

House Committee on Children and Youth

Testimony

Permanency Practice Initiative

Thursday, August 27., 2009

By Cynthia K. Stoltz, Esq.
Administrator, Allegheny County Children's Court

Good morning. Thank you for affording me the opportunity to testify regarding the Pennsylvania Permanency Practice Initiative (PPI) and specifically our experience in Allegheny County with the PPI and its impact on children in foster care.

By way of background, I am an attorney with sixteen years experience with family court matters in a number of capacities including child advocate intern, private attorney, master/hearing officer, deputy director and my current position as Court Administrator of the Children's Court. I have served on a number of local, state and national committees focused on reform efforts to improve the court and child welfare system's handling of abuse and neglect cases. Presently, I serve as Chairperson of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's Juvenile Procedural Rules Committee. I also serve on the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable, which focuses on children and families in the Dependency Court system. I know that you will be hearing from many distinguished individuals who are both knowledgeable and passionate about these important issues. I am so pleased to be invited to speak to you from the court's perspective and based upon a belief that the court plays a vital role in the success of reform efforts to improve outcomes for children and families in foster care.

When I began my tenure with the court roughly thirteen years ago, the situation in Allegheny County was less than ideal. The court at that time lacked sufficient judicial and staff resources, having one full time and four part-time judges responsible for handling approximately 17,000 cases per year and an average of 63 cases per day. A court administrative team exclusively responsible for coordinating these cases was nonexistent. With increasing numbers of children in foster care and the lack of solid relationships between the court and key stakeholders, including the child welfare agency, there was a public outcry for system leaders to take action.

Since 1995, our system transformed into what many have called a "national model". Through collaboration demonstrated by both the Executive (OCYF) and Judicial (Family Court) branches over roughly a three-year period, Allegheny County significantly reduced the number of children in out of home placements by 14%, and reduced the

average length of stay in placement by over 30%. While this was encouraging, our work was far from complete.

In 2004, when the PEW Commission on Children in Foster Care released its report, it issued a strong call to action to improve court oversight of cases to facilitate better and more informed decisions relating to children's safety and well being. When the Pennsylvania Supreme Court answered that call, established a permanent office of Children, Families and the Courts and launched the PPI, Allegheny County was eager to volunteer. The partnership demonstrated by Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer, Deputy Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare Estelle Richman, Pennsylvania OCYF Director Richard Gold and PA Supreme Court OCFC Administrator Sandra Moore has been a powerful statement of their commitment to this initiative. The PPI seemed a logical next step in Allegheny's transformation, as many of the components were already established. It afforded an opportunity to enhance existing practices and fill gaps. More importantly, perhaps, it provided an opportunity to be part of statewide reform to role model the power of collaboration in a large metropolitan jurisdiction and to learn from other jurisdictions about best practices through the statewide roundtable structure Administrator Sandra Moore noted in her remarks. Ultimately, our decision to embrace the PPI was a good one because it challenged 'old ways of thinking' about permanency and strengthening families and pushed us forward toward more progressive strategies grounded in collaboration.

I would like to briefly address Allegheny County's continued transformation and system change as part of the PPI, the 'collaborative ventures' that reshaped our system and their impact on children, and finally the role of court as one of many entities necessary for successful reform efforts.

First, in order to effectuate system change, there must be a **commitment to a set of guiding principles** by relevant stakeholders. The Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable established clear principles based upon child safety at home and in out-of-home placements, timeliness in addressing children's needs, continuity of care and maintaining family ties, community involvement and cultural competency and an accessible court system with strong advocacy for children and families.

We began by convening Allegheny's Children's Roundtable, a multi-disciplinary group comprised of judges, court and child welfare administrators, parent and child advocacy leaders, service providers, medical and mental health experts, and others. The group worked diligently to create a comprehensive set of recommendations, guided by the principles established by the PA Children's Roundtable, many of which have already been turned in to concrete deliverables. The group relied upon national experts such as Judge Nancy Salyers, Executive Director of Fostering Results, who noted that in order to build a better court, you must LEAD (through collaboration) and LEARN (by paying attention to the data).

