



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

**Testimony of Laval Miller-Wilson, Deputy Secretary for the Office of Children,
Youth and Families & Brinda Penyak, Special Advisor to the Secretary**

Senate Aging & Youth Committee
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Good morning, Chairwoman Ward, Chairwoman Collett, committee members, and staff. My name is Laval Miller-Wilson, and I have the privilege of serving as the Deputy Secretary of the Office of Children Youth and Families (OCYF) within the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS), under the leadership of Secretary Valerie Arkoosh. I am joined by Brinda Penyak, who serves as a Special Advisor to Secretary Arkoosh. We appreciate the opportunity to testify about the Commonwealth's child welfare system today.

Supporting children and families, and reducing the prevalence of child abuse and neglect, is a core responsibility of federal, state, and county governments. Every day, DHS collaborates with key partners across the Commonwealth to empower parents with the support necessary for their children to grow and thrive safely at home. However, protecting our children cannot be the sole responsibility of a single department or office – we must work across departments and disciplines, in a whole-of-government approach to prevent abuse and increase awareness of its warning signs. Each of us plays a role in protecting our children, and only by working together can we ensure a robust network of prevention and treatment services and resources.

Understanding that involvement in the child welfare system can be a source of trauma for both children and families, the Shapiro Administration is committed to building a system that is trauma-informed, prevention focused, and seeks to minimize disruption to children and families. This work is not possible without our

child welfare social workers, their support teams in county children and youth offices, private providers contracted by counties to provide preventive and treatment services, and community partners. Their steadfast commitment to serving our children is commendable, and each protected child is a testament to their work.

A strong and experienced workforce is the backbone of a successful human services field, but Pennsylvania’s county children and youth agencies (CCYAs) are struggling to protect children and support families due to difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff. Today, we aim to outline these challenges by first reviewing the structure of Pennsylvania’s child welfare system, and then by highlighting trends identified in DHS’s annual reports on the operations of ChildLine and protective services provided by CCYAs. The impact of workforce challenges on our county agencies and the private provider agencies is profound, compromising our collective ability to protect children and support their families. We will conclude by identifying potential strategies and solutions, and by inviting further partnership and dialogue.

The Structure of Child Welfare

Pennsylvania is one of nine states with a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system. This structure means that child welfare (and juvenile justice) services are organized, managed, and delivered by 67 CCYAs, with staff in these agencies hired as county employees. County commissioners or executives, elected by each county, serve as the governing authority responsible for ensuring their CCYAs fulfill their mission to protect children's immediate safety, keep children with their families, and provide temporary care when necessary.

CCYAs are the sole civil agency responsible for investigating and assessing allegations of child abuse and neglect. By statute, these investigations **must** be conducted by county staff, a responsibility that cannot be delegated.¹ This work is done by trained CCYA caseworkers who:

¹ Hundreds of private agencies have contracts with CCYAs for prevention, in-home services, foster family services, kinship care, permanency, and congregate care, but the Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) makes the county agency the sole civil agency responsible for investigations: Section 6362(a) states “the county agency shall be the sole civil agency responsible for receiving

- Visit and talk with frightened, hurt, and angry children who have been harmed,
- Discuss the most sensitive issues of the allegations with the family,
- Make immediate life-altering decisions about the placement of a child, and
- Locate and make placement of a child in an alternative setting, if necessary.

A CCYA caseworker makes potentially life-or-death recommendations and decisions daily with every telephone call, visit, and activity. CCYA workers often visit families during evenings, weekends, and holidays. It is, without exaggeration, one of the most important positions in government. Unfortunately, an increasing number of counties lack the staff to complete their investigations in a timely manner.

