

**Testimony on the National Governor's Association Project
House Committee on Children and Youth
Public Hearing
Thursday, August 27, 2009**

Good morning, Chairwoman Bishop, Chairman O'Brien, members of the Committee and staff. I am Anne Marie Ambrose, Commissioner of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services, the largest child welfare agency in the Commonwealth. DHS is currently a participant in the National Governor's Association Policy Academy project. We are excited by the challenge of identifying and implementing placement reduction strategies to decrease the number of children in foster care – because as we all know – with the right supports children are best served with their own families.

So, I am pleased to share with you Philadelphia's commitment to and experience in this important initiative. And I am proud to report that it was just nearly two weeks ago in our NGA meeting that Deputy Secretary Richard Gold announced that Philadelphia County has reduced its number of dependent placements by 264 within a 6 month period. So how are we able to do this?

First, we are able to do to this because of our current leadership team at DHS. They have created an urgency for better outcomes for Philadelphia's children and families. They come with diverse strengths and competencies, but function with the same goal in mind of improving safety, permanency and well-being for the children we serve. In the past year we have reduced the number of children in dependent placement by 8%.

Next, in order to continue to meet the state's goal of continuing to reduce placements, DHS has developed a County Program Improvement Plan which outlines our NGA Placement Reduction Strategies and Action Steps. Our goals are to increase safety, reduce our reliance on out-of-home care, improve permanency, and reduce reentry. Our strategies to get there include strategic decision making, family group decision making, family finding, the creation of a diverse array of services, and partnerships with the courts. For purposes of my testimony today, I will focus on DHS' strategic decision making efforts and how

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that helped define our continuum of in-home services, and our collaboration with Family Court under the leadership of Administrative Judge Kevin Dougherty.

Child safety is the foundation for all of our decision making efforts at the Department. We have adopted a safety model of practice at DHS where we incorporate safety assessments into all aspects of our organizational decision making. This starts with our front end. In May 2008, DHS developed and implemented Hotline Guided Decision Making (HGDM). HGDM integrates safety practice in screening families for abuse and/or neglect as well as provides standardized criteria for accepting reports and making appropriate referrals. The primary objectives for HGDM are to ensure that families receive the appropriate response from the Department and relevant service intervention. Only those cases with active safety threats are accepted for service. Children and families who have other risk or well-being needs are referred to less intrusive community based services to meet their needs. So, our continuum of care for families coming to the attention of the Department through our hotline goes from Alternative Response System (ARS) -Family Stabilization Services (FSS)-Teen Diversion-In-Home Protective Services (IHPS) and then placement.

ARS is designed to ensure child safety, engage and support families in enhancing their abilities to meet the basic and well-being needs of their children in the least intrusive, time limited manner through the use of community resources. It is designed to provide families with supports from their communities while keeping them out of the formal child welfare system. ARS is the least intrusive service offered to families coming to the attention of the department.

ARS provides up to 60 days of supportive and safety services for families currently under investigation by the Department where the allegations may indicate a possible safety threat. RSR is an immediate service that DHS provides to preserve the family throughout the course of an investigation.

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Next, FSS provides supportive services for families who are court ordered to be supervised by the Department even though DHS determines that there are no safety threats. It is anticipated that this services will most be utilized for families which truancy issues as a way to divert children from placement. A similar service is our Teen Diversion Placement Program which provides immediate supportive services to families with adolescents at risk for placement.

Lastly, our IHPS provides up to 180 days of intensive safety services for families experiencing active safety threats. Referrals for IHPS are made by DHS staff at the conclusion of an investigation with the intention of providing intense in home services in an effort to maintain child safety and preserve family unity.

As you can see, building a continuum of in home services that meet the needs of children and families can have a positive impact on placement reduction.

Placement, as you can see, is always the last option for the Department. And if we have to place children, we place them in the least restrictive environment closet to their home. I am proud to report that FY-08 to FY-09 DHS has significantly reduced its reliance on out of state placements for dependent youth by 49%. We have been able to do this with increased collaboration with our system partners, private providers, Community Behavioral Health and Family Court.

DHS values collaborative efforts with other City Departments and has worked diligently with Family Court to improve permanency outcomes for children. In 2008, we increased our adoption finalizations by 12%; this is our first increase since 2004. We also increased the number of permanent legal custodianships by 11.9% in 2008; our first increase since 2005. We are on track to exceed this progress in the coming year.

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Philadelphia's most challenging area of placement reduction in line with NGA goals is reducing the number of children in delinquent placement. We have seen a 10% increase in the number of delinquent youth placed. Judge Dougherty and I are committed to making this a priority in the coming year.

With the support of DPW and NGA, the Philadelphia Initiative intends to improve its efforts to safely reduce its reliance on placement, to provide a continuum of in-home services designed to ensure child safety and preserve family unity, and to increase its permanency outcomes for children who ultimately come into care. Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to share Philadelphia's experience with such a worthwhile initiative. I would be happy to take any questions that you may have at this time or to provide you with my contact information for further discussion.