



# Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

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Good morning, my name is Joan Benso and I am the President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a statewide, independent, non-partisan, data-driven child advocacy organization. We seek to improve the health, well-being and education of the Commonwealth's children. Our vision is that by 2014, PPC will have helped Pennsylvania move into position as one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child

I'd like to thank Chairwoman Bishop and Chairman O'Brien for the opportunity to present relevant, and at times, troubling data related to Pennsylvania's child welfare system. The issues surrounding children and families receiving child welfare services and the children that live in foster care rarely rise to the surface of legislative priorities in Harrisburg. That needs to change and I am hopeful that today's hearing will mark that change as I and the other people here today provide you with valuable information about our system and current reform initiatives.

About a year ago PPC began an initiative known as the Porch Light Project. Simply put, the Porch Light Project strives to make sure that every child grows up in a home where he or she feels safe and part of a loving and nurturing family. To make this goal a reality, the Porch Light Project will work to spearhead public policy reforms that ensure all children grow up in families where their needs for safety, permanency and well-being are met. The Project will build the political will - including strong and visible leadership, appropriate financing, and sound public policies - to make this vision of a "forever family for every child" a reality.

PPC has engaged a powerful national partner in our child welfare reform work - Casey Family Programs. Casey is the largest national operating foundation whose sole mission is to provide and improve - and ultimately prevent the need for - foster care. Casey is a valuable resource for information, research and best practices that help advise our statewide efforts to improve child welfare policy.

The Porch Light Project is guided by a Leadership Council that is comprised of a diverse group of state and national experts, legal and judicial officials, county children and youth directors, human services directors, youth, parents and state legislators. From the House of Representatives, Representatives Phyllis Mundy and Katie True, and from the Senate, Senators Stewart Greenleaf and Leanna Washington, all serve on and advise the Council. The role of the project's Leadership Council includes the review and analysis of current child welfare data, advisement on public policy reforms

that will improve outcomes for children and families and the advancement of such reforms through advocacy efforts coordinated through PPC.

Under the Porch Light Project, we have gathered data that provides a look at the “big picture” for Pennsylvania’s children and youth in the child welfare system. I’d like to share some key data findings that have compelled PPC to begin the child welfare initiative and that are now driving our recommendations for public policy reforms that will safely reduce the number of children in Pennsylvania’s foster care system.

According to the Department of Public Welfare’s Annual Child Abuse Report, there were 25,655 reports of suspected child abuse in 2008 and 4,201 of those reports were substantiated.<sup>1</sup> Fifty children died from abuse in 2008 – four more than in 2007.

On any given day there are more than 50,000 children and families receiving in-home services by County Child Welfare Agencies across the Commonwealth. The goal of in-home services is to strengthen families so they can successfully and safely raise their children in their homes. Examples of in-home services could include drug and alcohol counseling, parenting and life skills instruction, and housing or employment assistance.

Over 18,000 Pennsylvania children are living in foster care. Children are placed in foster care in every community in the Commonwealth. Children from birth to age five make up 30 percent of the foster care system; children age six to 12 equal 24 percent of the population, while the vast majority or 46 percent of children living in foster care are teenagers 13 and older. It doesn’t matter what type of county you live in – rural, rural mix, urban or urban mix – the majority of children in foster care are 13 years or older.

The median length of placement for children in foster care in Pennsylvania is 16 months. More than 30 percent of all children who spend between 12 and 24 months in foster care – or experience the typical length of stay will live in three or more foster care settings. This oftentimes means living in a new community, attending a different school and trying to make new friends. Think for a moment what that must be like if you are twelve years old. Think about what it must be like to have make this kind of dramatic change in your life two or three times while you are in middle school. Placement stability is an important element of healthy child development.

Statewide, 47 percent of children in foster care are African American, yet African American children only make up 13 percent of the state’s child population. White children represent 80 percent of the state’s child population, but only are 47 percent of the Commonwealth’s foster care population. This means that African American children are six times more likely to be in foster care than white children. Latino children are three times more likely to be in foster care than white children.

There are often multiple reasons why children are removed from their homes. Table 4 of your packet illustrates the reasons children in care on March 31, 2009 were placed as

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<sup>1</sup> A “substantiated report” includes both founded and indicated reports of child abuse in the Department of Public Welfare’s Annual Child Abuse Report. A “founded report” means that there is a judicial adjudication that a child was abused. An “indicated report” means that a county agency or regional staff find abuse has occurred based on medical evidence, the child protective service investigation or an admission by the perpetrator.

cited by their caseworkers – including physical and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, abandonment and a number of other reasons, many of which are striking.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that more children were removed from their homes because of issues of *neglect* (23 percent) rather than physical abuse (13 percent). Almost 16 percent of children are removed from their homes due to inadequate housing. And finally, 27 percent of children who are removed experience their caretakers' inability to cope due to illness or other reasons. These figures should shock all of us into the realization that physical abuse – what many people may think is the typical cause for child removal – is only one of many reasons why county agencies remove children to assure their safety and well-being. This data points to the importance of home and community based services that strengthen families.

