



DAUPHIN COUNTY

SOCIAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

CHILDREN & YOUTH ADMINISTRATOR
MARISA MCCLELLAN, ESQUIRE

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Testimony regarding the Child Welfare System

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4/3/24

My name is Marisa McClellan and I am the Administrator for Dauphin County Social Services for Children and Youth. I have 18 years of experience in the child welfare system, the majority of which is with Dauphin County. I have been fortunate to hold different positions within the office of Children and Youth, including representing the Agency as the solicitor. I thank you for the opportunity to testify before this body and appreciate the efforts to examine the issues of the child welfare system in the Commonwealth.

The Children and Youth Agency is mandated to investigate all allegations of child abuse and neglect and provide services to families who are identified as in need of assistance. My testimony today will focus on the amount of referrals coming into an Agency and how that information is processed and the work it entails to process it; the continued lack of sufficient staff to review and oversee services needed for families; the increased complexity of cases that are handled by the Children and Youth Agency; and the extensive amount of work involved with recruitment and retention of staff due to high levels of turnover and burnout.

Based upon Pennsylvania Department of Human Services 2022 Annual Child Protective Services Report, there were 165,295 general protective services reports and of those, Agencies assessed 80,908 reports and validated 39,995 reports. More than half of the reports logged into the system- which takes significant staffing to do, were screened out with no further child welfare agency action. This means that the child welfare system must process through excessive amounts of information to just get to families meeting the criteria for services. The child welfare system has been a catch-all for other systems to utilize when those other systems do

not have the means- either monetarily or systematically with services to assist families and children. If a more streamlined approach to utilizing the child welfare system was initiated, the amount of time Agencies are spending wading through vast amounts of information and checking on families, that really are in need of another service, would be reduced and Agencies would have more time to focus on families in need of the child welfare system.

The child welfare system works with many other entities that also regularly engage with child services- such as education, human services agencies like mental health and drug and alcohol, probation, and medical systems. Each system requires sufficient funding and services available to assist children and youth throughout the Commonwealth. If those service areas had reinforced efforts, it would alleviate some of the pressure that the child welfare system encounters.

In Dauphin County we use a special approach to all referrals coming into the Agency. It is called the RED team approach, which stands for Review, Evaluate, and Determine next steps. Each day this team meets to review all referrals coming in. They put together any past history the family may have had with the Agency. They also look at if other referrals were made and when those occurred. They direct next steps to the caseworker that gets assigned the referral. They also make determinations whether child welfare services are needed for that specific family referral. This approach assures consistency with all referrals in Dauphin County. It also provides an enormous amount of assistance to the caseworkers getting new cases as the next steps are clearly identified for each worker to follow.

If at the statewide level there would be a better evaluation and assessment of referrals coming in, and diverting those referrals to the correct system or service, it would clearly reduce the amount of referrals into child welfare. Utilizing an approach similar to the RED team approach may assure and assist that families receive the correct attention and service in a faster and more efficient fashion.

Staffing shortages are not a new issue to child welfare. Even before there was a nationwide staffing shortage, child welfare was well-versed in high vacancy rates. The vacancy rate only continued to increase over the past four years, and it has not improved in some areas of the Commonwealth. Referrals and cases assigned within child welfare did not reduce. In fact they continue to increase on a yearly basis. There are only so many hours in a day and so much one caseworker can do, to assure the needs of a family are met. Safety of children is tantamount and must occur, and additional services after assuring safety are challenging to implement with waitlists and so many cases on a caseworker's caseload to navigate. Caseworkers at their core, want to see families get what they need, and it has been a struggle to assist families when there are fewer and fewer caseworkers to go around. Not only does the Commonwealth need to review what the workload should entail for a caseworker, but it has to evolve the role so that we continue to improve family engagement and family services.

In Dauphin County we have found that creating positions that focus on certain areas of casework, such as placing a caseworker directly within a school district, or a caseworker working solely with a police department on specific case types really helps not only assure an expertise but also a commitment and drive from that caseworker to keep on improving that specific area. The Department of Human Services and the Office of Children Youth and Families has been very supportive to Dauphin County in the creation of these unique child welfare caseworker roles. But Dauphin County along with the rest of the Commonwealth needs to be able to get the word out, about these positions and how fulfilling and rewarding this work can be. If the Commonwealth took a broad approach through a media campaign to recruit more people for caseworker roles it would reduce the vacancy crisis dramatically.

Child welfare, and several other systems such as mental health and juvenile probation continue to see an increase in complex youth that require extensive services. The Commonwealth has taken notice of this increase. But still child welfare has to worry if a youth may have to sleep overnight in the office, because there is no provider or placement available to house the child. This should never happen, but in the past four years it is a county child welfare office reality. Complex cases require the most amount of time, energy and resources that child welfare and other agencies have. While there are plans in place to improve this, the immediacy of the problem requires the Commonwealth to provide more assistance wherever it can as soon as possible.

Staff recruitment and retention are also activities that require a large amount of time and resources. Recruitment initiatives are occurring in each county and that creates a lot of redundancy for the Commonwealth. All counties need the same thing: a larger workforce. There could be a statewide recruitment approach that would assist counties to this end. Retention is its own concern as caseworkers continue to leave the profession of child welfare due to burnout. While reducing caseload sizes will assist in maintaining staff, other areas need to be studied to assure that staff can continue to do this work for multiple years.

I want to thank this body for giving me this opportunity to discuss these issues and to consider these concerns. I also want to thank my County Commissioners, specifically George Hartwick III, for his continued support and dedication to the child welfare and human services systems. Dauphin County regularly recognizes and promotes the work of Children and Youth. This encouragement and support keeps our staff going each and every day to help the families of Dauphin County and this Commonwealth.

Thank you.

Marisa McClellan