

Family Engagement in Child Welfare Services

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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE

Good morning, Chairwoman Harper, Chairwoman Bishop, committee members and staff. I am Bev Mackereth and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Children, Youth and Families, also known as OCYF, at the Department of Public Welfare. Thank you for this opportunity to address the committee on one of the foundational practices of child welfare – family engagement.

The primary focus of Pennsylvania's child welfare system is on the safety, permanency and well being of the children we serve. We operate from the assumption that children belong with their own families and should receive necessary services in the community rather than being placed outside of their home and away from their families. Placement should be the last resort and children should be placed in the most appropriate setting to meet their needs in a location that promotes reunification with their family – if possible – and as soon as possible.

The Child Welfare System in Pennsylvania is state supervised and county administered with both agencies having key roles in the protection of children. The Department of Public Welfare (DPW) is responsible to assure the availability and provision of public child welfare services, provide oversight and technical assistance to each county agency and establish and enforce policy and regulation that support the achievement of child welfare goals and outcomes. This authority is vested in the department through Articles VII, IX and X of the Public Welfare Code (Act of 1967, P.L. 31, No. 21). In addition, the department is responsible for the licensure of public and private child welfare agencies and the investigation of complaints received regarding these agencies.

Each county is responsible for administering a program of children and youth social services to children and their families. The county children and youth social service program includes:

- ❖ Services designed to first and foremost protect children from abuse and neglect and enable children to remain safely in their own homes and communities;
 - ❖ Services designed to prevent dependency and delinquency of children and that help overcome problems that resulted in dependency and delinquency;
 - ❖ Services designed to provide permanency and stability for children in their own homes or in placement and that preserve relationships and connections for children with their families and communities of origin;
 - ❖ Services designed to meet the needs of children and families, enhancing the family's capacity to provide for their own children's needs including services to meet the educational, physical and behavioral health needs;
 - ❖ Services designed for youth alleged and adjudicated delinquent, which are consistent with the protection of public interest, providing balanced attention to the protection of the community, the imposition of accountability for offenses committed and the development of competencies to enable youth to become responsible and productive members of the community; and
 - ❖ Services and care ordered by the court for children who have been alleged and adjudicated dependent or delinquent.
- Several pertinent laws have been passed that promote child welfare system improvement which will lead to improved child and family outcomes. On October 7, 2008, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was signed into law. This law provides states with new opportunities to strengthen this practice. Grounded in themes that are viewed as best practices, the new law emphasizes the need for more accountability in ensuring that we are achieving lasting permanency for children receiving our services. The law's overarching themes focus on maintaining family connections, ensuring that youth exiting the system are prepared for adulthood and that all children are afforded educational stability.

The law underscores the need to explore relatives as resources for children entering care and requires that notice be provided to all relatives within 30 days of a child entering placement. Because siblings who enter placement are often separated, the law also supports continuing sibling relationships through frequent visitation when they can't be placed together.

While use of kin as resources has been a priority for Pennsylvania for many years, there is still room for improvement. We have continued to increase the number of children placed in kinship homes which have become permanent resources. On March 30, 2012, 24.1% of children in placement were placed with kin compared to 22.2% on September 30, 2008. However, we often delay our search until the time of placement or when a child is no longer able to return to their family. Recognizing that we lose essential time by waiting, our efforts need to be more focused on identification and preparation of kin at the initial point of involvement with the child and their family.

Pennsylvania chose to implement several of the optional provisions under the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Adoptions Act by amending the Public Welfare Code and the Juvenile Act (23 Pa. C.S., Chapter 63). Acts 80 and 91 of 2012 underscore the importance of the role that kin play in providing support to the children and families we serve. Pennsylvania law now requires that relatives to the fifth degree of consanguinity and affinity be notified within 30 days when a child enters care. Additionally, this legislation ensures that kin are provided with resources to meet the needs of children for whom they provide permanent placement through receipt of a subsidy when certain criteria are met. Passage of these optional federal requirements shows the Commonwealth's commitment to ensuring the children remain connected to their families and that families are engaged in planning for their future needs.

Engaging families is critical to promoting healthy families, improving outcomes and promoting self-sufficiency for children and families served through the child welfare system. Government cannot and should not be in every family's home nor should it serve as a child's

long-term parent. Recognizing that at times there is a need for government intervention, it should be focused on ensuring that children are safe, that their well-being needs are met and that permanency is achieved in a timely manner. We have found that when given the opportunity, families will step up. When we build natural supports around them, families will lean on each other. And when we stop telling them what to do and start asking what they need, families will be successful.

