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***Testimony on Innovative Ideas to
Improve the Child Welfare System***

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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Bishop and members of the House Committee on Children and Youth, I am Anne Shenberger, the President and CEO of Philadelphia Safe and Sound (PSS), a leading research, programming, and child advocacy non-profit, whose mission is to improve the health and well-being of children and youth. Philadelphia Safe and Sound (PSS) diligently works to improve the health and well-being of children and youth by collaborating with government, non-profits, foundations, corporations and community groups to positively impact the ways in which public and private entities serve children. For the past eight years, PSS, in collaboration with data providers and the City of Philadelphia, have produced the Report Card on the well-being of children and youth for data-driven decision making.

On behalf of PSS, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss innovative ideas and practices to improve Child Welfare, and I commend you for holding this public dialogue on child welfare. Without your continued leadership on a policy level; our ability to improve the State's child welfare landscape - for the good of abused and neglected children - will be hindered.

Data-Driven Decision Making

The focus of my testimony is to highlight the development and the utility of Philadelphia Safe and Sound's Centralized Data Repository (CDR), and to briefly discuss the proposed statewide Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare services.

Using data and research to inform practice and policy is becoming common practice for the private and public sectors alike. More and more foundations require grantees to provide empirical evidence of their effectiveness and over the last decade there has been increased governmental focus on outcomes and accountability in child welfare. The Adoption and Safe Families Act at the federal level ushered in a new era of accountability that moved focus from procedures and process to outcomes and results. Across the country public child welfare agencies with varying degrees of sophistication use data to monitor performance and to evaluate their impact on clients, especially in light of the federal Child Welfare Services Reviews (CSFR). As service delivery and policy making have become more data driven, access to and manipulation of data has become extremely crucial.

Still, policymakers, children and youth administrators and private service providers struggle how to use data and research to determine the practices and services are the most effective in achieving positive and lasting results for children and youth. Even a well-resourced system such as Philadelphia's, whose

costs of services to support children, youth and their families exceeded \$719 million in FY 2006-07, cannot reliably state how effective its services are and what impact they are having on clients. A common problem within government agencies is the tendency is to rely on data held within their own departments and analyze that data more for the purposes of resource management than for outcome measurement. Yet clients rarely are self-contained in one service delivery system, and evaluating client outcomes becomes impossible if you are unable to track clients across systems. Government agencies cannot afford to make service delivery and funding decisions without access to empirical data that is current, comprehensive, and integrated.

The Philadelphia Child Welfare Review Panel, created in October 2006 by Mayor Street, to study the Department of Human Services (DHS) and how the agency protects children from abuse or neglect, following a series of media reports about child abuse cases, recommended that “DHS establish an external accountability process that includes an annual public report card that covers the core outcomes” of safety, permanency, and well-being. The panel went on to recommend that “responsibility for the report should be placed in the hands of an independent body that is granted full, unfettered access to the data resources of DHS. At a minimum the report should provide an historical context, describe circumstances at the community level, and highlight the differential experience of high-risk populations.”¹

¹ *Protecting Philadelphia's Children: The Call to Action*, Philadelphia Child Welfare Review Panel, May 31, 2007

Recognizing the need for a database that allows for cross-system and longitudinal analyses to support the City in programmatic and policy decision making, PSS developed the CDR to integrate administrative data from a variety of City agencies and programs. This multi-dimensional database allows PSS to track individuals across systems to better examine the effectiveness of services and to inform programmatic best practices. In addition, results of PSS's analyses are used by the City of Philadelphia to modify social service policies as well to inform service delivery content and location.

