

Hearing of House Children and Youth Committee
PA Child Welfare Initiatives
August 27, 2009

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Good morning. My name is Laurie O'Connor. I am the Director of the Office of Children and Youth in Montgomery County. Montgomery County is a participant on the Statewide Implementation Team for the National Governor's Association Policy Academy for Safe Placement Reduction. We are also one of sixteen (16) counties selected by DPW's Office of Children, Youth and Families to serve as a pilot site for reduction initiatives. The National Governors Association supports the Commonwealth and its counties in implementation of a statewide strategic plan to reduce child placements up to 20% by the end of 2010. My statements today will focus both on the statewide initiative as well as my county's efforts to achieve safe reduction goals.

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices identifies and shares national best practices, serves as an information clearinghouse and provides tailored technical assistance to states across the country. One of several areas in which the National Governor's Association supports states is in the arena of social programs. The Policy Academy on Safely Reducing the Number of Children in Foster Care has functioned since early 2008 as one of these social service initiatives. It is undertaken in partnership with Casey Family Programs, one of the largest and most renowned foundations serving children and families in the country; its mission focuses specifically on foster care. The Policy Academy brings expertise of Casey directly to six states (Arkansas, Florida, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina).

The Pennsylvania Home Team for the Policy Academy is led by DPW's Office of Children, Youth and Families and includes representatives from county child welfare agencies, other relevant state agencies, our private providers, stakeholders and the courts. Identified counties are piloting practices that have been successful in other jurisdictions across the country. Those practices which successfully improve outcomes in pilot counties can then be replicated.

Devising strategies for reducing the number of children in placement without compromising our system's overarching goal of protecting children is the core intention of the Policy Academy. Child welfare in Pennsylvania has traditionally been a system that adheres to statutes and regulations that are focused on keeping children safe. These child centered mandates support a placement driven system. More recently, evidence to support practices and programs which view the entire family as the consumer of service, have been successfully adopted. We are increasingly able to keep children safe at home without compromising mandates for child protection. However, our state utilizes placement more frequently than some jurisdictions across the country.

Jurisdictions which have heavily invested resources in- home and community-based services keep more children out of placement and sometimes out of the child welfare system altogether. These jurisdictions have sustained their successes by reinvesting unspent placement dollars in community-based services.

As I previously stated, Montgomery is one of the 16 counties piloting strategies and setting goals outlined in the statewide plan. We view participation as an opportunity to keep more families together by adopting effective practices and coupling them with model initiatives that are consistent with our goal to keep children "safe at home".

Most recently, Montgomery County has committed significant resources to not only assure protection of children, but to also promote well-being of family members. We believe that when families are healthy their children are safe. Our Commissioners and the Board of Judges take pride in maintaining a broad array of prevention, early intervention, supportive services and aftercare. These programs achieve positive outcomes and support the diversity of our families and our communities.

We take our goal to keep kids “safe at home” very seriously. Services have become mobile. Instead of making our client families come to us or to travel to service agencies to get the help they need, assistance is provided to families in their own homes. Expanding the nature and array of services that we can provide to families has significantly reduced child placement numbers in recent years. Since July 1, 2008 there is an 18.5% reduction. At the start of our current fiscal year, the county was legal custodian of 269 children, the smallest number in several decades. We have kept our children “safe at home” despite a 50% increase in reported suspicions of child abuse and neglect. We are proud of what we have accomplished, but believe that we can do better.

We continually look for ways to improve programs and practices in response to changing needs of our residents. We prioritize active involvement of the courts, community stakeholders and service providers. This requires that staff commit to doing business differently. They must partner with other systems, involve communities and families in planning, and focus time and resources in keeping kids at home or safely reuniting families as soon as it is possible.

Montgomery County has received quite a bit of assistance in accomplishing success. We have volunteered to participate in several practice improvement initiatives and it has been a win-win situation as

the goals of the special initiatives complement one another. The NGA Policy Academy is one of several initiatives to which we have made a commitment. It has been a lot of work, but it has had a positive influence on policy and practice which has, in turn, resulted in better outcomes.

We participate in the Office of Children and Families in the Courts Permanency Practice Initiative which provides training and technical assistance to implement evidence-based, family engagement practices of Family Group Decision Making, Family Finding and Family Development Credentialing to our front line staff. Staff have benefitted greatly in the past year from training in the additional skills which support these practices. We are actively involved in the Supreme Court's Children's Roundtable, which improves court processes in child dependency cases by building collaboration between child welfare and our juvenile court. We have participated in the American Bar Association's Barriers to Permanency Project which supports implementation of concurrent or dual track permanency planning for families so that children do not grow up in foster care. Each step brings us closer to our goal of developing a child-centered, family-focused and multi-system response to meeting needs of children and families.

While we have been successful in some endeavors we have a way to go in achieving our vision. Guidance and expertise available through the National Governor's Association Policy Academy is directing our continued planning for "safe at home" goals. The NGA Academy provides the support and assistance necessary to establish an ambitious but attainable goal to reduce placements and to improve the lives of those children who remain in care. We believe that we can successfully achieve comprehensive and sustainable change in our child welfare

programs to assure that every child has increased opportunity to grow up healthy, safe and loved, in a permanent family.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to discuss the benefit of child welfare initiatives in my county.