



INNOVATING CHILDREN'S SERVICES:  
Establishing a Children's Cabinet in Pennsylvania



Sometimes it's the complexity of the case from day one: medically fragile, multiple system involvement but in a providers admission experience, roughly half of the time these kids didn't start out that way. The inability of the system to deliver the right service at the right time has turned these cases into "complex."

a PCCYFS Provider

### **Background: Pennsylvania is Failing Thousands of Children and Families who Need Help the Most**

Every day, hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania children and families depend on a complex web of human services, educational, and health care systems. These systems continue to be riddled by distinct and separate federal and state mandates, local preferences, complex financing, and inadequate coordination efforts. For families, especially those with children with complex health or behavioral health needs, attempting to navigate these systems can feel insurmountable.

We have high and rigid expectations of families to adhere to detailed treatment and support goals, yet currently offer limited state leadership to help them navigate these complex systems. In many cases, agencies attempting to serve these youth and their families are faced with extraordinary administrative burden, fiscal uncertainty and inconsistent approaches to program and licensing standards, which impede clinical integrity for the children, youth, and families they are mandated to serve. These regulatory and fiscal rules make it harder for families, many of whom are in incredibly challenging situations, to get the help they need.

Similarly, for the organizations that operate within and across these various systems, the amount of administrative resources that go towards implementing duplicative or uncoordinated regulations and guidance leads to a waste of funds that could be better spent elsewhere. From county to county and state department to department, government agencies have various but often duplicative requests for information, data analysis needs, monitoring tools, audit tools, etc. A single agency could be asked to pull the same information dozens of times, in addition to the unique requests that they receive from each department with which they contract. Some providers have gone so far as to hire individuals who do nothing but focus on documentation and other similar administrative requests. Further, each government agency has their own unique interpretation of rules and regulations and guidance around regulatory implementation can vary greatly, leading to much confusion around those who are being required to abide by them.

### **The Cabinet Approach**

A coordinated approach at the statewide leadership level would help breakdown some of these systemic and enduring silos that currently impede the level of quality service provision that



providers offer and families deserve. The Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth, & Family Services proposes a Pennsylvania Children's Cabinet structure, inclusive of multiple child-serving agencies and branches of government, to direct the provision of services to Pennsylvania's children.

A Children's Cabinet is a collaborative government structure that can promote coordination across multiple state agencies, departments, offices, and program areas to improve the well-being of children and families. Given the complexities of our child serving systems a Children's Cabinet would allow a new administration to prioritize major children's initiatives and mobilize resources across agencies to minimize and mitigate program, policy, and financing barriers. The next Administration can materially improve the lives of thousands of children and families with complex needs by establishing and empowering a Children's Cabinet. A Children's Cabinet is intended to:

- Develop and implement the Governor's shared vision across agencies for improving child and family outcomes.
- Foster coordination among multidisciplinary stakeholders at the state and local level.
- Produce cost-savings, increase efficiency, and improve service delivery and effectiveness.
- Improve the state's economy and prospects for competition in the global marketplace by investing in the education and skills of children, the state's future workforce.
- Foster public awareness of major children's issues.
- Engage new partners in public efforts to serve children and their families.
- Build on efforts to support children and create a sustainability commitment to children's issues in the state.

### **Pennsylvania's History**

In Pennsylvania, there have been several formal and informal efforts at establishing a Cabinet, or at a minimum, to establish the infrastructure across state agencies to better coordinate efforts across systems.

- The Casey Administration formalized a Cabinet which resulted in the establishment of the Student Assistance Program and implementation of the Children's Health Insurance Program, both initiatives with long standing impact on the youth and families of PA.
- During other administrations, internal efforts primarily across the Department of Human Services (then Department of Public Welfare) were initiated which resulted in systems reform. For example, collaboration across Behavioral Health (through the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse) and Child Welfare (through the Office of Children Youth and Families) resulted in enhanced treatment services being available and funded through Medicaid for children and youth who were dependent.
- Additionally, investments in Early Childhood and Early Intervention resulted in the development of Office of Childhood Development and Early Learning (OCDEL); a program office that coordinates efforts across program offices and the Department of Education.
- Given the success of Pennsylvania's efforts on a smaller scale, a statewide Children's Cabinet in Pennsylvania has the potential to be an incredible method of improving coordination and quality of services statewide.



