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## **Illinois DCFS enhances training for foster parents and staff, expands resources and housing options to support LGBTQI+ youth in care during Pride Month**

CHICAGO – June is Pride Month and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is enhancing training and services to ensure LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and intersex) youth in care are protected and supported.

All young people deserve to grow up in safe, loving and caring homes. In addition to the circumstances that brought them into care, LGBTQI+ youth in care face additional challenges, including homophobia, transphobia and the constant need to assess their communities, schools, social networks and foster families to decide whether to disclose their LGBTQI+ identity, when to do so and to whom.

“Our mission is to provide a safe and loving home for every youth in our care, including those who are LGBTQI+,” said DCFS Director Marc D. Smith. “We’re doing that by providing ongoing training to our staff; expanding our network of service providers, health care professionals and private agency partners; and making sure foster families have the tools they need to provide affirming and informed care to the youth that need them most.”

To help ensure youth are receiving the best care in the most supportive environment, last fall the department launched enhanced mandatory LGBTQI+ training for staff and private agency partners. In addition, all foster caregivers must now complete mandatory *LGBTQI+ Children and Youth in Care Training* as a condition of licensure and license renewal. Both training courses for staff and caregivers provide guidance on how to ensure the safety, well-being and permanency of LGBTQI+ youth in care; outline professional and ethical responsibilities of caregivers when working with LGBTQI+ youth in care; provide an overview of the importance of supporting the development of sexual orientation and gender identity; analyze why youth in the LGBTQI+ population are currently overrepresented in child welfare; and identify effective strategies to



meet the unique needs of LGBTQI+ youth in care, including creating and providing affirming practices, support and care.

Studies have shown that approximately 30% of youth in care nationwide identify as LGBTQI+, and many youth come into care when they are rejected by their families after making their sexual orientation or gender identity known. LGBTQI+ youth are more at risk of becoming homeless than their peers and they need welcoming, affirming and supportive families to care and advocate for them. To that end, the department is finalizing contracts with Lawrence Hall, Lakeside and Bridge 2 Pathways to match LGBTQI+ youth in care living in Cook, Will and Kankakee counties with safe, LGBTQI+ specific housing.

The department is also deeply committed to giving all youth in care an opportunity to provide feedback on service delivery, programs and policies that directly affect them through membership on the Statewide Youth Advisory Board (YAB), a channel for current and former youth in care aged 14-21 to share their perspective and experience with DCFS leadership at monthly meetings held across the state. As an extension of the YAB, last October the department launched the LGBTQI+ Affinity Group (YAAG) for youth in care to identify the greatest issues and challenges they face related to racial and gender bias, disparity and equity; propose recommendations for system improvements that promote diversity, equity and inclusion; and collaborate with diversity, equity and inclusion professionals and DCFS staff to improve services, programs, policies and the experiences of all youth in care.

*About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Founded in 1964, DCFS is responsible for protecting children from abuse or neglect by responding to calls received on the Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873). With the goal of keeping children safe, DCFS strengthens and supports families with a wide range of services. When keeping a child safe means removing them from the home, DCFS makes every effort to reunite them with their family. When the best interest of the child makes this impossible, DCFS is committed to pursuing safe, loving and permanent homes for children through adoption or guardianship. DCFS is also responsible for licensing and monitoring of all Illinois child welfare agencies.*

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