To hold counties accountable for compliance with minimum child safety standards, Pennsylvania has a statewide licensing system that evaluates all 67 CCYAs, as well as private service providers, for adherence to federal and state laws, regulations, and policies. OCYF staff conduct annual licensing inspections of CCYAs through random file and record sampling, interviews with administrative, supervisory, and casework staff, and reviews of internal policy/procedures, personnel records, and fiscal documentation. Counties are encouraged by OCYF to exceed minimum requirements and work towards best practice standards.

Pennsylvania has a record number of CCYAs—at the time of this testimony, seven—operating on a provisional license. Workforce recruitment and retention challenges are the largest contributing factors that have led OCYF to place CCYAs on provisional status, due to their impact on case practice.

and investigating all reports of child abuse”; Section 6375(d) contains the same “sole civil agency” language for investigating general protective service reports; and Section 6334.1.1(1) provides that the county shall investigate allegations of abuse, then after investigation, ongoing work and services may be performed by private contractors.

Region	County	# Provisional
Central	Blair	4 th
Central	Northumberland	1 st
Western	Clearfield	4 th
Northeast	Lackawanna	2 nd
Western	Lawrence	1 st
Western	Indiana	1 st
Southeast	Delaware	1 st

In his 2017 report, "[State of the Child](#)", former Pennsylvania Auditor General Eugene DePasquale reviewed county child welfare agencies and the impact workforce shortages have on quality of service. "Turnover creates a ripple effect: one caseworker leaves, creating increased workloads for other caseworkers, which results in more resignations... Increased continuances in court because a new caseworker does not have the knowledge or information readily available during the hearing. Continuances can lead to children staying in care longer... and difficulty filling positions with qualified staff." More importantly, however, is the impact this can have on children and families: "Having to relive the trauma by telling their story over and over again; delays in reunification; information getting lost in translation or lost completely; delays due to newer caseworker's time to familiarize themselves with the case; a new caseworker taking a different approach to the case, which requires children and parents to have to learn the rules all over; and delays in a family sharing their needs and struggles with someone unfamiliar."

Current Data Trends About Child Welfare

Pennsylvania's Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) requires DHS to [annually report](#) to the Governor and General Assembly on the operations of ChildLine and child protective services provided by CCYAs. This report is an important tool that helps DHS analyze trends and identify opportunities to better support families and

protect children. Significant changes over the past decade, especially following the pandemic, have impacted this area.

In 2014, the Commonwealth enacted 24 pieces of legislation dramatically changing policies and procedures governing child protection and the reporting and investigation of child abuse and neglect.² The primary statutory vehicle for that change was the CPSL, the statute that defines, *inter alia*, child abuse, who is a mandated reporter, how reports must be made, how investigations are to be categorized and conducted, and who is maintained on the child abuse registry.

These laws broadened the definitions of “child abuse” and “perpetrator,” expanded the list of mandated reporters, increased penalties for failure to report suspected abuse, protected reporters of child abuse, and enhanced clearance requirements for individuals working or volunteering with children. They also promoted the use of multi-disciplinary teams for child abuse investigations and supported the use of information technology to increase efficiency and data tracking.

The impact of the 2014 CPSL changes was immediate and far reaching. The [annual child abuse reports](#) reveal that beginning in calendar year 2015, the first full year of CPSL implementation, the number of child protective services reports (CPS) increased nearly 50 percent to 42,023 from 29,516 in 2014. It has remained high. From 2015-2019, the annual average of CPS reports was 44,035. General protective services (GPS) reports and ChildLine calls also surged during this time, with averages of 160,969 and 174,477 per year, respectively.

The pandemic briefly reduced some of these numbers in 2020. However, the [2022 Annual Child Abuse Report](#) showed a return to previous levels of reports of potential child abuse or neglect, with Childline calls reaching an all-time high of 205,613. That means more referrals to counties to investigate.

² These changes followed the Sandusky prosecution and the 2011 the PA General Assembly’s Task Force on Child Protection (created by Senate Resolution 250 and House Resolution 522) to conduct a comprehensive review of the laws and procedures relating to the reporting of child abuse and the protection of the health and safety of children. After 11 public hearings and more than 60 testimonies, the Task Force on Child Protection released its report on November 27, 2012, with recommendations on how to improve state laws and procedures governing child protection and the reporting of child abuse.