During Federal Child and Families Service Reviews conducted in 2002 and 2008, it was determined that Pennsylvania's child welfare system needed to continue its efforts toward engaging families and youth in case planning and decision making with particular focus on engaging non-custodial parents. This finding is not unique to Pennsylvania, but rather a national trend. Strategies and action steps were developed to promote improved child, youth and family engagement statewide and these efforts have continued over the past few years. Through our continuous quality improvement efforts we monitor county level practice through Quality Service Reviews that assess the engagement of families in case planning and their role and voice in decision making.

In 2006, under the leadership of Justice Max Baer, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court launched the Children's Roundtable Initiative, an initiative to help improve the child dependency system and also created the Office of Children and Families in the Courts. The principles guiding this work are focused on protecting children, promoting strong families, promoting child well-being, and providing timely permanency. In 2008, the Permanency Practice Initiative (PPI) was launched with clearly articulated goals to reduce the length of time dependent children spend in placement through implementation of evidenced-based and informed practices. These goals are shared by the Department of Public Welfare and have made for a natural partnership between the Supreme Court and the department.

Since the beginning of the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable, the department and the Supreme Court have partnered to improve the dependency system through the use of Family

Group Decision Making, Family Finding, and other family focused tools. The department's Office of Children Youth and Families Deputy Secretary serves as a co-chair on the state roundtable and in each county where county local roundtables exist, a children and youth agency administrator serves as a co-chair. This has led to a successful partnership and positive changes in the dependency system.

Recognizing the success of family engagement tools such as Family Group Decision Making, Family Team Conferencing, Team Decision Making and High-Fidelity Wraparound, the Office of Children, Youth and Families promotes the expansion of these practices throughout the Commonwealth. In fiscal year 2008-2009, the Department of Public Welfare started a special grant program with enhanced state match for counties as part of the needs based plan and budget.

When Family Group Decision Making was first used, conferences primarily focused on creating plans for youth who were at risk of an out-of-home placement. While we have many success stories and our youth tell us that we are not only asking them questions but that we are listening to them, we have more work to do. Seeing the success of these conferences, the use of FGDM has expanded greatly. Now FGDM is not only used to plan for placement prevention, but also for safety, independent youth transition planning, truancy, homelessness, mental health needs, environmental conditions, and other family concerns. Additionally, counties are embedding different forms of family conferencing in their practice and holding team meetings at all critical decision making points in a case. However, for team conferencing to be effective, natural supports have to be identified and invited into the team.

Family Finding is one way to create this team. In its role as a partner in the Permanency Practice Initiative, DPW is supporting the implementation of this strategy, which uses intensive searches and outreach efforts for extended family members at the beginning of a case and/or later in a placement case in order to find as many resources for a child as early as possible.

Family Finding also goes beyond the standard definition of family to look for natural supports in friends, church congregations, teachers, coaches, and other community connections.

DPW is providing counties with access to the Accruint system to assist in implementation of the Family Finding Model and to enhance concurrent planning efforts. The Accruint system is a search tool that performs computerized searches for relatives and kin of children and youth involved with the child welfare system. In combination with Family Finding the Accruint services identify numerous unknown resources for our children and families which prevent placement of children in out-of-home care and when placement is necessary will lead to permanent placement with kin resources and life connections for children.

I am proud to say that positive changes have occurred in the dependency system since the implementation of these family-focused strategies and the partnership between The Department of Public Welfare and the Supreme Court. Looking back over the past four and one-half years (October 1, 2007 to March 31, 2012), we have been able to safely decrease out-of-home placements by 30 percent statewide and improve permanency for countless children. Without the Permanency Practice Initiative, Justice Baer, and local systems throughout Pennsylvania, this success would not be possible. Family engagement must be at the forefront of everything we do to continue our success.

We remain committed to continuously improving the quality of services that are delivered through the child welfare system. One of our priorities is to evaluate the effectiveness of services to ensure that they lead to improved outcomes for children and families. As a result of data analysis, we intend to eliminate the use of services that are not producing positive outcomes and to replace them with evidence-based and evidence-informed programs that have been proven effective. This not only benefits families by ensuring that services provided address their individual needs, but also is fiscally responsible.

In reviewing House Bills 2499 and 2500, it is clear that this legislation has been drafted to enhance the current family engagement efforts and emphasize the importance of these strategies in ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of the children, youth and families in Pennsylvania.

It is difficult to quantify the fiscal impact this legislation will have. While, additional costs will be incurred with increased usage of Family Group Decision Making and other family engagement tools, we believe that by improving family engagement in planning and decision making that out-of-home placements will be reduced.

In closing, OCYF through its mission and vision supports the role and voice that children, youth and families have in making decisions that impact their lives. By listening to families we ensure that we are able to address their individual needs and that they are invested in these efforts.