

Good Morning Chairwoman Watson, Vice-Chairman Moul, Mr. Grass, Honorable Committee. Thank you for the honor of allowing me to present to you today. My name is Lynne Kallus-Rainey. I am the Executive Director of Bucks County Children and Youth. I have been its appointed Director for 8.5 years; prior to this I had been a senior manager for 13 years after serving in supervisory and casework positions since 1979.

I have personally experienced the impact on the lives of children, families and the county agency when there are issues negatively affecting the work force and their ability to carry out the legislated mission of child protection.

There are 5 main points I want to leave you with today:

1. An understanding of how the county child welfare agency operates.
  - I hope this is helpful when considering new legislation for new mandates and when considering
  - How to improve the current system.
  
2. That the elements of public child welfare essential to its operations intersect with other major "systems" which operate independently and apart from the child welfare system.
  - For example: the courts, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Early Childhood and Education to name just a few.
  
3. That the core of what makes child protection services work is in-person, in-home visitation.
  - Consistent engagement of individuals and families by qualified, well-trained professionals are necessary to this process.
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4. That public child welfare agencies are vulnerable to changes in the political, social and economic policies of elected officials at any given time.

- When legislating new mandates it is necessary that care be taken to address the needs of the workforce so as to enhance professionalism and retention.
5. It is helpful to consider new structural approaches of service delivery systems when developing new mandates.
- Thinking through an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to mandates so that dramatic impact on any one system is lessened and the means to the desired outcomes is shared.
  - An integrated approach can develop service systems using the same amount or less of funds and achieve more targeted results.

## The Nature of the Job

The job has never been easy or simple. Caseloads have always exceeded the ideal; salaries are not on parity with similar type public sector work such as teacher or probation officer. The child welfare caseworker requires extensively more training, skill development, responsibility and personal risk than a caseworker in aging or mental health yet those jobs usually pay the same and in some cases more.

Salary ranges within court and human service departments are unique to each county. What is fairly universal is how the job of a child welfare caseworker is often overlooked for its vital role in public safety, public health and of course to community infrastructure.

Why people stay:

What is it about child welfare that makes it one of the most rewarding yet disagreeable jobs on the planet? How many times does a caseworker hear “I wouldn’t want your job, I couldn’t do your job or why do you stay”?

We know that caseworkers, supervisors, managers and executive directors stay when their clients, their work and their agency are valued and appreciated. Effective workload distribution through responsive management and staff complement is seen by caseworkers as a message from county commissioners and state legislators saying, “the work you do is vital, we know it is not easy, we have your back”.

Why people leave:

The testimony you have just heard from direct service caseworkers describes the many challenges they face in their job, particularly the repetitive, compliance oriented paperwork, long hours, and unrelenting volume of work.

Whether it ever happens to you or not, the underlying pulse in public child welfare is what if a child dies on my watch?

The death of a child is a life-changing event. It is a fact of the world we live in and our work is about preventing it when possible.

Imagine yourself, 25 years old, having worked with a family for 8 weeks seeing the baby once or twice a week. You’ve brought formula, diapers, food, transported mom and baby to the doctors; an early morning call wakes you from your sleep and you are told the baby was just slammed against a wall causing fatal injuries. What is the first thing you say to yourself?

“What could I have done to prevent this”? You think of the beautiful baby and have nowhere to go with your personal grief because you know a magnifying lens will be applied to every element of your character, your work, your judgment, your skill, and your worthiness. Your name and that of your supervisor may be released to the media. The media have been known to scandalize child deaths and to highlight perceived deficiencies before even all the facts are known. Local elected officials are sensitive to media and it happens that administrators of the agency are fired. There may be a criminal or civil suit that you are named in. Co-workers leave the agency; supervisors are directing more cases to court rather than use best practice and critical thinking skills alone. Let the judge make all the decisions. The court is frustrated and overwhelmed as judges feel the caseworker should have done more before bringing it to court but the

agency can't do more in this scenario, it is guilty either way, if they do or if they don't'.

Court:

Most people think of a child welfare professional going into people's homes, interviewing, investigating abuse reports, securing resources for needy families, establishing relationships with children who have been forever scarred due to sexual or physical abuse and helping them learn trust again through careful and skilled work with legal, foster and adoptive families. What is often overlooked are the countless hours, days, and weeks that the child welfare professional must spend preparing for and testifying in the Court of Common Pleas.

There are two primary venues within Common Pleas court that the child welfare professional must be adept, Dependency and Orphans Courts. The caseworker is the first party who must present factual, relevant information to the judge or hearing master as to whether a child and case meet the standards of the relevant statute.

There are many instances and types of hearings that public child welfare requires caseworker proficiency: Shelter Care Hearings when emergency custody of a child was ordered ex parte by a judge or if police or a hospital took custody, Adjudicatory Dependency Hearings when full facts and evidence are presented, Interim Permanency Reviews for all children age 5 and under in out of home care and occur minimally every 3 months, Permanency Reviews every 6 months for all children in placement, Judicial Reviews every 6 months for children still living with their parents for which an adjudication of Dependency had been made, Termination of Parental Rights Hearings and Adoption proceedings.