Substantiated near fatalities have also risen every year since 2015, peaking at 138 in 2022. The increase in near fatalities (and fatalities) is attributable to the rise in incidents involving young children ingesting legal or illegal substances, as well as an increase in lack of supervision. However, lack of supervision (often involving ingestion) is no longer the leading cause of substantiated fatalities and near fatalities in 2022. While this was the case in 2020 and 2021, for 2022, the leading cause has shifted back to violent acts, accounting for 38 percent of substantiated fatalities and 41 percent of substantiated near fatalities.

Finally, the [2022 Annual Child Abuse Report](#) highlights the issue of overdue child abuse reports. The number of CPS investigations completed in over 60 days increased significantly from 254 in 2021 to 358 in 2022. This continues a concerning upward trend seen in recent years. Preliminary 2023 data – to be finalized and published in the next two months – shows an increased number of CPS and GPS reports, as well as more overdue CPS reports, attributable to critical staffing shortages at CCYAs. OCYF closely monitors counties with significant overdue outcomes and works with them to develop and implement appropriate plans of correction.

Child Welfare Workforce Challenges

Recruitment and retention of child welfare staff is the foremost problem facing our child protective services system.³ Today, much like all direct service/care industries, Pennsylvania’s county child welfare agencies (including private providers) are struggling to hire. Work in this field is not easy. Staff face demanding caseloads, uncertainty, high-stakes decisions, trauma to children and families, traumatic stress, bureaucratic hurdles, external oversight, and public scrutiny. These factors, compounded with low pay and limited benefits, reduce interest among qualified graduates. Those who have worked hard for a bachelor’s or advanced degree may look for a lower stress job for a comparable wage to pay off their student loans. Alternatively, some workers who remain in the human services field find themselves working multiple jobs to pay off their loans. This limits the pool of qualified applicants interested in this area of work.

³ In 2016, in [testimony presented](#) to the Pennsylvania House Children and Youth Committee about the child welfare system, then OCYF Deputy Secretary Cathy Utz, highlighted that recruitment and retention was a challenge. The problem has now reached critical levels.

CCYAs have reported vacancy rates as high as 80 percent. Frequent staff turnover affects the efficiency and effectiveness of critical family services, and high vacancy rates result in higher caseloads for case managers, potentially jeopardizing the safety and well-being of children and families in need.

OCYF recently partnered with Public Financial Management (PFM) to develop a CCYA Recruitment and Retention Project that launched in August 2023 and is nearing completion. Ten CCYAs across the state volunteered and dedicated time and resources to participate in interviews and focus groups. Many reported their struggles with recruitment and retention. Key findings include:

- Between FY 2018 and FY 2023, nearly 1 in 2 CCYA caseworkers (including supervisors) separated from employment within the first two years of service.
- More than 1 in 5 CCYA caseworkers left their jobs in FY 2023, the highest rate in more than five years.
- More than 1 in 4 CCYA caseworker positions were vacant as of FY 2023.
- Fewer than 600 new caseworkers were hired in FY 2023, down from over 800 caseworkers hired annually pre-pandemic.
- The caseworker vacancy rate more than doubled from 10.4 percent in FY 2018 to 25.6 percent in FY 2022.

