

Written Testimony on Children and Youth Services Reform

Kimberly Duffy

House Children and Youth Committee

April 1, 2016

First I would like to thank the members of the House Children and Youth Committee for focusing on the plight of the frontline caseworkers in our child welfare system. These individuals are critical to the success of their organizations and struggle daily to ensure the safety of the children of Pennsylvania. By way of introduction, my name is Kimberly Duffy and I have devoted all eighteen years of my career in the area of child welfare and, more specifically, child abuse investigations. I worked for ten years at Adams County Children and Youth Services conducting child abuse investigations and supervising child abuse investigations. In my time with children and youth, I had the distinct pleasure of helping to establish the Adams County Children's Advocacy Center and eventually accepted the position of forensic interviewer with the center. I remained there for six years and during that time I also worked at the state level helping to develop multidisciplinary investigative teams and children's advocacy centers across the state. I am currently employed with the York County Children's Advocacy Center as a forensic interviewer and training coordinator. My career has also afforded me the opportunity to train as faculty for ChildFirst PA and as a contracted trainer for the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance.

In my role with the York County Children's Advocacy Center, I work on a daily basis with the county caseworkers and I hear their frustrations and struggles as they try to do a job which can be incredibly overwhelming at times. The concerns that they express to me are in many ways similar to the concerns I experienced as a caseworker many years ago. They feel inadequately trained to meet all of the complex needs of the families on their caseloads. Due to the staff shortages, caseworkers have extremely high caseloads and do not feel that they can devote the appropriate amount of time to each family that is needed to really assess what is happening in the home and provide adequate services to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being for the children in the home. Paperwork consumes a large amount of their day and many caseworkers feel that time with children and families is sacrificed in order to complete all of the required paperwork for their cases.

While most caseworkers will tell you that they love their jobs and feel a strong desire to protect children and help to empower parents to succeed, the emotional toll that the job takes on them eventually begins to compromise their personal well-being and, for some, their own family life. The majority of caseworkers work well beyond forty hours a week every week. I have heard countless stories of caseworkers putting the needs of their own children and families second to conducting home visits and responding to reports that are received late in the day. It is daily practice for caseworkers to be visiting families in their homes late into the evening hours. While all of us experience times when work commitments take precedence over family responsibilities, when that becomes the culture of the work place and caseworkers realize that this is their "normal", many begin to evaluate their employment options.

The most humbling reality of this job is the death of a child. During my time as a casework supervisor, I kept a folder of every child death that occurred in my county regardless of whether or not that family had involvement with children and youth. No one wants a child to die and if you work for children and youth you certainly don't want a child to die on your watch. Pennsylvania has had to learn many hard lessons at the expense of our children. From Jerry Sandusky to Jarrod Tutko, the flaws in our system are glaringly obvious.

We need to strengthen our multidisciplinary investigative teams. This consists of children and youth, law enforcement, district attorneys, and medical providers. The Child Protective Services Law requires each county to have an investigative protocol that directs how the multidisciplinary

investigative teams conduct joint child abuse investigations. When teams learn how to conduct strong joint investigations from the beginning, children are protected, families are preserved, and offenders are held accountable. One of the primary lessons learned from the investigations into Jerry Sandusky's victimization of young boys was the lack of coordination between law enforcement and child protective services. We cannot continue to repeat the mistakes of the past and allow the safety of our children to hang in the balance.

The death of nine year old Jarrod Tutko who only weighed 17 pounds and was locked in an upstairs bedroom with no furniture and feces smeared on the wall must never be forgotten. The Dauphin County Grand Jury investigation into his death highlighted several areas for improvement in the child welfare system to help avoid a horrific death of this nature from occurring again. ChildFirst PA was noted in the Grand Jury report as being a training which provides caseworkers with the concrete skills to effectively conduct child abuse investigations. The report stated:

The grand jury had the opportunity to hear testimony about an in-house training system that worked and produced skilled, knowledgeable CPS intake caseworkers at Dauphin County CYS. It is a finding of the grand jury that a caseworker has to have specialized training and knowledge to properly do an investigation. There is a need for this personalized, hands-on training to be implemented state-wide, in each county agency.

ChildFirst PA

(1) Testimony of several individuals cited to a specific training, ChildFirst, which to a multidisciplinary approach. It was lauded as not only being helpful, but being directly applicable to the work the caseworker was doing. One caseworker described it as follows:

One of the trainings that I remember most was the ChildFirst training, a week-long training out in Hershey. And it was with caseworkers, law enforcement, you know, people from the district attorney's office and we were all there.

It was somewhat of a classroom-based training. But like I said, it was a week-long training and we actually got to act things out.

On one of the days they actually brought in some kids from the Derry Township School District to act for us and, you know, we had to do mock interviews of the kids and we were critiqued on how we did the interviews and how we interacted with the kids.

And that's one of the trainings that I've taken over my eight years doing child abuse investigations that stuck with me the most.

(2) The training has members from the entire multi-disciplinary investigative team (MDIT) train together, and they work through the process of receiving referrals and interviewing children. The MDIT team includes a caseworker, a police officer, and a prosecutor. It provides the opportunity for the team to work together without interfering with each agency's process. Further, it is a training on putting the child first through the entire process and ensuring that the child is always the priority. There is a demonstrated need for this training and others like it to receive state-support and statewide implementation.

ChildFirst PA is based on a training model developed the National Child Protection Training Center in Winona, Minnesota. The PA Children and Youth Solicitors Association along with support from the PA District Attorney's Association brought the ChildFirst training to Pennsylvania. ChildFirst PA began training multidisciplinary investigative teams in March of 2011. In March of 2012, Pennsylvania was certified as a ChildFirst state. ChildFirst PA has trained approximately 400 team members in 35 counties across the state.

From March of 2012 to March of 2015, ChildFirst PA was supported through Children's Justice Act federal grant dollars. Those grant dollars were awarded by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. This allowed the PA Children and Youth Solicitor's Association to offer the training to multidisciplinary investigative teams at no cost. The Department made the decision to stop awarding the Children's Justice Acts funds to the Solicitor's Association for ChildFirst PA despite that fact that the Children's Justice Task Force conducted a study which found that training for multidisciplinary investigative teams is a statewide need. Additionally, the Grand Jury report issued the following recommendation:

Recommendations: The grand jury recommends that Pennsylvania support ChildFirst PA and similar MDIT type trainings with continued Children's Justice Acts or other funding to ensure this proven program continues to be available to caseworkers, police officers, Children and Youth solicitors and prosecutors.

The current state of the child welfare system requires improvements at a variety of levels to help ensure that the system is functioning in a manner which supports its staff, complies with the standards set forth in the Child Protective Services Law, and, most importantly, protects our children. Training is one component which presents as an avenue to improve caseworker competency and child safety. Resources exist within the state that can meet the training needs of caseworkers but dedicated funds need to be put in place to support those resources. Pennsylvania used the Jerry Sandusky scandal as a platform to reform the Child Protective Services Law broadening the scope of how we define abuse, who we define as perpetrators of abuse, and who is required to report abuse. A second wave of reform now needs to occur to support the child welfare system in carrying out these new charges. Let us not rest on the good work that has been done by so many but, instead, strive to carry the child welfare system into a new era.