

Testimony

House Children and Youth Committee

Public Hearing on Children and Youth Services Reform

Dauphin County Commissioner George P. Hartwick, III

April 4, 2016

**GOOD MORNING REPRESENTATIVES WATSON, CONKLIN AND
OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE CHILDREN AND YOUTH COMMITTEE.
MY NAME IS GEORGE HARTWICK AND I AM A DAUPHIN COUNTY
COMMISSIONER, OVERSEEING THE COUNTY'S HUMAN SERVICES
DEPARTMENT. I ALSO SERVE AS CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNTY
COMMISSIONERS ASSOCIATION OF PA'S (CCAP) HUMAN SERVICES
COMMITTEE AND ON THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES (NACo).**

**THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK TODAY ON THE
CHALLENGES FACING OUR CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES SYSTEM.
THIS IS AN ISSUE OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE THAT DIRECTLY IMPACTS
THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN THROUGHOUT OUR COMMONWEALTH.**

IT IS NO EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT BEING A CHILDREN AND YOUTH CASEWORKER IS ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING AND AT TIMES HEARTBREAKING JOBS IN ALL HUMAN SERVICES. OUR CASEWORKERS SEE THE VERY WORST IN HUMAN BEHAVIOR, AND IT IS ESPECIALLY HARD WHEN THE VICTIMS ARE YOUNG CHILDREN.

AS A RESULT OF HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF CHILD ABUSE CAUSED BY THE JERRY SANDUSKY CASE AND THE MORE THAN 23 NEW CHILD PROTECTIVE LAWS THAT WENT INTO EFFECT OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, DAUPHIN COUNTY CHILDREN & YOUTH HAS SEEN A 128 PERCENT INCREASE IN CASE REFERRALS.

IN DAUPHIN COUNTY AND ACROSS THE COMMONWEALTH, CHILDREN & YOUTH CASEWORKERS ARE COMMITTED TO PROTECTING THE CHILDREN IN OUR COMMUNITIES. BUT THESE DEDICATED WORKERS NEED THE LEGISLATURE'S SUPPORT.

IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT THE STATE PROVIDE THE RESOURCES
NEEDED TO ENSURE WE HAVE ENOUGH CASEWORKERS TO HANDLE
THE INCREASED WORKLOAD AND THAT THESE CASEWORKERS, MANY
WHO HAVE ADVANCED DEGREES, ARE BEING PROPERLY
COMPENSATED. WE MUST ALSO ENSURE THEY HAVE THE EQUIPMENT
THEY NEED AND ARE NOT BEING UNDULY BURDENED BY REGULATIONS
OR PAPERWORK.

WHEN CONSIDERING LEGISLATIVE CHANGES, I WOULD
ENCOURAGE YOU TO CONTINUE TO CONTACT THOSE ON THE FRONT
LINES TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT IT WILL HAVE ON THE DAILY
WORK OF OUR CASEWORKERS.

WE NEED TO ENSURE BETTER COORDINATION AND
COOPERATION AT ALL LEVELS BEFORE IMPLEMENTING NEW LAWS
THAT IMPACT THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM.

ENACTMENT AND EFFECTIVE DATES THAT FAIL TO CONSIDER THE TIMING OF THE NEEDS BASED PLAN AND BUDGET PUT COUNTIES IN A TOUGH SPOT, WITH THE POTENTIAL FOR COSTS DRIVEN BY CHANGES IMPLEMENTED NOW THAT ARE NOT CAPTURED IN THE BUDGET UNTIL SOME TIME IN THE FUTURE.

PERHAPS IMPLEMENTATION IN PILOT COUNTIES WITH A TIME TO ANALYZE IMPACT WOULD MAKE SENSE, OR TIMING EFFECTIVE DATES TO THE BUDGET PROCESS COULD BE THE STANDARD THE LEGISLATURE AGREES TO FOLLOW FOR THE FUTURE.

IN EXIT INTERVIEWS, CASEWORKERS OFTEN REPORT FRUSTRATION WITH THE REQUIREMENTS TO FILL OUT LENGTHY AND OFTEN DUPLICATIVE PAPERWORK AS WELL AS CONCERNS REGARDING THE LACK OF CLARITY WITH RESPECT TO REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS. THEY NOTE THAT THE TIME SPENT CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS AND COMPLETING PAPERWORK DETRACTS FROM THEIR ABILITY TO SERVE THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN THEIR COMMUNITY.

ANOTHER OBSTACLE ENCOUNTERED BY COUNTY CHILDREN AND YOUTH AGENCIES IS PROVIDING QUALITY TRAINING TO STAFF TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE COMPETENT.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT WHEN THERE ARE MULTIPLE LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY CHANGES THAT BECOME EFFECTIVE IN A SHORT TIME FRAME. WITHOUT PROPER TRAINING, CASEWORKERS CANNOT CONFIDENTLY PROCEED AND MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS.