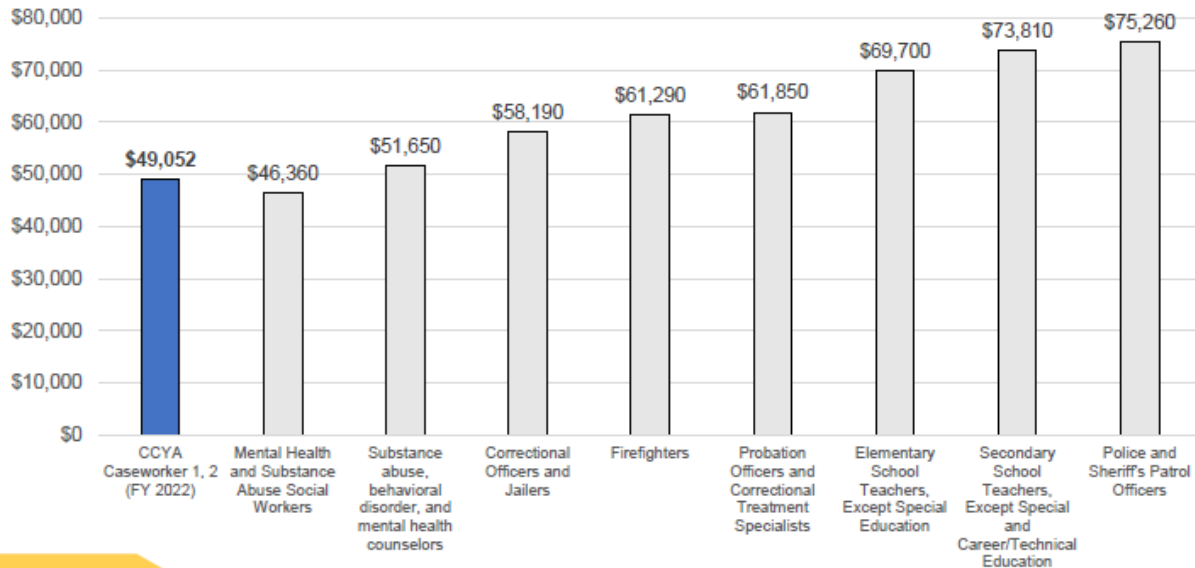
Insufficient pay levels for CCYA workers remains a top concern. Multiple CCYA caseworkers reported working second jobs, with reports of higher earnings in other short-term jobs than in their caseworker roles:

- My agency “can’t keep people because they’re working two jobs.”
- “I earned more money in one week as a bartender than two weeks here [employed as a caseworker].”
- “I’m still working at Aldi!”

The PFM project indicates CCYA worker pay lags behind other direct-service occupations in the Commonwealth. See Table A (below and accompanying this written testimony).

CCYA caseworker pay also trail many occupations in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that provide direct services to children and families

Average Caseworker Pay (1, 2) versus Other Occupations in Pennsylvania



Personnel Summaries, Needs-Based Budgets (FY 2022), US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) OEWS data reflects straight-time, gross pay exclusive of premium pay effective May 2022. CCYA Caseworker data effective FY 2022.

In addition to lower wages compared to peers in other professions, county child welfare workers undertake tasks few others are willing to do, such as being on call at 3 a.m. to visit a family in crisis or entering a home where a parent is in full meltdown mode.

The profession of child protective services is losing appeal among young people, partly because its value has been attacked. CCYA workers report feeling that their work is misunderstood, particularly by those outside the field who may make emotionally charged judgements about the actions of agencies and caseworkers. It is not uncommon for there to be an assumption of wrongdoing by CCYAs and child welfare generally: that CCYA should intervene more often in family affairs, and on the other hand, public opinion can be quick to assume CCYA overreach. Too frequently, it is the caseworker who becomes the focus of attention. The nature of this work can fuel assumptions from people on social media and in the press that, at times, oversimplify the individual actions and authority of caseworkers. This can devolve into a “blame game” that undermines and stigmatizes this work and causes CCYAs to operate without support or public trust.