## Critical Elements

A number of thought leaders, including the National Governor's Association for Best Practices, and the Forum for Youth Investment, have identified a Children's Cabinet as a much-needed best practice to improve the quality of children's services at the statewide level. Specifically, these policymaking entities recommend the following elements as imperative for a successful children's cabinet:

- 1. Governor's Office Leadership:** In order to substantiate buy-in, establish neutrality, and elicit sufficient authority over all cabinet participants, the Children's Cabinet should exist out of the Governor's Office. Such a structure would also lead to a more streamlined approach when executive action needs to occur, create a pre-existing forum to launch child-related Governor's initiatives, and also foster a sense of importance and significance to help bring all relevant agencies to the table. Minnesota, for example, restructured their children's cabinet, which was previously housed in their education agency. This reorganization led to increased cross-agency buy-in and improved communication with their legislature.<sup>1</sup>
- 2. Adequate Funding:** Allocating adequate funding to this initiative will have a considerable impact on the cabinet's ability to function as opposed to thrive. Without adequate staffing and dedicated resources, the group will be challenged to sustain momentum, continue meetings, and achieve tangible results on an ongoing basis. The average state Children's Cabinet includes approximately 1.5 staff. This equates to an Executive Director and an analyst position.<sup>2</sup> In order to sustain its operations, the Children's Cabinet should have the allocation to adequately support both positions, among other expenses.
- 3. Data Sharing Agreements:** The single greatest benefit of a children's cabinet is the ability to breakdown silos and other impediments to greater service coordination for the benefit of children and families. One of the greatest challenges in understanding the scope of the challenge itself is that state agencies rarely share data with one another. A Children's Cabinet model can formalize an opportunity for agencies to share and analyze data across systems to help eliminate duplication and streamline resources. Without adequate data

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<sup>1</sup> Minnesota's Children's Cabinet. Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB). Accessed September 2, 2022 (<https://mn.gov/mmb/childrens-cabinet/>)

<sup>2</sup> J. Pineda (the Forum for Youth Investment), 2022 July 19, Personal communication (video conference). <https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/state-childrens-cabinets-and-councils-series/>



and information sharing, the Children's Cabinet will be extremely limited in its ability to achieve its intended goal of coordinated service provision across multiple agencies. During the pandemic, for example, the Minnesota Children's Cabinet was best positioned to analyze family and provider needs and was able to mobilize quickly to create a "real-time hub for comprehensive information, including live maps, across the state of childcare capacity to meet emergency workers' needs,"<sup>3</sup> a coordinated effort that required data sharing across multiple state agencies.

4. **Inclusion of Multiple Agencies and Branches:** In Pennsylvania, there is a unique opportunity to establish a Cabinet with far reaching benefits to the children, youth, and families of Pennsylvania. The membership should have sufficient policy authority within their agencies and consist of agency Secretaries. Additionally, children's cabinets have found success with the inclusion of the legislative and judiciary branches. Due to the engagement of the legislature in the Children's Cabinet and membership of individuals who controlled both policy and resources, many states reported that American Rescue Plan Act funding, for example, was directly allocated to targeted needs of children and families during the pandemic as the communication and coordination structure was already in place.
5. **Rotating Leadership:** Oftentimes when one or two agencies serve as ongoing anchor or leadership agencies, there is very little engagement outside of those two agencies and systems. When a new chair is appointed every 2-3 years, agencies have found that there is greater success and ongoing engagement. The Commission for Improving the Status of Children in Indiana (CISC) is a coordinating body whose commission chair rotates annually among the three branches of government – a judge or justice appointed by the Chief Justice of Indiana, a member of the legislative council (rotating between the House and the Senate) and a member of the Governor's

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<sup>3</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment, Children's Cabinet Network. Continuity Through Crisis: How Cabinets Meet The Needs Of Young People During A Pandemic. (December 2020) [https://forumfyi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Continuity-Through-Crisis\\_-How-Cabinets-Meet-the-Needs-of-Young-People-During-a-Pandemic.pdf](https://forumfyi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Continuity-Through-Crisis_-How-Cabinets-Meet-the-Needs-of-Young-People-During-a-Pandemic.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Id.