Each hearing requires preparation of paperwork of due process notification to all parties, court reports and preparation for oral testimony by the caseworker.

The caseworker in many of the above hearings must testify as to how parental or child behaviors and home environmental characteristics cause serious concern for the safety and or well being of a child based on statutes in the Juvenile Act, Child Protective Services Law or the Adoption Act.

The judge has a Dependency Bench Book that includes questions for the bench to consider. Typically a supervisor preps the caseworker for the standard questions likely to be asked. Many times judges and/or opposing counsel ask difficult questions or a parent asserts something that may not be true as known to the caseworker. In those instances a caseworker may hesitate or state they do not know the answer. It is not uncommon for the credibility of the caseworker to be called into question. While trained for that occurrence, the court experience depending on the temperament of the individual and of the bench can be felt as humiliating and/or defeating by the caseworker.

Systemic issues:

Legal Representation of all Parties:

Parents may be represented by an attorney at all stages of the proceedings. Each child is appointed an attorney as a guardian ad litem; an agency solicitor represents the agency. The caseworker is not the direct client of the solicitor and therefore is not personally represented. Often caseworkers do not have an opportunity to prep with the solicitor until a few minutes before the hearing outside the courtroom, if that.

Organizational Structure and Personnel:

New mandates, laws, juvenile court rules, state bulletins, or county policies all require new business processes, training and re-training of staff, monitoring mechanisms put in place, Information Technology (IT) system modifications and management to incorporate them into daily practice. Children and Youth agencies are staff intensive. The skills necessary for operations include high level accounting, computer technology, data system administration, clinical social work, organizational management and supporting administrative skills.

Hiring:

There are two mechanisms by which Children & Youth agencies in Pennsylvania can hire for the required skill sets. The traditional and most

often used is through the Pennsylvania State Civil Service Commission.

The other is, a state approved, County Merit System for Hire.

The Pennsylvania State Civil Service Commission is slow, it is laden with rigid rules that dictate when and what positions are open for testing, and how the rule of 3 must apply in hiring based on test scores despite actual suitability for the Children and Youth job. It requires delays as when not authorizing a new list of eligible candidates for hiring until several weeks after the last candidate was hired from a previous list. As well as another required 2-week delay upon issuing the new list so candidates can be surveyed for their availability.

In the dynamic world of child welfare, hiring through civil service is like putting a moped engine in a Formula 500 racecar. It contributes to caseworker overload, multi case transfers, and ultimately resignations. Which contributes to putting vulnerable children and youth reported to the agency at more risk because less detail can be attended to per investigation and case.

### Training:

Training for new workers involves structured curriculum by the Child Welfare Resources Training Center, a state contracted provider through the University of Pittsburgh. The training involves 10 modules, which total 20 days of curriculum and 120 hours in a classroom plus 6 hours of online instruction. It takes on average about 3 months to complete. New caseworkers are not allowed to work independently until they have at least completed Module 4, which is safety assessment. Typically the county agency has to wait 4 to 8 weeks until a new worker can be accommodated into a safety assessment module and a cohort for the full certification series.

Preparing a new worker for today's public child welfare is complicated, it is never ending. In addition to foundational child welfare laws, philosophy and interviewing skills is on the job training including that of

personal safety. Personal safety must be considered in every capacity the caseworker must practice including while at the county office and courthouse.

#### Retention:

How to retain a competent, experienced child welfare professional work force?

Financially, through the Needs Based Budget and Planning Process, the state legislature and the Office of Children, Youth and Families must ensure that each county agency is equipped with a sufficient number of staff from caseworker, supervisor, management and administrator.

County officials must ensure the necessary county match from county funds. Optimal state reimbursement for caseworker positions to help counties staff their Children and Youth agencies would be 90 to 100%. Due to the nature of the work, caseload size is difficult to quantify. The use of best practices, caseworker skill level and intensity of cases must be calculated for effective service delivery.

The recently enacted Child Protective Service Laws mandated a new reporting and data system: Child Welfare Information Solution, a.k.a., CWIS. Caseload size must incorporate the interface of support personnel and add supervisory time to accommodate for CWIS.

The reality is that both the volume of new reports and CWIS compliance computer work has reduced supervisory time which presents a safety dilemma for both children and staff that must be urgently addressed.

#### Recommendations:

When considering new laws that impact the child welfare system the adage of it taking a village to raise a child must be in the forefront. Questions of how to formulate a cross systems approach with relevant state partners on a new mandate will serve to lessen dramatic impact on any one system and enhance the achievement of desired outcomes. It is no simple task however the time has come for an integrated structural approach to Human Services.

It is critical that legislators understand the job of the county child welfare worker when considering new mandates. The job has reached its capacity.

Structural approaches to how counties and the state can address today's challenges on behalf of children and families, will in the long run, be more effective and help a struggling child welfare work force promote its strengths through a clear identity and focused mission.

Thank you for your time and attention.