

House Committee on Children and Youth

Testimony

Permanency Practice Initiative

Dauphin County Commissioner George Hartwick III

August 27, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairman, committee members and esteemed guests. I am honored to be testifying before you today about the dramatic success we have had with our Permanency Practice Initiative and the unique county-court partnership we have cultivated in Dauphin County. Our success is measured in not only statistics, and not merely in terms of dollars and cents, but in lives saved, and lives improved.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak about an initiative that I have been passionate about since my election as a Dauphin County Commissioner six years ago, and since I was given oversight of Human Services in a county serving 256,000 residents.

The essence of my remarks boils down to this: we have developed and nurtured an unheard-of and overwhelmingly positive relationship with the courts in Dauphin County. This positive partnership has enabled us to work for and with families in crisis to heal them from within, and to heal them permanently. Instead of viewing the courts as an adversary or a remote authoritarian figure, we view them as an ally and a partner. This view is evident in our Family Group Conferencing success, a practice in which we have families generating their own solutions to the issues tearing them apart, instead of dictating to them from above. We know that the more hearts, hands and eyes involved in the raising of a child or the care of someone in need, the better.

Becoming a PPI Phase One County was a natural progression for us, and a perfect fit. I am proud to say that my staff, since 2004, has exhibited extraordinary leadership in the implementation of Family Group Conferencing, the foundation of the PPI initiative. In fact, we have hosted an international convention on the practice and have trained many other counties in the practice.

The Court Improvement Project or PPI tied directly into both the family engagement practices we have implemented as well as the outcomes we are striving toward:

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- Reducing out-of-home placements
- Reducing the use of Residential Treatment Facilities
- Increasing the number of children returned home within 12 months of removal
- Decreasing the number of placement settings a child has while in care

The additional family engagement practices incorporated into the PPI (Family Finding and Family Development Credentialing) would further support the county's efforts in this area and expand this type of practice to the provider community as well. This expansion would allow for consistent family engagement practices for the benefit of Dauphin County consumers.

As part of this initiative, Dauphin County would receive the support of both the AOPC and OCYF. As such we would receive both information and education, as well as financial support.

The Court Improvement Project or PPI initiative also correlated directly with and supported Dauphin County's Integrated Human Services Plan, the vehicle that is driving our practice in the county. Again, the same family engagement practices and the same outcomes are a focus of the IHSP. Because of this, the PPI initiative would not be seen as just another initiative. It would dovetail directly with efforts already in place in the county and support those efforts.

The PPI initiative supports the philosophical and fiscal vision of Dauphin County.

It was the first such project to address both Dependency Court issues and Child Welfare Practice in the same initiative.

The PPI initiative would focus on the federal CFSR goals and support a collaborative approach with the Courts through the Round Table structure.

This initiative has brought about remarkable success in our capital county. The proof is in the numbers:

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- Sixteen out of nineteen permanency outcomes have improved in Dauphin County.
- Caseworker sensitivity to timeliness has greatly improved.
- The numbers of foster care children in the system has decreased 14%.
- New foster care admissions have decreased 37.1%.
- Three-month permanency reviews have reduced the length of placement for children ages newborn to 5.
- Dauphin County has received additional training as a result of the initiative:
 - Family Finding
 - Family Development Credentialing
 - 3-5-7 Model (to address loss and grief issues)
 - Family Group Conferencing
- Dauphin County received the Accurint System (family-finding) by being a part of the PPI. This tool will be invaluable in helping to locate family members for our youth. **Family Finding and the Accurint System**

As counties move forward in child welfare practice through the Permanency Practices Initiative, a core component of that initiative is Family Finding. The Family Finding Model was developed by Kevin Campbell and looks at systemic changes that support child safety, permanence and well being. Lifelong connections are seen as critical for children and the goal of Family Finding is to ensure that every child is given the opportunity to develop such connections. Core beliefs of this model are:

- Every child has a family
- Loneliness can be devastating and particularly felt by foster children
- Meaningful connections to family help a child develop a sense of belonging

- The single most identified factor contributing to positive outcomes for children involves meaningful connections and lifelong relationships with family

Family Finding is an intensive search for a child's relatives. It combines common sense, social work, detective work and technology. It begins with a review of case files for names of relatives and contacts. Then specially crafted internet searches are completed in an effort to locate these individuals. Many of the search techniques have been based on those used by the Red Cross following disasters to reunite families.

There are six stages in the Family Finding process:

- Locating family members
- Engaging the family members found
- Making decisions that will lead to the support and well being of the youth in his/her future
- Evaluation of the team's plan for the care for the youth in question
- Linking of family to natural and informal supports that can be accessed as needed

As previously stated, technology is also a key component to locating family members. Counties who are a part of the Permanency Practices Initiative have access to the Accurant system to help in family searches. Accurant is a computer software tool that enables counties to locate family members through electronic access to a comprehensive catalog of public records information. These records enable counties to locate family members and move into the Family Finding process.

- The initiative helped the county put into place the tools and training that would build upon previous efforts and further promote youth and family engagement in case planning.

