

**Testimony on
Foster Care and Adoption Issues**

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Good morning, Chairwoman Bishop, Chairman O'Brien, members of the committee and staff. I am Estelle Richman, Secretary of the Department of Public Welfare (DPW). I am joined by Jennifer Friedman, Chief of Staff, and Cathy Utz, Bureau Director for Policy and Program Development, both of the Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF). I am pleased to be here today to provide testimony regarding DPW's role in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court Permanency Practice Initiative and the National Governor's Association Policy Academy to Safely Reduce the Number of Children in Foster Care.

Overview

DPW's primary focus is on the safety, permanency and well being of the children we serve. We operate from the assumption that children belong with their own families and should receive necessary services in the community rather than being placed outside of their home and away from their families. Placement should be the last resort and children should be placed in the most appropriate setting to meet the child's needs in a location that promotes reunification with the family – if possible – and as soon as possible.

Currently, DPW is engaged in a number of initiatives which complement and build on one another to encourage best practices in the commonwealth's child welfare system. All of these practices are aligned with our goals to: increase safety, safely reduce reliance on out-of-home care, improve permanency, and reduce re-entry. DPW believes that these best practices will result in positive outcomes for children, their families, the counties and DPW -

including fewer children in out-of-home placements, more children in permanent homes, and more placements nurturing, family-like homes.

I am now going to ask Cathy Utz to discuss the Fostering Connections Act.

Fostering Connections Act

On October 7, 2008, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was signed into law. This law provides states with new opportunities to strengthen practice. Grounded in themes that are viewed as best practice, the new law emphasizes the need for more accountability in ensuring that we are achieving lasting permanency for children receiving our services. The law's overarching themes focus on maintaining family connections, ensuring that youth exiting the system are prepared for adulthood and that all children are afforded quality education.

The law underscores the need to explore relatives as resources for children entering care and requires that notice be provided to all relatives within 30 days of a child entering placement. Because siblings who enter placement are often separated, the law also supports continuing sibling relationships through frequent visitation when they can't be placed together.

How

While use of kin as resources has been a priority for Pennsylvania for many years, there is still room for improvement. We have continued to increase the number of children placed in kinship homes and who have become permanent resources. However, we often delay our search until the time of placement or when a child can no longer return to their family. Recognizing that

by waiting we lose essential time, our efforts are now focused on identification and preparation of kin at the initial point of involvement with the child and their family.

Fostering Connections not only supports use of kin as best practice, it also provides states with the option of seeking additional federal funds to support relative placements for eligible children and families. We are happy to report that Pennsylvania was the first state to submit a plan that would permit us to claim additional federal funds for relative placements which is pending final federal approval.

The second theme I'd like to highlight is greater support for youth through focused efforts to promote permanency, including ensuring that a youth is prepared to transition to adulthood. Fostering Connections requires that each youth have a transition plan developed at least 90 days prior to leaving placement. Too often, children are discharged from the child welfare system with little stability in the form of housing, employment or even one individual that they can call for advice or guidance.

Pennsylvania has long supported the development of individualized plans for children and families. However, the quality of our plans needs to improve to ensure that they are youth directed and provide services that support the development of skills that promote self-sufficiency.

The new law also supports continuing education for youth leaving the child welfare system after age 16 through the education training voucher program. Through this program, youth may receive up to \$5,000 annually to support

attendance in post secondary education and training programs. A similar program has been in place for many years in Pennsylvania. Fostering Connections reinforces the importance of promoting post secondary education with the availability of the additional financial support.

Improving the educational stability of children in placement is another overarching theme of the law. States are now required to coordinate with the child's home school district at the time of placement in order to minimize the disruption of the child's education. The law also permits states to claim federal funds to support the child's transportation to and from their home school district. Finally, if it is not in the child's best interest to be placed in the same school district, they must be enrolled immediately in the school district where the placement setting is located.

As we put plans in motion that will lead to system change it is important that we listen to the voices of those who matter most – the children we serve. Through the development of our Youth Advisory Boards, we communicate with our youth about their experiences in the foster care system. More importantly, we ask them for suggestions for future systems change and are including them in development of policies and practices that impact service delivery. I've been fortunate to interact with many of our youth and I am impressed with their fortitude and the young adults that they have become. In talking with one of these group recently, it was clear that they see their mission as making the child welfare system a better place for the children who will be involved with the system in the future. For them, it's less about what the system did to them and

more about what it could do for those after them. By listening to our youth, we are better able to identify what we are doing well and where we need to make changes.

While the points that I have covered are not inclusive of all the legislative changes pursuant to the law, they serve to highlight some of the key requirements. Additionally, some of the changes in the Fostering Connections Act are in line with work we have started with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) through the Permanency Practice Initiative.

Permanency Practice Initiative

DPW is working with the AOPC to reduce the number of youth in care through the Permanency Practice Initiative. This initiative utilizes various strategies to decrease the use of out-of-home, congregate services in particular and foster care in general and increasing permanence at the onset and for older youths in care.