staff appointed by the governor. This rotating responsibility fosters deep commitment from all bodies as they must be prepared to smoothly transition each year's work over to the next without losing efficacy<sup>4</sup>

6. **Lived Experience:** We recommend that the Children's Cabinet seek ways to meaningfully integrate and include children, youth, and families with lived experiences in the systems that will be participating in the Children's Cabinet. During a 2016 Children's Cabinet Summit, participants reported a variety of ways of engaging these individuals, including "community conversations, surveys, focus groups, online communication and advocacy opportunities."<sup>5</sup>
7. **Legislative Establishment:** While the Children's Cabinet will likely be initially established through Governor's Executive Order, to create continuity beyond the initial Administration, it must eventually be written into legislation and allocated funding through a state General Fund.

### **Other Jurisdictions: A Children's Cabinet is a Proven Approach in Other States**

Many states have established a Children's Cabinet to align system priorities, regulations, fiscal accountability and program integrity. According to a 2020 study conducted by the North Carolina Child Well Being Transformation Council, 39 other states have a "Children's Cabinet" structure of some kind existing through 48 different configurations.<sup>6</sup>

The Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund developed a tool called "Our Tomorrows" that enables them to hear from stakeholders about their lived experiences in real time. Families, children and other stakeholders share personal stories that are analyzed and aggregated into "story maps" showing common themes and concerns. The hot spots that these story maps generate are then presented to decision makers at all levels to ensure they have real-time information on the issues Kansans are facing so that they can address them early. Kansas adapted their existing tool to seek residents' experiences around COVID-19, making families' concerns visible to decision-makers early and quickly.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment. 2016 Collective Impact Policy Summit Memo: Aligning Policies for Children and Youth. (2016) <https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/2016-collective-impact-policy-summit-memo/>

<sup>6</sup> Holt-Kabel, Laura; Lucas, Brent; McGorty, Kiernan; and Thayer, Adora (2020) North Carolina Child Well-Being Transformation Council Final Report. <https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewDocSiteFile/34716>

<sup>7</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment. Continuity Through Crisis. (December 2020).



In Arizona, the Governor chairs the Children's Cabinet. This ensures that the priorities of the Cabinet are met, decisions are made and changes are implemented in a timely and efficient manner. This model guarantees that leadership is involved as decisions are made. Cabinet members and staff prepare to discuss issues before the Cabinet in order to maximize their time together to discuss cross agency issues. Engaging the Governor in this way has focused the work of the Cabinet and enhanced its effectiveness.

Accomplishments that Arizona attributes to their Arizona Children's Cabinet since 2003 include:

- The state currently has no waiting list of families seeking child care subsidies.
- The number of low income families claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit has nearly tripled.
- Arizona has seen a 70% increase in adoptions and a 66% increase in permanent guardianships.<sup>8</sup>

A 2013 Indiana statute established the state's Commission on Improving the Status of Children (CISC), initially as a coordinating entity with no staffing and budget, but it now has more than 300 people involved across committees and task forces.

- The Indiana CISC has also committed to making clear process documents. For example, there is a template that anyone from the subcommittees bringing a policy recommendation to the full commission must fill out to make sure it is clear and actionable and has a reasonable timeline.
- The commission has recommended several successful changes to state law affecting children, including expanding developmental screening for young children, ensuring every alleged child victim of human trafficking has an attorney, and creating a new Juvenile Justice Reform Task Force.<sup>9</sup>

Irrespective of the focus of the Cabinet, establishing a strategic agenda for the children and families of Pennsylvania is imperative. The next Governor has a tremendous opportunity for to make a significant contribution to the families of Pennsylvania by creating a Children's Cabinet.

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<sup>8</sup> Arizona Governor's Office of Youth, Faith, and Family. (2022) <https://goyff.az.gov/csfe>

<sup>9</sup> The Aspen Institute Education and Society Program. (2022) Strong And Sustainable Children's Cabinets: A Discussion Guide For Leaders. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/childrens-cabinets-report-030122.pdf>



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