is proud to be among the first states to develop a Prevention Plan and begin implementation of this groundbreaking piece of legislation. Our evidence-based practices to strengthen families are being augmented by supportive federal policy and fiscal resources never before available for prevention services. Our success in reducing reliance on foster care and congregate care and ensuring children grow up in families is being reinforced through Family First. We can now truly envision a day when foster care is used only when absolutely needed and for short periods while families are stabilized.

*Child and Family Services Review*

Maryland created a self-directed Child and Family Services Review process that allowed us to assess our strengths, identify our needs, and craft innovative solutions for improving our performance on federal measures. This is building our capacity to conduct on-going continuous quality improvement and furthering our efforts to be a learning organization. Because of these strides, Maryland was selected by our federal partners to pilot a new approach to developing the Program Improvement Plan. A five-day gathering brought together more than 65 stakeholders who crafted key strategies to improve child welfare outcomes in Maryland. We were one of only three states ever to have a Program Improvement Plan approved within the required 90 days. The work to actualize these outcomes lies ahead and will require focused attention, strategic application of resources, and your leadership to ensure success.

### *Technology and Infrastructure*

For the past two years we have worked to create a management information system to create efficiencies in our day-to-day practice and documentation requirements. We have worked to articulate, test and prepare to implement new tools that will allow us to be out in the community serving children and families and reduce the amount of time we are behind a desk. While the technology will not do our work for us, it can be a great resource to support our relationships with families.

### *Alignment Across Child Welfare and Adult Services*

Our child welfare and adult services systems have historically operated in silos even though both are responsible for the safety and well-being of Maryland's residents. We brought integrated teams together to craft a shared way of supporting children, youth, families, and vulnerable adults. The Integrated Practice Model is a direct outgrowth of their efforts. Additionally, we have undertaken a policy development and revision project to promote consistency across these service branches. This quality improvement process will ensure we are reducing conflicting policies and increasing alignment in all of work.

### *Partnerships*

We are stronger together and the partnerships we've strengthened or forged in the past several years are key to continuing momentum and success. This is especially true in our partnership with the provider community. Each and every day, the provider community and our Local Departments are together strengthening families and ensuring they receive high quality services designed to meet their individual needs. Our partnerships with Legislators has also grown tremendously and resulted in important legislation crafted to support children, youth and families. Highlights include expansion of kinship services and ensuring quality assessments and services for substance exposed newborns. Legislative members also formally established Foster Youth Shadow Days to ensure youth voice is included in the policy making process. I leave Maryland with a deep gratitude to all of our partners for contributing energy, ideas, and resources to the transformation underway.

Each of these strategies has made a powerful contribution to our overarching strategic direction and priority child and family outcomes. Importantly, these strategies and successes are inter-related and mutually reinforcing. There is a synergy among them that creates a whole far greater than the sum of these parts. Individually and collectively they support the system transformation we all want for our children, youth, families and vulnerable adults. They help us deepen a system and partnership perspective, and reduce the likelihood that we engage solely as individual agencies.

Indeed, our child welfare system transformation demands sustained action from a community of dedicated partners, stakeholders, public servants and communities. Over the next several months, Regional Town Hall meetings are being held across the state to bring all of the partners together. The Town Halls are structured to seek your input, review progress, celebrate our accomplishments, and further transformational work together. Invitations will be going out shortly in your area and I hope each of you will engage and contribute.

I will always look back at this time with tremendous pride for what we've accomplished and deep gratitude for the partnerships created. The Maryland child welfare system, the adult services system, the Social Services Administration and the Local Departments of Social Services are stronger because of our collective efforts, and our children and families are safer and their well-being is improved. Thank you.

With warmest regards,



Rebecca Jones Gaston