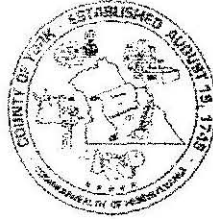


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August 26, 2009

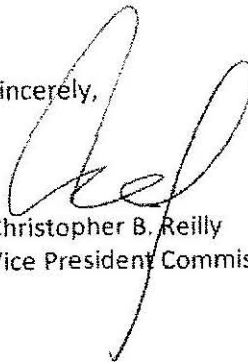
The Honorable Louise Bishop
PA House of Representatives
PO Box 202020
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2020

Dear Representative Bishop,

Attached please find testimony for the House Health and Human Services Committee regarding York County's work with the National Governor's Academy. Please include this in the testimony packet for your Thursday, August 27, 2009 hearing.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,


Christopher B. Reilly
Vice President Commissioner

Good morning, to the majority and minority chairs and all members of the Children and Youth Committee. It is an honor and a privilege to be here today before my former colleagues to testify about York County's involvement with NGA, the National Governor's Academy.

I need to take this opportunity to publicly thank Secretary Richmond for sending Deputy Secretary Richard Gold to work with us. While not here today, I also need to thank Richard Gold for his commitment to York County. It has led to changes in our practice and more importantly, it has taught us to make better decisions for children and families.

The Deputy Secretary comes to York County once a month and assists us in our specific case reviews. This process now drives policy and protocol for the agency. Due to time constraints for testimony today, I will attempt to highlight what we have been referring to as, "lessons learned from Richard."

Lesson number one: URGENCY!! We have learned that every day in a child's life matters. You may be sitting there thinking, how could anyone not know this? Unfortunately, the culture within CYS had forgotten this. There was a devastating lack of urgency. Children stayed in care too long, were moved from placement to placement and there was never any urgency to find permanency. Through this process we have learned that this is the wrong thing to do! We have raised expectations for our workers and providers to make better decisions. (example: saddest case/ day one, parents incarcerated for two days, children aged out of system)URGENCY matters!

Lesson number two: DON'T PLACE CHILDREN FOR NON-SAFETY ISSUES! We have learned that children need someone in their lives to be a resource, someone who cares about them. Taking a child away from the people they care about just doesn't work. In York County, we were placing children for truancy, parent-child conflicts, homelessness and other non-safety related matters. Now, rather than spend thousands of dollars a month to keep children in placement, we can and do provide rental assistance and case-management to assist parents with housing and employment so they can keep their children. The children and youth system was not set up for government to be the parent. It is up to us to help families find solutions and create their own plan. Using a **family engagement process such as Family Group Decision Making**, allows families to stay out of the system and teaches them to rely on family and community to help them parent their children. (example: placement of child and mom for makeup fight) When children must be placed for safety, finding family for a child, keeping siblings together and removing barriers for this to occur is the best possible solution. Placing a child in the care of a stranger should be the last solution.

Lesson number three: FAMILY SERVICE PLANS NEED TO BE REAL! Established goals and reviews of Family Service Plans have been "boiler plate" - meaning that they all say the same thing. We

have learned that we have, as a system, set children and families up to fail. Goals remain, "return home", for many years, even when a child cannot possibly return home. Family Service Plans set unrealistic expectations and individual values get in the way of making appropriate decisions for children and families. (example: the twins kept in group home for 3 years, MR mom case)

Lesson learned number four: WE CAN AND MUST " THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX". I've learned a great deal since leaving the legislature last year about the impact of the laws we passed, the regulations promulgated from the laws, and their affect on real families. While well intended, the consequences of some of the regulations can be devastating to children and families. Let me share some examples with you: when we passed the no smoking ban, we were right to include foster homes however, with kinship care, meaning care by a family member, we are wrong if we keep a child from a family member because they smoke. We also have regulations that spell out the number of beds that are needed, keeping a child from living with a safe loving environment because they have to sleep on the couch, just doesn't make sense.

Lesson learned number five: QUALITY NOT JUST COMPETENCY. I worked for York County Children and Youth Services from 1980-1987. And, up until the time Richard came to York, the primary focus has been on paperwork. We moved as an agency from caseworkers to case managers. Case managers rely heavily on providers while caseworkers are responsible to know their families, engage their families, and assist their families to plan for themselves. In the past 6 months, we have learned that quality counts. Having all paperwork completed and in on time is important, but not nearly as important as making good decisions for the well being of our children and families. Our culture and focus is changing. While not an easy process, it is absolutely necessary. National numbers tell us that children do not do well in stranger care. From our own experience over the past 6 months, we see our children aging out of the system and returning to the homes and family that we have kept them from.

Deputy Secretary Gold has been open to waivers of regulations that don't make sense. Having him monthly in our county has allowed us to use a common sense approach as we work with real children and families. Our lessons learned are forcing us to work smarter and more efficiently. We have a long road ahead of us to bring about sustainable change but thankfully we are moving in the right direction.

I want to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to share York County's experiences and again, thank you to DPW for what you have done and continue to do for our York County Children and Families.