The goal for foster care should be to place a child in the least-restrictive, most family-like setting and this is the case for about 70 percent of children in Pennsylvania as they are placed in foster family homes, of which about 22 percent are with relatives. But, this is not the reality for one in four children in foster care in our state. About 24 percent of Pennsylvania children are placed in group homes and institutions while this is only the case for 17 percent of children living in foster care in the nation. Pennsylvania far exceeds the national average of foster care placement in congregate settings. While congregate placement is appropriate for some small group of children who have high-end needs that cannot be met in less restrictive environments, it is not the case for many. Research studies have indicated that foster care children who live in congregate settings are at 2.5 greater risk of delinquency, likely to achieve lower education outcomes and be more reliant on public assistance than former foster care children who lived in family settings. When you examine the data more closely, it is evident that the placement in congregate settings is even more likely for our youth as almost half of teenagers are living in group homes or institutions.

All types of counties place a disproportionate number of youth in group homes and institutions. In rural counties, almost 41 percent of youth are placed in congregate settings, in rural mix counties 52 percent, in urban and urban mix counties 48 percent.

Foster care is meant to be a temporary situation for children. Under the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), the federal government requires that children in foster care have a permanency goal. The common sense explanation of this would be to suggest that every child has a permanent family but federal law allows wide latitude in determining permanency goals. Five options are implemented in related Pennsylvania law. The first goal is for children in foster care to be reunified with their birth families which is the goal for 68 percent of the children in foster care. The next most preferable goal for the well-being of a child is to live with a relative or be adopted which is the goal for about 20 percent of the children in foster care. What about the last 12 percent of children? What is the goal for each of them? They have the goal of emancipation or long-term foster care – neither of which yielding a permanent and stable family.

When we delve deeper into the data, we find that a large number of youth age 13 and older – just over 24 percent of all the youth in that age range – don't have a goal of a

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<sup>2</sup> Caseworkers can cite more than one reason for removal of a child from his/her home.

permanent family. In fact, in Pennsylvania, over 2,000 youth (age 13 and older) have a goal of long-term foster care or emancipation putting each one of these youth in the position of facing their lives without the support so many of us take for granted from our families.

This is a very serious problem in all types of counties. Youth age 13 and older with the goals of long-term foster care or emancipation range from 18.5 percent in rural counties, just over 17 percent in rural mix counties, a little more than 22 percent in urban counties to nearly 38 percent in the urban mixed counties.

What happens to children in Pennsylvania when they leave foster care? Where do they go? Almost 57 percent of Pennsylvania children exiting foster care are reunified with their birth families. While that is an encouraging sign, about 28 percent of these children will re-enter foster care within 12 months. Clearly, Pennsylvania has work to do in the areas of post-permanency and post-reunification services to prevent disruptions and re-entry into foster care.

Almost 17 percent of children who leave foster care are discharged to adoption, and less than 3 percent of those children are 13 or older. On average, it takes 31 months for a Pennsylvania child to be adopted.

Pennsylvania can also improve in its timeliness in achieving adoption. ASFA requires a child welfare agency to petition the court for the involuntary termination of parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 months out of a 22-month period. In Pennsylvania, over 5,000 children or approximately 27 percent of children in foster care have been in placement for more than 17 months, but have not been freed for adoption. Only 11 percent of these children will be freed for adoption within the next six months.

Each year, almost 1,100 Pennsylvania youth leave foster care after age 18 – aging out to unknown circumstances. Youth who age out of foster care tend to have much poorer outcomes than other children. They are twice as likely to drop out of high school; a third will struggle with mental health challenges and one in four is likely to be arrested.

These and other potential outcomes are far too often the reality for many of the nearly 1,100 youth who age out every year in Pennsylvania. To be very frank, the child welfare system is failing every youth who ages out of care without a permanent family to provide them life-long care and support.

The data I shared with you today suggests there are numerous areas for improvement in Pennsylvania's child welfare system. The Porch Light Project Leadership Council recommends the following objectives to guide our collective vision of safely reducing the number of children in placement:

- Ensure that all families with children who at risk of abuse and neglect receive family strengthening services and supports so fewer children ever enter foster care and can remain safely in their homes.
- Lessen Pennsylvania's reliance on congregate settings and place more children in family-like settings, preferably with kin and in their home communities.
- Establish a goal of true permanency for ALL children in foster care.

- Promote permanency for all children in foster care through timely and effective reunification and permanency services that make every effort to reunify children with their birth families and assure that children are prepared to be part of another permanent family should reunification efforts fail.
- Assure that all children in foster care receive the necessary education, employment and mental health services that facilitate positive adult outcomes.
- Drive child welfare financing to focus on the goals of safe reduction and permanency, including flexibility to reinvest savings in child abuse prevention and other family strengthening services.

You are going to hear today about some very exciting work happening in our counties to address these issues through two reform projects already under way that focus on safely reducing the number of children in foster care in Pennsylvania – the National Governor’s Association Policy Academy and the Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts.

Your information packet today also includes the comprehensive reform agenda proposed by the Porch Light Project. We look forward to working with the committee and other interested policymakers to safely reduce the number of children living in foster care and to assure that every Pennsylvania child has a permanent family to call their own – a home where the porch light is always left on to guide and welcome a child home.