

House Committee on Children and Youth

Testimony

Permanency Practice Initiative

Thursday, August 27,, 2009

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I want to thank the members of the committee for giving us the opportunity to express our appreciation for your support of our continuing efforts to protect children and strengthen families. The testimony you are hearing underscores the vital collaborative role we all play in improving outcomes for children and highlights a current atmosphere of both incredible challenges and exciting opportunities. It is with sincere humility that I add my comments to those of my colleagues who have so eloquently preceded me today.

On a good day, child welfare work is an emotionally-charged, difficult and tiring world. Workers are routinely confronted with complicated, frustrating, heart-wrenching and often frightening situations and expected to offer solutions that quickly resolve all issues. In my thirty-six years in human services, I have not observed a more sincere group of dedicated professionals eager to embrace positive change. Part of my job as an administrator is to make sure my staff has the training and tools necessary to perform at a high level. The Permanency Practice Initiative provides an innovative array of services that give workers the opportunity to relate to families in a creative and respectful manner that improves the lives of their children.

Please let me share an experience with a Chester County case that I believe clearly illustrates an improved outcome for children as a direct result of the tools provided through the Permanency Practice Initiative.

The parents of a two year old girl were sent to prison for a crime they committed together. The young child went to live with a nineteen year old step-sister. While in prison, the mother gave birth to the couple's second child. The infant girl was also taken home from the hospital by the young step-sister. Over time, the young woman became overwhelmed with the responsibility and financial costs of raising two young children and they came to the attention of the Chester County Department of Children, Youth and Families and were placed in a foster care home with a family they did not know. The little girls were two and four years of age at the time.

The girl's step-sister visited them in their new foster home but expressed concern about her ability to resume the responsibility for their care in the future. Our department began using the techniques of "Family Finding", a PPI program designed to locate family resources for children, when the girls had been in placement less than six months. While no relatives on their father's side of the family were willing to participate, there was a small group of the step-sister's relatives and a large group of her friends that were willing to rally support for her. Both parents were contacted in prison and were supportive of the plan for the girls to return to the care of their young step-sister.

The agency arranged a "Family Group Decision-Making" conference, another PPI program technique, which included both parents from prison by video conference or speaker phone and many friends of the step-sister. Present at the meeting was a family that had been particularly supportive of the young woman and the little girls. They had lost contact with the girls when they were placed in foster care but immediately recommitted themselves to do whatever they could do to support the step-sister in raising the girls when they were contacted through Family Finding. The little girls were returned to their step-sister shortly before the family group conference. The conference produced a wonderful plan, with many of the participants pledging to take the children for short visits each week so the young woman could have some time to herself. The step-sister recognized that she did not have the total burden of care for these young children and felt much supported in the process.

The training resources and support that have been made available to us through the Permanency Practice Initiative have given us a better way to provide improved outcomes for children, as I believe this example shows. Just as importantly, these programs allow us to embrace the philosophy that extended families are perfectly capable of re-connecting with one another and developing plans that keep children safe and do so in a manner that offers the families a dignified and respected relationship with the child welfare system. These are exciting programs. They reflect who we want to be as child welfare workers. They signal a new partnership between child-serving professionals, families, state and county governments and the courts.