

Testimony to the Assembly Committee on Children, Families and Food Security – March 10th, 2025 by Tom Blatner

Chairwoman Haider and Honorable Members of the Committee;

Good morning. I am Tom Blatner, co-founder and Board Chair of the Family Success Institute. Thank you all so much for considering A4365, the Community Recovery and Family Success Act. This bill was formulated by many members of our Family Success Institute Learning Community, a cadre of stakeholders from around the state.

I have spent my working life in virtually every corner of the human service arena; from a welfare case worker to an addiction supervisor, COO of the NJ Division of Mental Health and Hospitals, head of the NJ child welfare system, overseer of the NJ juvenile justice system and the past 40 years as the head of a human services consulting firm. Each public position was organized around a response to distress.

In 2003, the tragic discovery of the remains of an 8 year old boy in a garbage bag under a staircase in Newark shook the state and the nation. A small group of concerned fellow colleagues felt that we needed to approach this crisis differently. We turned to parents, family members and community leaders for their guidance. These conversations sparked several key points that became the family success vision.

– rather than maintaining a morass of fragmented siloed programs and services that are point-in-time responses to the many symptoms of individual and family distress, we must honestly identify and meet the basic conditions at home and in community that all families need to successfully raise their children. How can we change what we do to assure that families are strong and children have the best shot at a good life?

-we must assure that parents and community members hold seats of power at the tables where decisions are made that impact their lives.

- we must analyze our vast spending to invest in success and divest from distress.

- we must summon the courage to declare and assure that family success happens for **all** New Jerseyans, not only those with privilege.

All over the state, we have witnessed local initiatives, services and programs from non-profit organizations and local government that reflect these principles - from Newark to Elizabeth to Trenton to Camden to Paterson to Middlesex and Monmouth counties and beyond.

In 2013, the Family Success Institute was established to promote positive changes in state policy, practice and funding to formally support this family success vision.

Our first two initiatives were an analysis of the state budget using the Family Success framework and the formation of a state-wide Learning Community to bring like-minded individuals and organizations together to collaborate and formulate goals. The Learning Community has grown to over one hundred diverse organizations across the state.

Passage of A4365 – The Community Recovery and Family Success Act will establish a state-wide forum of public, non-profit, civic and resident representatives to chart the way forward together, stimulate the development of county and locally based holistic systems of family success, and begin to invest in success and divest from distress. Our cause was adopted and championed by Assemblyman Atkins to whom we are eternally grateful, and other legislators, including several members of your committee. You are going to hear from our diverse and committed colleagues today about why this bill is so important to our future and deserves your support.

Thank you so much for your consideration.