The Permanency Practice Initiative calls for the incorporation of strength-based social work practices with specific court related changes that will safely accomplish the following seven goals:

- ✓ 1. Reduce the number of children/youth adjudicated dependent and in court-ordered placement
2. Reduce the time children/youth spend in the foster care system
3. Reduce the number of children/youth who re-enter care
4. Reduce the Dependency Court caseload

5. Reduce placement costs in order to ensure that funds are redirected to other services, including placement prevention, aftercare, and adoption services
6. Reduce the level of care (i.e. – reduce the number or percent of children in restrictive placements and increase the number of children in kinship care, when placement is needed)

And finally:

7. Increase placement stability, which equates to less moves for a child.

In its role as a partner in the Permanency Practice Initiative, DPW is supporting the implementation of Family Finding. This strategy uses intensive searches and outreach efforts for extended family members at the beginning of a case and/or later in a placement case in order to find as many resources for a child as early as possible.

DPW is providing counties with access to the Accruint system to assist in implementation of the Family Finding Model and to enhance concurrent planning efforts. The Accruint system is a search tool that performs computerized searches for relatives and kin of youth who are in care. In combination with Family Finding the Accruint services will identify numerous unknown resources for our children who are placement – which will hopefully lead to kin resources and even better permanent life connections for the child.

Finally, DPW is supporting the Family Credentialing Program which trains private providers to treat family as consumers and treatment partners. This

empowers youths and families to become involved in the decision making that effects their lives as opposed to being by-standers to the process.

DPW is extremely pleased about its partnership with the AOPC and the counties and about the progress thus far with the fourteen participating counties in phase one of the PPI and we are looking forward as the AOPC rolls out the second phase.

The final initiative we would like to describe for you today is the National Governor's Association – Policy Academy to Safely Reduce the Number of Youths in Foster Care (NGA) and Jennifer Friedman will speak to you about this.

National Governor's Association (NGA) – Policy Academy to Safely Reduce the Number of Youths in Foster Care

Pennsylvania was one of six states chosen to participate in the NGA policy academy to safely reduce the number of children in foster care. The academy is being conducted in partnership with Casey Family Programs. This policy academy offers state teams the opportunity to work with national and state experts to improve outcomes for children and youth who come to the attention of the child welfare system. Pennsylvania has a divers state team comprised of representatives from OCYF, OMHSAS, county children and youth agencies, county juvenile probation officers, the Juvenile Court Judges Commission, AOPC, the Department of Education and providers.

As a participant in the policy academy, DPW was required to identify a reduction goal for the number of children in foster care. We felt that we should take full advantage of the NGA opportunity and set a bold three year goal of safely reducing the number of Pennsylvania children in foster care by 15 to 20

percent, or approximately 2,000 to 3,000 children and youth by 2010. This is a goal for DPW and our county partners; there is no financial penalty from the NGA if we do not meet this challenge. However, we are striving to meet this goal because it means that we are improving the lives of the children and families we serve.

The NGA team recognized that if we were going to meet the challenge we had to have county engagement. The team decided that we should concentrate our collective efforts on a select group of counties and then after we had achieved success, replicate our efforts throughout the commonwealth. We are concentrating our efforts on sixteen counties by working with them to implement county-specific plans that focus on four key strategies: increasing safety, reducing reliance on out of home care, improving permanency and reducing re-entry into the system.

The county-specific work is being accomplished by county NGA teams who are comprised of members from the NGA core team and/or representatives from their agencies or offices, county integrated teams including children and youth, juvenile probation office, MH/MR, judicial and educational representatives from the sixteen NGA counties as well as children and youth representatives from non-NGA counties who agreed to be partners. Together the entire NGA team have worked together to not only create, but more importantly implement county specific reduction plans that can be modeled throughout Pennsylvania.

The individual county reduction plans are interwoven together and form the basis of our state reduction plans. Also the individual county plans are

shared with all NGA participants and serve as technical assistance to each of the participating counties. Every quarter we bring counties together to network and share best practices. Counties bring their integrated teams to an all day meeting where we all share the successes and challenges we have experienced. Our next county meeting is October 28, and I am sure the panel of county representatives will be able to share with you today about their experiences and successes.

I am happy to report that we have already seen movement in terms of reduction on both the dependency and delinquency systems. Between November 2008 and June 2009, 14 counties have reduced their dependency out-of-home placement numbers, 12 counties have reduced their delinquency numbers and 10 counties have reduced both. Statewide, there were 649 fewer placements during this period of time. Also, we have seen an increase in the integration and increased cooperation among the child serving county systems in all the NGA counties. This is integral to ensuring that our children and families are receiving all of the services they need.

Conclusion

On behalf of Secretary Richman and my colleagues at DPW, I'd like to thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to provide testimony on these important issues. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.