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TESTIMONY

TO

HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL 79

AMENDMENTS TO PENNSYLVANIA ADOPTION LAW

PRESENTED BY

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CONCERN - PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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MR. CHAIRMAN and members of the House Judiciary Committee. My name is Mary Beth Hughes and I am the Director of Adoption Services at CONCERN - Professional Services for Children and Youth.

I very much appreciate this opportunity to testify before the committee on the specifics of House Bill 79 and its implications for establishing uniform standards of adoption service practice in Pennsylvania.

CONCERN is a private, voluntary non-profit child welfare agency whose main office is located in Fleetwood, Berks County, PA. Regional offices are also located in the Lehigh Valley, Doylestown, Coatesville, Scranton, and Lewisburg areas. CONCERN provides a wide range of services to children and youth including foster care, group home care, counseling, and adoption services. I have a Master's Degree in Social Work from Temple University and have worked in the private sector of the child welfare field for almost seventeen years. During that time, I have had the opportunity to directly work with children of all ages, birthparents, and adoptive families in various positions I have held, that being, caseworker, pregnancy counselor, therapist, supervisor, and currently, director of a large adoption program. Presently, we offer a variety of services through our Infant, Special Needs, International, and Independent adoption programs, as well as our Unplanned Pregnancy Counseling Program. During 1990, we facilitated adoptions for 101 children of varying ages, backgrounds, and characteristics through each of these programs.

I thought it would be most helpful to the committee for me to speak about my direct experiences and current practices within our adoption department

and unplanned pregnancy counseling programs as it relates to the proposed amendments to the adoption statutes. I would first like to offer, however, that our primary purpose in providing adoption services is to help children become members of a family. While we fully recognize the interdependent needs and interests of the birthparents and adoptive parents, our main objective is to attend to the child's well-being.

Counseling to Birthparents

It has been proposed that birthparents considering adoption be provided with access to counseling services. Based on my experience in counseling birthparents, I fully support attempts to engage them in the decision-making process regarding their child's future. Presently, we offer comprehensive services to birthparents, not as part of the adoption service, but as a separate service geared to the needs of young parents, including those not considering adoption. Our services are not contingent on a decision to select adoption as the plan. The focus of our service is to engage birthparents in the problem-solving process to meet the needs of their child, to make well-informed decisions and to protect their rights and interests. If they choose to parent the child, we assist them in identifying and securing all necessary and available resources in an attempt to help them fulfill their parental responsibilities. Ultimately, the greatest benefit of this type of ongoing support is derived by the child. For those parents choosing adoption as the best plan for the child, we assist them through the legal process, separating from the child and coping with the associated emotional conflicts and grief. It is also extremely helpful to the birthparents to participate in planning for the

child. Providing complete information on the child's medical, developmental, and psychosocial background, as well as being provided with an opportunity to express their preferences and wishes regarding selection of an adoptive family creates a productive dialogue that ultimately benefits the child. The importance of gathering background information cannot be understated in the adopted person's life. Recognizing that they are valued individuals in the planning process, birthparents are better able to move through the grief process and/or reconnect with the agency later on if new medical information is discovered or if continued support in dealing with the emotional issues is needed. It is not unusual for me to hear from a birthmother or birthfather around the time of their child's birthday. The relationship that we established during the counseling and adoptive placement process can be helpful to them at these times.

Termination of Parental Rights

It has been proposed that additional grounds for involuntary termination be included in the adoption statute. Again, I support these additions as I sincerely believe, based on my professional and personal experiences that it is in the best interest of the child to be with his/her primary caretaker(s), whether they be biological or adoptive family, at the earliest possible age. Prior to 1989, our agency policy and practice was to place infants in temporary foster care until parental rights were terminated. Although this practice assured that birthparents were afforded ample opportunity following the birth of the child to consider their decision and adoptive parents were not placed in a "legal risk" situation, ultimately what we were experiencing were a significant number of lengthy

placements of infants because of complications in the termination process. Involving putative fathers in the planning and termination processes is oftentimes difficult and in some cases, it is also difficult to locate and/or engage birthmothers. A turning point in my thinking about legal risk adoptive placements, quite frankly, came with the birth of my daughter in 1989. At about three months of age, it was obvious to me that she had an awareness of me as her primary caretaker over and above her relationships with other people even in her immediate world. At six months of age, she could consistently distinguish between her family members and strangers. To ask that a child during this stage of development attach to a new primary caretaker greatly compromises the child's developing trust. Upon my return to the workplace, I energetically facilitated a change in our placement practice that recognizes the rights and needs of birth and adoptive parents, while emphasizing the importance of eliminating or at the very least minimizing the separations and losses experienced in the child's life. I was disappointed to see the change from three to four months. Although the termination process could be initiated after a four month period, my concern is that the process itself takes additional time and we may still be faced with placing children with adoptive families or returning children to birth families, in other words, interrupting the developing attachments, at critical stages of development. A three month period would better ensure that any changes could occur prior to six months of age.

Preplacement Investigation and Report

While I support the need to adopt uniform standards of adoption practice in evaluating an adoptive parent(s) capacity to meet the needs of an adopted child, I would like to more broadly define this activity within the context of my current practice. My experience has shown me that most applicants have the potential to become adoptive parents, even if there are some issues in which they may need support. Our process of assessing and preparing families for adoptive parenthood emphasizes education and support. We fully engage adoptive applicants in the evaluative and preparation process. It is they who ultimately decide whether the adoption of children is the best plan and if so, we attempt to impart knowledge of parenting and adoption issues so as to help families develop their potential for being parents to a child adopted by them. Adoption is a lifelong process - a child and family may need support on an ongoing basis or at different times in their lives. The adoption process seems simple until your five year old asks, "Why did my first mommy give me away." Through the preplacement, assessment, and preparation process, as well as the postplacement support period, we have been able to help adoptive parents in anticipating and preparing to address problems and issues that may arise during and after the child's coming into the family. Most of our families enter the adoption process feeling powerless and expecting to be "accepted or rejected." As the process evolves for them, most families feel more knowledgeable about adoption issues and better equipped to deal with the responsibilities. We emphasize mutual decision-making throughout the entire process. We also have a very active adoptive family support organization that provides families with ongoing education and support. Adoptive families within this context are able to learn a great deal from each other.

Religious Belief

I believe that I have already addressed the importance of respecting the wishes of the birthparent(s) in selecting an adoptive family. Honoring their preference as to the religious faith in which the adoptive parents intend to rear the adopted child is just one example of how we currently, in our practice, engage them in planning for placement. My only concern is that this issue not unduly delay the placement of the child.

In summary, as adoption service providers, I believe we have a responsibility to provide preparation, counseling, and support on an ongoing basis for all parties involved in the adoption process. If we are to adequately represent adoptive children and their best interest, we must make every effort to ensure a timely placement, access to important psychosocial, genetic and medical information, and ongoing support to families formed by adoption. Thank you.