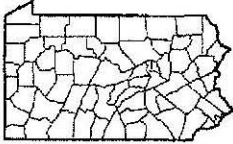


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Testimony to House Children and Youth Committee Regarding the Federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act August 27, 2009

Good morning. My name is George Kovarie and I am pleased to have this opportunity to testify before this committee, and I am before you as president of the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators Association (PCYA), an affiliate of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) and as Director of Berks County Children and Youth Services.

Roughly one-half of the counties in our state operate outside of the formal provisions of both the National Governor's Association and the Permanency Planning Initiatives (PPI). While both of those efforts hold merit, I can say that as an industry, public child welfare has made material changes to practice that are reflected in improving outcomes, enhanced consumer satisfaction, and in many cases, as in Berks, reduced costs from fewer out of home placements. I should note that many counties have participated in Court Improvement Projects (under the Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts) and Barriers to Permanency (under the American Bar Association) several years ago, and progress in these areas has been occurring for the past 8 – 10 years.

Success in this strengths-based work includes using a range of family conferencing services, such as Family Group Decision Making, intensive in-home services as alternative to out of home care, and keeping children at home safely. When placement is indicated, many counties use short term arrangements, such as Voluntary Placement Agreements (VPA), and kinship care, which have been enhanced through improved family finding tools. In this respect, I recommend extending VPA from the current 30 days to 90 days, allowing counties to remediate family issues before being compelled to go to Juvenile Court. I might add that the Federal Government allows for VPAs of 180 days.

Careful and systematic case reviews and pre-petition reviews, not unlike NGA activities, has been important in redirecting service dollars to keeping children safe at home rather than in substitute care. All of these measures are reasonable efforts to prevent both findings of dependency and court ordered removal.

In this fiscal environment, one clear disincentive to the Permanency Practice Initiative is the requirement that any savings achieved must be reinvested in public child welfare programs, and over the last 3 years, Berks reduced spending by about 3 million dollars, a savings available to Berks property tax payers. If I had to identify a single element of PPI that compels commissioners not to participate, that would be the mandatory reinvestment requirement.

Let me state for the record that while we have substantial fiscal concerns at the county level around cash flow, and with recognition of the increasingly compromised position of our private provider network, these are days and months of change that will shape the future of child protective services. We ask that evolving public policy allow counties to select and implement programs that best meet their respective communities' needs.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I will gladly respond to questions at this time or in writing.