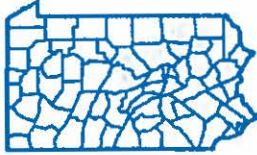


# Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators, Inc.



*PO Box 60769 - Harrisburg, PA 17106-0769  
(717) 526-1010 - Fax (717) 526-1020*



## **TESTIMONY REGARDING WORKFORCE RETENTION IN CHILD WELFARE**

**PRESENTED TO THE HOUSE  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH COMMITTEE**

**BY**

**BRIAN BORNMAN, ESQ.  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

My name is Brian Bornman. I am the Executive Director for the PA Children and Youth Administrators Association, an affiliate of the County Commissioners Association. Our association consists of all 67 counties. I have worked in the field of social work since 1988 in various roles, including those of child therapist, a child welfare caseworker, and legal counsel for a county child welfare agency. I thank you for the opportunity to testify before this body and appreciate the efforts being made here to address the critical issue of retention within the field of child welfare.

For many years, retention of staff, particularly caseworkers, has been problematic. This is the case throughout the nation. The problems facing Pennsylvania have been exacerbated in recent years due to a number of factors which I will address later. I have had the opportunity to discuss the issue of retention with many administrators and there is largely a consensus that the child welfare system is at a crisis point. Caseworkers are overwhelmed and morale is at an all-time low.

I want to paint a brief picture for you, one that is all too common. Imagine that you are 25 years old, right out of college, and full of energy and hope about changing the lives of children. You are trained and given your cases. You are doing your very best to meet with your families, determine what their needs are, and helping them connect with the services they need to strengthen their families. One day during a visit, one of the children, a five year old, has a bruise on their eye. You ask the parent about it, and they say that he ran into the corner of the breakfast bar while chasing his brother. The child doesn't say anything about where the bruise came from. You mention it to your supervisor and even discuss it with the agency solicitor who indicates that there are insufficient grounds to take any steps to remove the child. The next day, you are called from the local hospital and told that the child was brought to the emergency room overnight and was now in a coma due to a subdural hematoma. The parents are arrested and the media headline in the next day's paper reads "Child in coma, caseworker sees bruise and does nothing". The agency records are pored over with a fine toothed comb and they are put on a provisional license. A civil suit is filed naming you as a defendant and asking for \$10 million in damages. You are suspended without pay pending an investigation and your supervisor is put on administrative leave pending

investigation. The District Attorney mentions to the media that they are consider charging you criminally. Within a very short period of time, your career has taken a turn for the worst. Even if the suit is dismissed, the internal investigation determines that you did nothing wrong, and no criminal charges are filed, you can imagine the impact this has not only on you but on all those around you that have observed this.

There is always discussion about improving "the system". Laws are passed, advocacy groups push agendas, and many people play Monday morning quarterback regarding how things should have been handled. The reality is that the "system" is a group of people. It is administrators who have spent their entire working lives trying to protect children and work with the budgets they are given, it is young people right out of college who want to give back to society, it is lawyers who forego promising careers in the private sector to fight for what they believe in, it is fiscal officers who try to navigate the intricacies of a child welfare budget, it is DHS staff who bring their experience and skills to the state instead of private industry, and it is county commissioners who go to great lengths to make sure that children in counties are protected, even when state funds are not forthcoming. Despite this variety, there are several universal truths about the "system" in my experience. The reality is that nearly everyone in the system could make more money doing something else, certainly sleep better at night and have less stress doing something else, and their family lives may well improve. That being said, it is a long-standing joke in the field of child welfare that getting out of the mob; you may try, but it always pulls you back in. For many of the child welfare professionals, they simply can't fathom doing anything else.

So what are the challenges facing child welfare in PA right now? I would submit to you that caseload ratios, unrealistic demands, and inadequate funding are the top three.

First, the changes to the child protective services act that went into effect at the beginning of 2015 dramatically increased the number of referrals that are coming to the county child welfare agencies. Most counties have seen a 35-50% increase in the number of investigations they must complete, with some counties seeing sustained increases over 2014 investigations of over 100% for 2015. When these laws came out, there was no way to know exactly what additional staffing resources would be needed to accommodate the increase in referrals and investigations. DHS could not in good faith approve requests for staff increases based on arbitrary guesses of what the increase would be. The result has been that intake units across the state are largely overwhelmed and I have seen caseworkers carrying upwards of 50-75 cases. The well-being type units in the counties that benefitted families with increased visitation, better parenting training, and other non-safety specific services have had their staff moved to intake units to try and absorb the increases in investigations. While there is more than adequate documentation now to document the need for increased staffing, those staff will not be included in the needs based budget until July 2016, having been requested and documented in the budget submitted August of 2015.

In addition, numerous laws outside the CPSL changes have gone into effect in recent years increasing demands on caseworkers such as the Fostering Connections Act, Preventing Sex trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, and the recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act. Despite this, there has not been a change to the regulations regarding what is a permissible caseload ratio is since 1987. Currently, CCAP is working with the Penn State Network on Child Protection and Well-Being to have a time study completed to better ascertain what an appropriate level of cases can be carried by a caseworker with the goal to have it completed by the end of the



year.

Of particular frustration to many caseworkers is the Child Welfare Information Solution (CWIS). This is the data system that captures the referrals to ChildLine and forwards them to the counties for investigation. As with any new system, there have been substantial challenges in implementation which has resulted in frustration among workers as they now have to contend with an additional layer of technology and time to input data that used to take mere minutes to document with the old form. Caseworkers are now spending anywhere from twenty minutes to several hours per referral inputting data into CWIS. The reasons for this vary from CWIS issues, issues with the county case management systems, and simple user error or lack of familiarity with the system, but the end result has been that caseworkers feel more overwhelmed. The core of the frustration, in my opinion, is that caseworkers went into this work because they want to work with families and then realize that they spend the vast majority of their time completing paperwork and doing data entry while spending very little time actually working with their families, as well as a frustration that they are spending large amounts of time documenting and comparatively little time actually assessing the safety of children because the documentation is the most immediately pressing item.

