



National Association of Social Workers

My name is Jenna Mehnert. I am here to testify on innovative approaches to improving the child welfare system. Early in my career, I worked both as child welfare and a juvenile probation officer. Those experiences lead me to pursue a career focused on building better systems to serve children and their families. I have since worked for three political administrations and two national non-profit organizations. In all five of these roles part of my responsibilities have been to promote systemic reform within child serving systems. Today, I sit before you representing over 6,000 professional social workers as the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. It is my passion for protecting children and strengthening families that shape the suggestions I am here to offer.

As a policy specialist in the Department of Public Welfare, I was often frustrated that when reading the CPSL it appeared that Pennsylvania's law created a structurally strong child welfare system. The Child Protective Services/General Protective Services differential approach system makes sense. A CPS case is an alleged child abuse case that needs to be investigated quickly utilizing strong forensic interviewing skills. The General Protective Services (GPS) case requires a social work approach using a strength-based approach to enable families to better care for their children. Effective GPS requires strong case management and system advocacy skills to ensure that families receive the right services and support to make tangible changes in their lives. Often when I speak to the differential response system, to the grad students I teach, I am met with resistance. Students, who are current caseworkers, tell me that in their county the GPS response exists only on paper. Our system is designed not only to investigate alleged child abuse, but also to provide resources to keep families together.

I want to share a child's story to illustrate how profound some targeted system improvement efforts to help children and their families in Pennsylvania. Tia, a seventeen-year-old girl, lives in a crime-infested neighborhood with her mother and young sister. Her father is rarely around and provides no fiscal resources to support the two girls. Her mother, an active alcoholic, has been neglectful of the girls since they were babies, has recently become physically abusive. Both Tia and her sister have been adjudicated delinquents for defending themselves from their mother's outbursts and for using credit cards to purchase basic needs. They have no bedroom doors, so her mother often starts fights when drunk late at night. Tia is pregnant. She is due this fall and has one year left of high school. The baby's father has already disappeared. Tia's mother has pushed her in the stomach. The girls' probation officer has made several referrals to county children and youth. But, because of the girls' ages and the lack of physical injuries, the cases would only be numbered as a GPS case. What that means is that no one has come to help them. Not now and not when they were small children being left alone or not fed. As long as their mother does not beat them, no one seems to care about keeping them healthy or providing them with a stable environment. Tia wants to be a massage therapist and a good mother. The reality is more likely that she will lose custody of the baby within six months and she will never finish high school.

It is a heartbreaking story that is unfolding today. But, you can change the life outcomes for thousands of Tia's and their babies struggling every day here in the Commonwealth. There are concrete steps that could be enacted to better protect children and strengthen parents' ability to raise children in healthy environments.

The delinquency system is quick to hold a youth accountable, while the dependency system often refuses to meet the child's need. Victimization or neglect can be the root cause for delinquency, but delinquent children are simply thrown away. The legislature should create a law outlining expectations for providing dependency services to youth who first encounter government services as a delinquent. County children and youth agencies should screen delinquent children to ensure that any dependency needs are appropriately addressed.

County children and youth agencies need to have strong general protective services units that are adequately staffed with highly skilled professionals who are able to fulfill the critical roles of advocate, mentor, referral source, and counselor while still holding the family accountable for their actions. To appropriately accomplish what is a very challenging role, general protective service workers need to be licensed social workers holding masters degrees in social work and have their actions accountable to a state board. The appropriate delivery of effective general protective services is in fact the delivery of good social work services. County children and youth agencies have a very difficult time recruiting individuals who have pursued higher education degrees and charted professional paths focused on the delivery of social services. Both the low salaries and the anti-social work culture present in some counties, drive ethical professionals to practice in other states and fields of practice. Loan forgiveness for licensed social workers working in the delivery of general protective services is an accomplishable system reform that would dramatically improve the system by raising the quality of services delivered.

Finally, there are some strong system reform efforts that have made significant impacts on the functioning of child welfare systems in other states. Several of these programs are struggling to be implemented and financially supported in Pennsylvania. The two most significant programs that I would ask you to consider supporting are children's advocacy centers and court appointed special advocates. Children's advocacy centers utilize a child-friendly, multidisciplinary response to investigating child abuse. Court appointed special advocates ensure the best interest of dependent children is well represented in court. Both programs are struggling to grow in the Commonwealth.

Simply stated, there is no more critical role within government than to keep children healthy and to protect them from sexual assault or physical abuse. The Department of Public Welfare issues regulations that set a floor of acceptable practice. A county can provide substandard services to only a portion of children in need, and still never drop below that acceptable level. Without clear performance measures and true accountability, children will continue to be harmed and society will suffer immeasurable long-term destructive effects. The Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers is pleased to be of assistance to the House Children and Youth committee as it examines ways build better child serving systems. Thank you.