The 2023 arrests of CCYA workers in Lackawanna and Adams counties reportedly have had a severe impact on staffing in those counties and damaged morale in CCYAs across the state. In June 2023, five arrest warrants were issued for three workers and two supervisors from Lackawanna County's Office of Youth and Family Services (LCOYFS), alleging endangering the welfare of children and failing to report abuse. DHS/OCYF placed LCOYFS on a provisional license because of their backlog of overdue GPS investigations. The case received media attention from news outlets covering the provisional license, the arrests, county budgeting, and staffing concerns. Similarly, in August 2023, three employees of Adams County's Children and Youth Services (ACCYS) were arrested and charged with felony child endangerment in connection with the death of a child (Iris Mummert). The ACCYS handling of the Mummert case was investigated by DHS/OCYF and citations were issued as a result.

We understand that issues involving the health, safety, and welfare of children will always attract interest and attention – as it should. No entity or individual is above reproach, but this work exists within a framework of checks and balances. When it comes to state intervention in the lives of families, accountability and adherence to best practices, laws, and regulations are essential. The primary aim of child protective services is to ensure the safety of children and support parents as they do their best for their families. If this field and the people who do this important, life-saving work are going to be successful, there must be a baseline public trust and confidence that the system keeps children safe and supports their families. We can balance a diligent eye towards proper conduct and practices without presuming that people who do this work are inherently negligent or intentionally acting in bad faith. Anything less will continue turbulence in this field that threatens the integrity of this work and endangers children.

DHS/OCYF Actions to Support CCYAs

The Department awaits PFM's final report, which will highlight successful practices adopted by CCYAs across the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, OCYF has already begun implementing strategies to improve caseworker recruitment and retention. These strategies include, but are not limited to:

- Supporting county recruitment and retention strategies through the Needs-Based Plan and Budget process (i.e., hiring bonuses, retention bonuses, salary increases), and considering the adoption of new fiscal policies and strategies that reward counties for retaining staff and for maintaining a sufficient staffing complement;
- Through OCYF's Bureau of Children and Family Services staff, providing enhanced technical assistance and support to CCYAs and discussing strategies for funding and delivering short-term staffing for counties that are experiencing extraordinary staffing struggles;
- Creating opportunities to share successful recruitment and retention strategies among counties. For example, OCYF recently dedicated a quarterly information session for counties to this topic and had selected counties present on the workforce efforts that have been effective;
- Making a significant commitment to advancing trauma-informed care practices through OCYF Trauma Team, which helps improve staff well-being and retention; and,
- Partnering with the University of Pittsburgh Child Welfare Resource Center (CWRC) to increase the number of schools willing to participate in the [Child Welfare Education for Leadership](#) (tuition coverage for individuals seeking Master's for commitment to working with the agency for a length of time).

Additional DHS efforts underway that will impact recruitment and retention include:

- Implementing the Child Welfare Case Management (CWCM), which will streamline paperwork and increase consistent statewide data collection, and improve data exchange between counties and OCYF;
- Drafting regulations governing CCYAs that would update Title 55 Pa. Code Chapter 3130 regulations, which have not been updated since 1982 and would codify 40 years of federal and state law related to child welfare social services programs. OCYF intends to pair these policy updates with practice requirements to improve the operation and administration of CCYAs;

- Continuing to shift support toward prevention strategies that support interventions for families - interventions that divert the need for more intensive child welfare involvement. The federal Family First Prevention Services Act is being used as a catalyst to move county practice in this direction;
- Shifting to a universal assessment tool (UAT) to improve decision making related to safety and risk factors and support county children and youth workers in doing more thorough and informed assessments of family strengths and needs; and
- Implementing Blueprint workgroup and recommendations for improving outcomes for children with complex, multi-system needs; work that has the potential to increase the success of community placements and opportunities for treatment, and avoid inappropriate temporary sheltering (e.g., children sleeping in CCYA offices).

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In closing, we remain committed to working with members of the General Assembly to better equip our child welfare system to protect children, support families, and build strong communities. Just as it takes a community to raise a child, so too does ensuring their protection. We believe our shared desire for improvement and support of Pennsylvania's children and families can be achieved.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony on this important topic and for your continued partnership.