The CDR is an integrated, cross-system database, which houses an up-to-date broad spectrum of place- and people-based characteristics; and provides the ability for real-time cross-system data analysis. The most comprehensive administrative data contained in the CDR is child welfare data from the city's Department of Human Services (DHS). This data dates back to 1990 and includes all child abuse and neglect reports, as well as all contracted services provided to dependent and delinquent children and youth. In other words, comprehensive data on safety and permanency – abuse and re-abuse, entry and reentry and reunification. In addition to the DHS data, the CDR contains the following:

- Crime data from the Philadelphia Police Department on arrests, homicide victims, and gunshot wound victims.
- Socio-economic and population data from the US Census bureau, which is updated with the most recent annual estimates

- A Geographic Information Services (GIS) element, providing mapping capability with geographic boundaries as broad as city zip codes and police districts, and as localized as census tracts and block groups. The boundaries also include political boundaries, such as City Council districts, voting wards and State House districts.
- Complete information on Philadelphia's After-school and youth development programs, and Violence Reduction programs: the Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP), and the Adolescent Violence Reduction Partnership (AVRP).

Development of the CDR continues, and in a very short time, it will be much richer, particularly around data elements that will strengthen indicators of well-being. The CDR is poised to receive data from the Office of Supportive Housing (OSH), the city agency responsible for services to the homeless. The OSH data will consist of youth and adult shelter stays and families seeking or receiving transitional housing. Among many benefits, this will allow much easier analysis and a better understanding of the nexus between homelessness and the child welfare system, especially for youth who age-out of the child welfare system. A memorandum of understanding between the PSS and the Philadelphia School District (SDP) is currently under review by the School Reform Commission, so that the CDR can house education-related data, which will help in a major step toward evaluating education outcomes for children in the child welfare system. Upon SRC approval, the CDR will contain attendance data,

academic performance data, and data related to serious incidents in schools.

Finally, talks continue with the Family Court and Juvenile Probation leadership in order for the CDR to contain juvenile justice data, which will certainly make the CDR quite comprehensive in its wealth of information on children and youth.

So what's the value? PSS has the ability to perform extensive analysis to determine which child welfare programs will successfully place children in permanent living arrangements, ensure child and community safety, and promote child and family well-being. Remarkably, analysis that would normally take days or weeks to complete can now be completed in hours. The CDR provides the ability to do cross-systems analysis in a very short period of time. For example, children and youth administrators and JPO officials often deal with the crossover and link between child welfare and juvenile justice. A practical research question with important policy and practice implications might be, what impact does a youth's dependent care placement have on the likelihood of getting arrested post-discharge? Using the data contained in the CDR on DHS placement history and arrest data, PSS is able to determine what percentage of youth discharged from dependent placements were arrested. The analysis is able to go much deeper and compare placement types and the likelihood of arrests and control for individual background differences and other variables.

In short, the CDR can facilitate excellent management reports to allow Child Welfare administrators and policy-makers to be strategic as well as tactical in making program and policy decisions.

Evidence-Based Clearinghouse

Before closing I would like to briefly mention another innovative idea that is in the very early planning stages, an Evidenced-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare in Pennsylvania. PSS is in the planning stages and proposing to develop such a statewide clearinghouse that summarizes programs and strategies proven to be effective in improving outcomes for children and youth, and to provide child welfare decision-makers with the tools they need to make choices that are guided by the best available scientific evidence. The clearinghouse will be an accessible and searchable online database of evidence on the programs and practices that are intended to achieve permanency, enhance child well-being, and keep children and communities safe. It will allow users to determine which programs and practices have the strongest evidence of effectiveness based on solid, reliable, scientific research. Legislators, county children and youth administrators, and service providers will have easy access to evidence regarding a variety of programs and practices that can help improve outcomes for the Commonwealth's children, youth and families. PSS is in the early phases of planning for the establishment of a clearinghouse, and will be seeking input from California, where such a clearinghouse has been operational for several years.

Conclusion

Safe and Sound's strength lies in the capability to conduct in-depth technical development to support and enhance the delivery, research, and

assessment of programs and services. Safe and Sounds background in policy research and analysis imparts a unique perspective in understanding how outcomes can be affected and improved through the expanded use of informational resources. Data and measurement are not ends unto themselves. The purpose of collecting, analyzing, and monitoring data and information is to identify trends and anomalies that can guide and improve, but not dictate, practice at all levels of child welfare. Most importantly, data and information must be used to tell stories about what is happening in practice and policy, to better understand the factors that impact the well-being of children.

Thank you for allowing me to share this information with you. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.