PENNSYLVANIA LAW RESTRICTS THE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF CASES TO 30 PER CASEWORKER AT ANY GIVEN TIME, AND IT IS NOT UNUSUAL FOR AN EXPERIENCED WORKER TO HAVE 25 TO 30 CASES.

THERE ARE OTHER FACTORS THAT HAVE AN IMPACT ON STAFFING AND RETENTION THAT MIGHT NOT BE SO OBVIOUS.

FOR INSTANCE, THE SIX MONTH DELAY IN PROVIDING COUNTIES WITH FUNDS FOR ALL HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMS LED TO THE IMPOSITION OF HIRING FREEZES IN SOME COUNTIES AS CASH FLOW ISSUES ESCALATED.

WE MUST ASSURE THAT COUNTIES ARE NEVER AGAIN PUT INTO A POSITION OF FUNDING THE COMMONWEALTH'S OBLIGATIONS AS THEY WERE IN 2015.

ADDITIONALLY, THE UNCERTAINTY CREATED FOR COUNTIES BY THE USE OF REBALANCING – MOVING THE FUNDING TO COVER THE FOURTH QUARTER CHILD WELFARE PAYMENT DUE TO COUNTIES TO THE NEXT FISCAL YEAR – CREATES MAJOR CONCERNS. THE RECENT VETO OF THE FISCAL CODE BILL ADDS TO THAT ANXIETY, AS IT CONTAINED LANGUAGE TO AUTHORIZE THE PAYMENTS IN THE EVENT OF A FUTURE BUDGET IMPASSE. COUNTIES VERY MUCH NEED THAT ASSURANCE IN WHAT EVER NEXT VERSION OF A FISCAL CODE IS CONSIDERED.

FINALLY, LACK OF FLEXIBILITY WITHIN THE PAYMENT SYSTEM FOR CHILD WELFARE SERVICES LEADS TO INNEFICIENCIES THAT CAN RESULT IN DIFFICULTIES WITH FILLING OPEN POSITIONS.

AS BRIAN INDICATED, WE ARE PURSUING A TIME STUDY THAT WILL HELP SIGNIFICANTLY IN DETERMINING THE RIGHT LEVEL OF STAFF RESOURCES NEEDED AT THE COUNTY LEVEL GIVEN THE NUMEROUS CHANGES IN LAWS AND REGULATION THAT IMPACT THE ACTUAL ACTIVITIES OF OUR COUNTY STAFF.

THE STATE CIVIL SERVICE SYSTEM REMAINS PROBLEMATIC, AND FAILS TO ASSURE THAT THE MOST CAPABLE CANDIDATES ARE AVAILABLE TO WORK IN THESE CRITICAL POSITIONS.

KEEP IN MIND, THE FAMILIES WE SEE ARE DEALING WITH MULTIPLE CHALLENGES, RANGING FROM JOBLESSNESS TO MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION ISSUES. FOR THIS REASON, ANYTHING WE CAN DO TO LOWER THE CASELOADS AS WELL AS MAKE SURE NEEDED SERVICES ARE READILY AVAILABLE IS CRITICAL TO THE WELLBEING OF THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES WE SERVE.

IN A SYSTEM THAT IS ALREADY HARD-PRESSED FOR RESOURCES,
BUDGETARY CHALLENGES INTRODUCE AN ADDED LEVEL OF
UNCERTAINTY THAT PUTS NEEDLESS STRESS ON ALL THE HUMAN
SERVICES PROVIDED BY COUNTIES THROUGHOUT PENNSYLVANIA.

AS THE FATHER OF FOUR CHILDREN, I TAKE OUR ABILITY TO HELP
FAMILIES IN OUR COMMUNITY PERSONALLY. I HAVE WORKED
ALONGSIDE DAUPHIN COUNTY'S CASEWORKERS TO SEE FIRST-HAND
THE SOMETIMES UNIMAGINABLE SITUATIONS THEY ENCOUNTER.

EARLIER, I ENCOURAGED ALL OF YOU TO CONTACT THOSE ON THE
FRONT LINES AS YOU CONSIDER FUTURE LEGISLATION AND FUNDING.

I WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND A PERSONAL INVITATION TO VISIT
DAUPHIN COUNTY'S CHILDREN & YOUTH AGENCY AND SEE THE
CHALLENGES FACED BY OUR CASEWORKERS.

RIDE ALONG WITH OUR CASEWORKERS AS THEY VISIT FAMILIES.
SEE FIRST-HAND THE DIFFICULTIES WE FACE IN MEETING OUR TWIN

GOALS OF DOING ALL WE CAN TO KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER WHILE
ENSURING THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN IS NEVER COMPROMISED.

THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME THIS OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK
ABOUT THE ISSUES FACING CHILDREN AND YOUTH AND I WELCOME
ANY QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE.

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