Many of the new laws and initiatives focus on child well-being. There have been initiatives to address overuse of psychotropic medication, more focus on locating family and building connections for youth in care, more family involvement through family group decision making, more focus on assuring that kids in care have opportunities to develop skills that will prepare them for adulthood and allow them to participate in extracurricular activities, more awareness of the risks of being trafficked for sexual exploitation, and more focus on educational stability. Kids now have the opportunity to return to care after they leave upon reaching 18 years of age and realizing that they still need the additional support. Nearly everyone within the system agrees with these goals, but every new initiative, regardless of how laudable the goal, comes at a cost of time and resources. Caseworkers who now have to go to doctor appointments to discuss the prescribing of psychotropic medications with doctors so they can explain why they are prescribed in court have less time to do other things. Increased family groups taking several hours each now means that the caseworker has less time to do something else. Preparing a more comprehensive court report to address all these initiatives takes time and means less time to do other things.

The new data system, increases in cases, and additional demands from all sides have all created a system where caseworkers are so overwhelmed that they have only two options. They can either spend all their time working to try and get everything done, to the detriment of their own families and health or they make choices about what is most important and the other responsibilities simply get pushed down the road. Unfortunately, the things that are most pressing due to the immediacy of the data system are some of the least important for this field. While we all recognize the need for having data regarding how many referrals were made and how many were determined to be legitimate, this should be secondary to assuring that children are safe. The safety and protection of children in PA should always remain at the forefront of what we do. It would truly be a tragedy if a child is hurt because a caseworker feels the need to rush through an assessment because they need to go back to the office and input data or write a court report.

These increased demands have created a situation in which the overload of cases has been going to the most seasoned caseworkers out of necessity; however, those workers then get burned out and move on to other jobs with less pressure and frustration. This has resulted in newer caseworkers

having more difficult and larger caseloads and many of them burn out quickly. As a result, many county agencies get trapped in a perpetual start-up cycle where all they are doing is constantly trying to fill vacancies and get staff trained. I have recently been to a county which only had 2/3 of their caseload carrying caseworkers filled. Another had half of their caseload carrying caseworkers leave within a two week time period. These type of vacancies are unsustainable and it should be little surprise that the quality of the work suffers. Nearly all administrators agree that you need a caseworker on the job for around 2 years before they are able to really do effective casework. It is crucial to keep and retain qualified staff.

All of this leads to my main point. Caseworkers need to be given caseload sizes that are realistic given the demands put on them in Pennsylvania. This must be based on a realistic assessment of what is asked of them and what can actually be accomplished in the time they have available. There must be a realization that caseworkers are child welfare professionals and not doctors, lawyers, or school superintendents. The demands put on them have to be realistic. While it is important to assure a child has the right educational opportunities, none of their medications have negative interactions, and their distant relative is consulted as a possible placement, there may be a need for those services to be provided by someone other than a caseworker. Someone with a higher level of expertise in those areas.

Lastly, one of the challenges within the field right now is funding. While I realize you always hear the refrain that there isn't enough money, that is not necessarily the issue I want to discuss as this hearing is about retention and workforce issues. The funding issue I want to raise is much more connected to retention. Whenever bills are passed that put additional demands on staffing, there needs to be a means to fund it. Rather than legislation always coming out with an effective in 60 days provision, I believe there needs to be language that times roll outs with the timetable that will allow it to be successfully effectuated in the Needs Based Budget Process. There should be more use of pilots in order to ascertain what the impact will be before mass implementation. If legislation needs to be immediately effective, there needs to be a supplemental appropriation in order to give effect to the increased demands. By doing this, we would be able to more purposefully and effectively implement the various initiatives that serve our children. Ultimately, no one wants to see the efforts to improve child welfare having a detrimental effect on the children of the Commonwealth because there was no means to increase staff to actually implement the changes.

These staffing difficulties were exacerbated by the budget impasse because no one wanted to fill new or vacant positions without knowing when the funds would be forthcoming. As a result, there was additional burden put on the individual caseworkers. I would ask that there be steps taken to assure that funding for child welfare, and all human services, continue to flow if there is another impasse.

I previously provided retention data that PCYA collected for nearly every county. Please note that this is point in time data and may not be representative of long-term trends within the counties. There are some things that may result in a mass exodus from an agency that is not their norm, such as the opening of a benefits processing center in the county.

Lastly, I want to thank this body for holding this hearing to address this important issue. I believe that with more planful implementation of initiatives and legislation, there can be fewer shocks to the workforce in the field and result in better practice and less turnover. I want to thank OCYF who

has been an exceptional partner in working with the counties on implementing the many changes to the laws effecting Child Welfare and I know they are interested in the results of the time study for caseload ratios as well. Cathy and her staff have been wonderful to work with and are readily available to discuss issues as they come up. While there is a distinct struggle within the system right now and a high degree of frustration, there is also a tremendous opportunity to improve the practice by establishing processes that will assure that the caseworkers doing this important work are not overburdened with crushing caseloads and unrealistic expectations. I have personally witnessed the tremendous lengths caseworkers will go to help the families they serve, but they have to be given the time and resources to do so.

Thank you.



Brian C. Bornman, Esq.

PCYA Executive Director

[bbornman@pacounties.org](mailto:bbornman@pacounties.org)