

Testimony on Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System

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Good morning, Chairwoman Watson, Chairman Conklin, committee members, and staff.

I am Cathy Utz and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) in the Department of Human Services (DHS). On behalf of Secretary Ted Dallas, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System. Protecting Pennsylvania's children from abuse and neglect is a shared responsibility that does not solely rest with the formal child protective services system. It requires the collective collaboration of community partners and Pennsylvania citizens to provide local safety nets for children and families that are facing challenges within our communities and neighborhoods.

The past few years have presented unique challenges, yet numerous opportunities, geared toward improving our ability to better protect our children. Thus far, 24 bills have been enacted that have reformed our child protection system. Together we expanded the definition of child abuse, identified more professionals who must report abuse, and enhanced the clearance requirements for individuals working and volunteering with our children. Certain mandated reporters must also complete child abuse recognition and reporting training. Within this legislative package, we also expanded our capacity to submit electronic reports of child abuse and neglect among mandated reporters, counties, and DHS, as well as gave individuals the ability to request clearances on-line. As a result, we have seen record numbers of calls and reports at both the state and county levels.

Calendar year 2015 data shows an all-time high in the number of reports of child abuse investigated statewide. These numbers increased from 29,520 in 2014 to 42,005 in 2015, representing a 42 percent increase. Additionally, calls received at the child abuse hotline increased from 164,911 to 188,357. The number of requests for child abuse history clearances

also increased from 587,545 to 1,539,005. Of the 1.5 million clearance requests received last year, 69 percent were received on-line. The number of requests for clearances from volunteers increased from 50,150 to 400,414. The number of individuals being listed on the statewide database as a perpetrator of child abuse increased from 1,118 to 2,223. From November 2014 through January 2016, 601,463 individuals received child abuse recognition and reporting training through DHS contracts with the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance, the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center.

This data shows that our efforts are paying off in terms of increasing awareness that child abuse and neglect occurs in all communities across our state and we're better protecting children through screening employees and volunteers. Yet, we have much work to do.

As you are aware, Pennsylvania's child welfare system is state supervised and county administered. As such, DHS provides oversight of and technical assistance to county children and youth agencies, and reimburses counties for delivery of direct services to children and families, including the overall operations of the county agency. Counties are reimbursed at varying rates for local operations and service delivery as established through the Human Services Code. For example, staff salaries, foster care and community-based services are reimbursed at 80 percent, certain adoption services at 100 percent, and institutional placements at 60 percent. Approximately 65 percent of the county child welfare budget is reimbursed through state funds with the balance from federal and county funds.

Amending the Child Protective Services Law was only the first step in this system reform. Ensuring that our workforce is well-prepared in fulfilling their role is an area that will require

continued focus and attention. Through the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, we offer a robust series of training opportunities that provide staff with the foundational knowledge to begin this work. New caseworkers are required to undergo 120 hours of core training in order to be certified as direct service workers. However, the classroom training is only one aspect of adequately preparing staff to do this complex work. Quality supervision and leadership within our counties' agencies is critical to the success of our workforce. Child welfare is not easy, and it's not for everyone. County agency staff work tirelessly each and every day to ensure that children are safe, have permanent homes in which to thrive, and their well-being needs are met. Often, at the cost of their own families, staff members can also experience their own form of trauma as a result of this work. Vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress are prevalent in child welfare staff in that they are seeing the impact of serious child abuse and neglect, investigating child abuse related deaths, and are being exposed to emotional and detailed accounts of traumatic events in children. This can take an emotional toll on them as well.

Recruitment and retention of public child welfare staff is a challenge nationwide. Data suggests that less than one-third of staff have formal social work education with an annual turnover rate of 30-40 percent. The average length of employment in public child welfare is less than two years. Supervisors generally have three years of experience and caseload averages are 24-31 cases per caseworker. The average salary nationwide is \$33,000. As the realm of social problems grow and intensify, workers are responsible for serving children and families with multiple challenges. Typical family needs include high rates of substance abuse, behavioral health issues, domestic violence, and poverty. Additionally, a majority of front line workers have encountered actual violence or threats of violence. Pennsylvania data closely mirrors these nationwide trends.

In an effort to strengthen our child welfare workforce, DHS has had a long standing partnership with counties and the University of Pittsburgh's Child Welfare Resource Center to prepare and support child welfare professionals and systems through education and research. Through this partnership, our goals include recruiting undergraduate social work students in order to prepare them for employment in the public child welfare system as well as retaining public child welfare staff by supporting their attainment of a Master's in Social Work.

Through the Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB) Program, there is a partnership with 14 schools to offer financial support to an average of 60-75 undergraduate social work majors during their final year of study. Through this program, students complete their internship in a public child welfare agency, receive child welfare specific coursework, and are enrolled in the previously mentioned core training. In turn, these students commit to employment in a public child welfare agency. To date, the program has an 88 percent completion rate. This program also benefits counties in that they have the opportunity to hire staff members who have completed an internship in a county children and youth agency, completed a portion of the required foundational training, and who commit to a minimum of one year of employment post-graduation.

Through the Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL) Program, financial support is offered to approximately 150 students annually. They receive child and family-focused coursework and field placement through 12 schools. The program has seen a 94 percent completion rate with a steady trend of part-time students. As of July 2015, there were a total of 1,224 graduates with 99 percent of counties participating in the program. Twenty-five percent of all county child welfare positions are held by a CWEL graduate or current student. We are also seeing a correlation trend between the success of CWEB and CWEL in that 21 percent of staff

that enroll in the CWEL program are also CWEB graduates. CWEL has yielded high retention rates within counties, where all but 13 graduates have completed their commitment since 1996. Of all program graduates, only 8 percent have left the public child welfare agency for reasons that include death, retirement, disability, relocation to another state, or obtaining employment elsewhere. The reasons for leaving also include seeking opportunities for advancement, having the ability to apply their education elsewhere, and receiving recognition of their knowledge and skills.

High caseloads, quality supervision, agency support, paperwork, and lack of pay are among some of the reasons staff leave. Through the State Leadership Roundtable, which is led by Supreme Court Justice Max Baer, the Recruitment and Retention Workgroup was charged with exploring these issues. This workgroup is comprised of representatives of all facets of the child welfare system, including the judiciary, legal representatives, counties, and DHS. The workgroup's first report will be issued in May. The report will include a review of information gathered and a set of preliminary recommendations, and will be presented to the State Leadership Roundtable for approval. This report and its recommendations will guide the efforts of the workgroup over the next year. An updated report and recommendations will be submitted for review and approval the following year. Once the report is final it will be shared with the standing committees responsible for oversight of DHS.

As we look to identify solutions to recruitment and retention of county child welfare staff, we must ensure that we understand why they choose the field of child welfare as their career path and why they choose to leave so that appropriate solutions can be identified. We must remember that we are not alone when it comes to high turnover rates, because other states share our challenges and are also seeking to find viable solutions. Recruiting and maintaining quality staff

requires a multi-faceted goal that does not rest with one entity or agency. It requires a collaborative response and commitment. If it were an easy issue to address, we would not be facing these challenges today.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony today on this important topic on behalf of DHS. We look forward to our continued partnership to promote healthy families and strong communities.