Second, following Judge Salyers sound advice, we focused again on the **collaboration among stakeholders as absolutely essential** to achieve long range and lasting

improvements in the foster care system. There must be collaboration among stakeholders, within the framework of a system of strong checks and balances. In Allegheny County the relationship between the court and child welfare agencies has been critically important to our success in achieving, over time, better outcomes for children and families. The court and agencies have continued to redefine our manner of doing business and focused on mutual responsibilities for system improvements. This approach resulted in a number of “collaborative ventures” that have reshaped our system.

Our court established a high-level policy committee convened by the court, to meet monthly to discuss system issues, examine court processes and develop consensus on procedural matters that cross organizational boundaries. These meetings, established roughly ten years ago, continue today, and demonstrate that open, honest dialog about system issues can produce effective solutions on everything from facility to improvement to time-specific scheduling. This has provided an additional forum to ensure that the goals of the PPI are an integral part of practice and policy.

Recognizing that the court as well as the agency must have accurate data for children under its supervision our county, with input from stakeholders, developed a state of the art web-based electronic filing system accessible to all system stakeholders. This system greatly enhanced efficiencies for all participants by creating essentially a paperless system of filing court documents and processing court orders real time. The system, however, did not go far enough to allow for case tracking and data collection necessary to address court performance measures and adequately inform decision makers. The PPI’s implementation of an automated data system (CPCMS) will allow Allegheny County to fully track cases in a statewide system.

In another joint venture focused on technology, Allegheny County engaged stakeholders in a process to support a pilot project (funded by a combination of government, private providers and foundations dollars) to utilize videoconferencing to improve efficiencies for all child welfare stakeholders. This system has had a direct impact on children by permitting mental health and other professionals to testify in a more efficient and expedited manner, freeing case workers to spend more time with children and families in the community, allowing parents who currently participate in telephone conferencing to participate instead in visitation with their children via videoconferencing, and providing emotionally fragile children the opportunity to testify from a remote site and avoid a traumatizing trip to court. The courtroom and five pilot sites are currently operational, with the hope of leveraging additional funds for all courtrooms and additional remote sites.

Our court has also recognized the need for both judicial education and multi-disciplinary, cross-systems training. We are very fortunate to have judges committed to educational programs with stakeholders. Training on PPI practices occurs on a regular basis. Judges and stakeholders have engaged in training as early as 7:30 a.m. and as late as 9:00 p.m. in order to avoid continuing cases, while becoming fully informed of the PPI priorities and practices. Stakeholders are committed to fully engaging PPI practices such as Family Finding, which has proven to be a powerful tool for both the court and caseworkers, and

has resulted in the establishment of permanent family connections for foster children in our system.

Finally with respect to collaborative initiatives, in an effort to address the specific needs of children and families our court partnered with the Department of Human Services to provide two unique centers located on-site in the Family Courthouse and professionally staffed by the Department of Human Services. These centers provide direct assistance to link families to needed services including health and medical care, housing, employment, behavioral health, counseling, as well as professional drug and alcohol and mental health assessments and service coordination delivered through a team approach.

These examples of collaborative initiatives supported by the PPI principles can be replicated elsewhere if there are strong relationships between the court and stakeholders.

All that said, the courts value their independence and impartiality. The most productive collaboration happens within a system with strong checks and balances. Children and parents must have meaningful access to the court and competent representation readily available. If one group of advocates is inadequately resourced, the entire system is greatly impacted, creating delays in moving children to permanency. The importance of adequate resources for all participants, court staff, advocates, and agencies to maintain and even playing field and balance collaboration is significant.

Finally, the PPI has focused attention on the **role of the court in effectuating system change**. The importance of a strong court system actively and meaningfully engaged in foster care reform and ongoing efforts to achieve the best outcome for children and families cannot be overstated. Too often in the past, reform efforts have failed to adequately involve the court responsible for handling these cases. This minimizes the decisions made in dependency cases, which have powerful ramifications for families.

I want to stop to provide an opportunity for questions. Let me conclude by reiterating what the PEW Commission so clearly articulated—that courts are vested with enormous responsibility and yet they have long been the unseen partners in child welfare reform efforts. Courts must be afforded the opportunity to provide meaningful input and become, in effect, partners in this process, and policies should reflect that commitment. The Pennsylvania PPI recognizes the importance of that partnership.

Thank you.