



**Remarks by Chris Kirchner, MSW
Executive Director of the Philadelphia Children's Alliance and
The Northeast Regional Children's Advocacy Center**

Good Morning Chairman Marsico and members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak today in support of HB No 1739 and state funding for Children's Advocacy Centers. My name is Chris Kirchner, and I am the Executive Director of the Philadelphia Children's Alliance, an accredited children's advocacy center (CAC) in Philadelphia. I've been in this position since 1992, and have witnessed the evolution and growth of the CAC model locally in Philadelphia, across the state, the country, and internationally.

Since 1995, the Philadelphia Children's Alliance has received a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to serve as the Northeast Regional Children's Advocacy Center (NRCAC, pronounced "NER-kack"). Through NRCAC, we have provided training and technical assistance to more than 600 communities in the child abuse intervention field in PA, NJ, NY, CT, MA, RI, NH, VT and ME. Covering the northeastern United States, our charge is to promote a team response to allegations of child abuse and develop facility-based programs known as Children's Advocacy Centers.

My time is spent working to build the capacity of the Philadelphia Children's Alliance to serve all 1800 children who present to DHS and the Police annually with allegations of sexual abuse, and developing children's advocacy centers across the northeastern United States through the NRCAC.

What I have learned in both roles is that partnership in investigative work provides the best results for children and for the professionals who serve them. The foundation of all CAC programs rests on the interagency partnerships among the requisite agencies necessary to fully address a case of child abuse from start to finish. Training of individual disciplines is important so that investigators from all agencies can do their job competently. Beyond individual competencies, it is essential that well-trained professionals value the strengths that their partner agencies bring to a holistic response to child abuse. Professionals need to be able to form interdisciplinary partnerships to share information, collaborate on responses to cases, problem-solve and make best case decisions in the interest of the child victim. The structure first conceived by Bud Cramer and his interdisciplinary colleagues in 1986 has proved to be the most successful strategy to comprehensively address child abuse cases and approach healing and justice for the children and families involved. Sharing information is the key: one participant at the table has interviewed Dad, another has information on Mom, still another has information from the C&Y investigation. Our biggest challenge is to bring together disciplines and individuals that don't always like, trust, or value each others' perspective, mandates or limitations. Each community must decide for itself that the needs of the children we serve take priority before those of the

agencies and individuals involved. From that perspective, teams always find a way to do the right thing despite tremendous obstacles in these cases.

Access to services is a key theme and obstacle in our advocacy to advance CACs. There are currently 750 accredited and associate CACs across the United States, and 21 of them are in PA. The PA State Chapter of CACs brings accredited and developing CACs together regularly, providing a forum for sharing information. Our Chapter's ultimate goal is to ensure that every child in PA has access to the services of an accredited CAC. Sadly, many child victims of sexual and physical assault cannot be treated with our model of service due to lack of resources. Some programs in PA restrict by age, others by case type. From urban areas serving thousands of children per year, to rural counties where CAC services might be shared across several counties, it is imperative that every child receive a coordinated response with adequate services available to meet their needs.

One of the biggest challenges facing Pennsylvania's CAC's is funding. Even in communities where there is an accredited CAC, such as Philadelphia, there may not be sufficient resources to ensure that every child can be served at the CAC. There has been minimal public sector funding support for CACs, and many CACs raise the bulk of their revenue from the private sector.

In Philadelphia we serve an average of 100 children each month with a coordinated response in our child-friendly facility. Our 1.5 million dollar budget includes support from the Department of Human Services and the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency, and more than half of our budget comes from the private sector. Although we plan to maintain diverse funding sources, we need a reliable state funding stream for a portion of our budget.

The national CAC Standards are the state-of-the-art in collaborative investigation; they offer Pennsylvania communities a set of criteria by which to create an approach to joint investigations that works for them, in the best interest of the children they are called upon to serve. We look forward to partnering with you to ensure access to children's advocacy centers for all of Pennsylvania's children who need us.