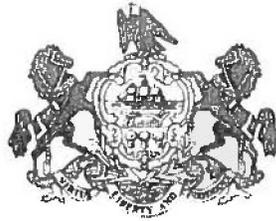


DAN MOUL, MEMBER
91st LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

PO BOX 202091
G-32 IRVIS OFFICE BUILDING
HARRISBURG, PA 17120-2091
717-783-5217

30 WEST MIDDLE STREET
GETTYSBURG, PA 17325
717-334-3010
TOLL-FREE: 1-866-646-4915

WWW.REPMOUL.COM



House of Representatives
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Harrisburg

September 13, 2012
Representative Dan Moul
House Children and Youth Committee
Testimony on House Bills 2499 and 2500

COMMITTEES

CHILDREN & YOUTH
VICE CHAIRMAN
GAME & FISHERIES
AGRICULTURE & RURAL AFFAIRS
TOURISM & RECREATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT, SUBCOMMITTEE
ON TRAVEL PROMOTION

Chairman Harper, Minority Chairman Bishop, fellow committee members, thank you for the opportunity to hold this hearing and discuss House Bills 2499 and 2500 today.

As you may know, I have a great interest in the issues that affect children, and I am probably one of the few members to repeatedly request assignment to the Children and Youth Committee. Unfortunately, the plight of our most vulnerable Pennsylvanians, the boys and girls who find themselves involved with the Commonwealth's child welfare system, is often overlooked by the General Assembly. I have introduced the bills we will be discussing today as part of a larger package of child welfare reforms I introduced with some of my colleagues on the committee: Chairman Harper and Representatives Rosemary Brown and Tarah Toohil.

House Bills 2499 and 2500 are intended to increase the level of family engagement in the planning, service delivery and placement for children and families who are receiving child welfare services. I recognize that effective family engagement practices require sustained effort on behalf of county Children and Youth Agencies, many of whom are already struggling to manage difficult case loads. However, I firmly believe that, if certain practices are properly implemented, we can build networks of support around the children and families who become involved with the child welfare system. These networks of support not only have the potential to create better, more stable outcomes for children, but they also can help taxpayers avoid bearing the burden of costly, long-term placements for some children.

Before I discuss the bills, I would also like to note that Act 80 of 2012, which was enacted after I introduced this legislation, made an important step forward for at-risk children by requiring that relatives within the fifth degree of consanguinity (blood) or affinity (marriage) be notified within 30 days of the removal of a child from the home. As a result of this new law, I am aware that some minor corrections may be necessary for my legislation comport with the provisions of Act 80. Likewise, I appreciate the feedback of the stakeholders participating in this hearing, and I look forward to working with stakeholders and the members of the committee to refine House Bills 2499 and 2500 as the legislative process moves forward.

House Bill 2499 – Family Finding

As you may know, family finding is a child welfare practice that involves ongoing diligent efforts to locate family members (broadly defined as relatives and kin) and engage them in the planning, service delivery and, potentially, the placement of the child. This practice allows child welfare agencies to identify those individuals in a child's life who can step in to form the support network for the child and the family. Although a robust support network will benefit families receiving services in the home, the development of this network is particularly important for children who may need to be removed from their homes.

My bill will require that counties engage in family finding for a child, when a child is accepted for services by the county Children and Youth Agency. Family finding will be conducted at least annually, and can be discontinued only if the child's involvement with the agency is terminated, family finding no longer serves the best interests of the child, or family finding poses a safety threat to the child.

The bill also contains a requirement that counties notify relatives within the fifth degree of affinity or consanguinity within 30 days when a child has been accepted for services. As I noted, a similar requirement was enacted as part of Act 80, so this provision may now be unnecessary.

House Bill 2500 – Family Conferencing

Family conferencing is a child welfare practice where the county Children and Youth Agency facilitates a meeting where a family – including relatives and kin – develops the safety plan for a child. In other words, family conferencing puts the key members of the family's support network around the table to decide how they will work together to meet the needs of the child.

My bill would require counties, within five years, to offer the opportunity for family conferencing to all families receiving services from county Children and Youth Agencies. The Department of Public Welfare would phase-in family conferencing over the five years, so that counties are prepared to comply. Family conferencing would be offered at least annually and at key decision points for the child and the family.

The county agency will be responsible for preparing the family for the conference and helping them to identify resources that are available to assist with addressing the safety concerns for the child. At the conference, the family will have the opportunity to develop a safety plan on their own terms, but with the guidance of the county Children and Youth Agency. The agency or a court must approve the safety plan to assure that it attempts to address the concerns for the child. The county agency will then assist the family with the implementation of the plan.

This practice makes families responsible for correcting the problems that caused a child to become involved with a Children and Youth Agency, and it gives the individual family members a sense of buy-in and responsibility for the child's continued well-being.

I know that it may be hard work for some counties to sustain a long-term commitment to effective family engagement processes, but it is work that must be done. Our child welfare system exists to protect children and preserve families, and the right ways to do these things are not always the easy ways. When a child must be removed from his or her home, it can be a very traumatic experience. Therefore, it is vital that government do everything in its power to engage the extended family and kin and involve them in meeting the needs of the child, before we place a child with strangers or in an institution. In situations that may not necessitate the removal of the child, government should be working to build family support networks around the child and his immediate family, so that they can begin to meet the child's needs.

My legislation is intended to put these ideas into statute, and I would ask for the committee's support and consideration. I would now be happy to answer any questions about the legislation, but I will remind the committee that the next two groups of presenters are child welfare professionals, who will be discussing the practice of family finding and family conferencing in much greater detail.

Thank you for this opportunity.