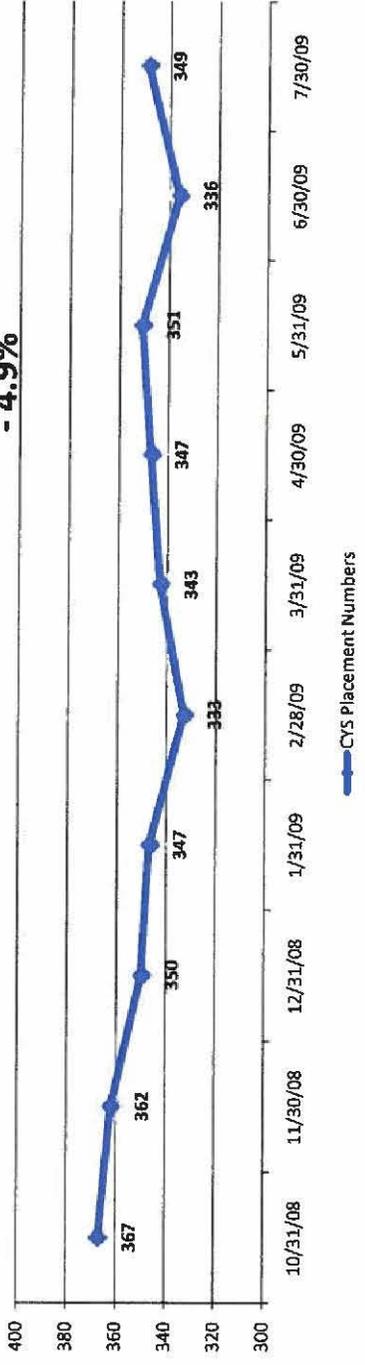
I am happy to outline our successes to you, and would be happy to answer any questions you may have. While the statistics and social-science-speak may make this issue seem cold and impersonal, it is, in the end, a story that transforms the lives of children facing abuse, families struggling to overcome addictions, children pulled from their birth homes, and more.

Thank you for your work on behalf of this important initiative, and these important people. I am eager to expand our county-court partnership to include our leaders in the Commonwealth.

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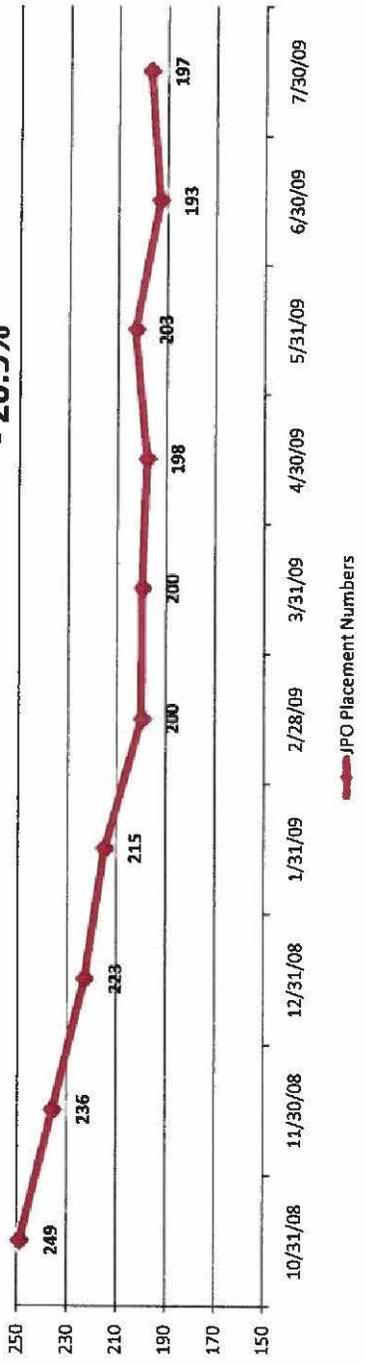
NGA County Initiative - CYS

Total Reduction in Placement since beginning of Initiative:
- 4.9%



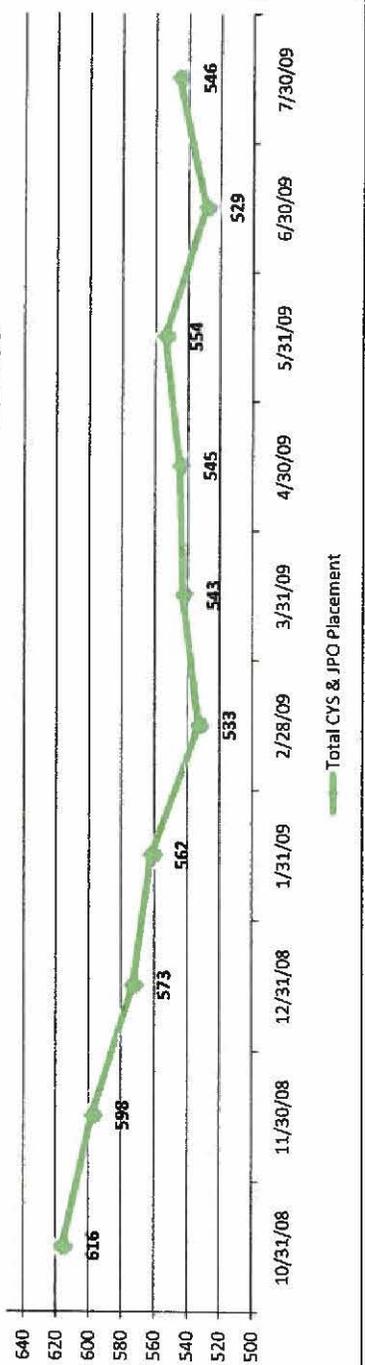
NGA County Initiative - JPO

Total Reduction in Placement since beginning of Initiative:
- 20.9%



NGA - Total CYS & JPO Placements

Total Reduction in Placement since beginning of Initiative:
- 11.4%



Dauphin County - Age 0-5 Placement Population

