



University of Pittsburgh

School of Social Work
Child Welfare Education and Research Programs

2329 Cathedral of Learning
4200 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
412-624-6310
Fax: 412-624-1159

Testimony Presented to the House Children and Youth Committee

**Child Welfare Professional Education and Training
May 16, 2016**

Good morning, Chairwoman Watson, Chairman Conklin, committee members and staff. My name is Dr. Helen Cahalane and I am the Principal Investigator of the Child Welfare Education and Research Programs of the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. On behalf of the University and Chancellor Patrick Gallagher, I welcome you to the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center. Thank you for your commitment to Pennsylvania's children, youth and families. On April 4th, you heard from a distinguished group of child welfare stakeholders, each of whom passionately articulated the challenges facing our system. Despite these challenges, each and every day dedicated child welfare professionals work to keep children safe, strengthen families, and help children achieve permanence. It is with this in mind that I appreciate the opportunity to further that discussion and to focus on the development of our child welfare workforce.

We are fortunate in Pennsylvania to have a comprehensive continuum dedicated to child welfare education, training, technical assistance, organizational development, practice improvement and research. The partnership that exists between the Department of Human Services/Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF), the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators (PCYA), and the University of Pittsburgh has enabled us to strengthen the child welfare system through collaborative efforts. Later this morning, you will hear an overview of the Child Welfare Resource Center and what we do to support and enhance the workforce and the county child welfare agencies. I will focus on our degree education programs and how we work in partnership with 16 universities across the state to provide baccalaureate and graduate education as an important strategy for developing the skills of future and current child welfare professionals.

University-agency partnerships in child welfare have a long history. In fact, since the beginning of federally funded child welfare services in 1935 with the passage of the

Social Security Act (P.L. 74-271), states have been encouraged to use a portion of their funds to support the development of child welfare workers through social work education.¹ Amendments to the Social Security Act (Title IV-B and Title IV-E) provide funding to support training and education partnerships between social work education programs and child welfare agencies. Pennsylvania took advantage of the opportunity to develop a degree education option for its child welfare workforce over 20 years ago by establishing an Interagency Agreement between the Department of Public Welfare (now the Department of Human Services) and the University of Pittsburgh.

The University administers two degree education programs in collaboration with 15 other Schools of Social Work throughout the state. Our undergraduate program, Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB), is designed to recruit new child welfare workers into the field. Our graduate program, Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL), focuses on enhancing the skills and abilities of current child welfare workers through advanced professional education. The mission of these programs is to strengthen child welfare services to children and families by increasing the number of social work-educated professionals and equipping them to deal with the increasingly complex demands of public child welfare practice. Our goals include addressing the critical issues of recruitment and retention, which are both national and state-level priorities in child welfare. We also provide academic and curricular support for child welfare studies to university programs, engage in efforts to promote skills in evidence-based practice, conduct research and evaluation, and advocate for practice improvement within the child welfare system. Most importantly, our programs support Pennsylvania's efforts to retain child welfare professionals by providing an educational career ladder and assisting in the long-term career development of our workforce.

The CWEB program is currently in its 15th full academic year of operation, and the CWEL program is now in its 21st year. Both programs have become integrated into the fabric of public child welfare throughout the state, with 99% of counties in the Commonwealth participating. OCYF Deputy Secretary Utz provided an overview of these programs in her testimony last month, and I will include additional detail today.

Through the CWEB program, we prepare undergraduates to enter the field of child welfare. Qualified students receive substantial financial support during their senior year in return for a commitment to work in one of Pennsylvania's county public child welfare agencies following graduation. Students must satisfactorily complete child welfare course work and an internship at a public child welfare agency. During the course of the internship, most students are able to complete a portion of the competency-based training required for all public child welfare caseworkers. Upon graduation, students also receive assistance with their employment search. Over 1,000 (1,051) students have graduated from CWEB during the program's 15 years of operation. CWEB graduates have completed internships and have been employed in 90% of Pennsylvania counties.

Once in the field, they are able to draw on a solid background of on the job experience, educational preparation, and skill-based training. County child welfare agencies benefit immensely from the program because it addresses a critical child welfare workforce need by providing skilled, entry-level social workers who come to the field with a combination of academic knowledge and exposure to child welfare practice.

The CWEL program provides substantial financial support for graduate-level social work education to current employees of public child welfare agencies. Caseworkers, supervisors, managers or administrators of any Pennsylvania county children and youth agency are eligible to apply to participate. CWEL has funded students from 64 counties and twelve Pennsylvania schools of social work on both a full and part-time basis. At the present time, approximately 20% of the Pennsylvania child welfare workforce consists of a CWEL graduate or a current CWEL student. Additionally, CWEL serves as an educational and career ladder for public child welfare employees. The active CWEL student enrollment during the current academic year consists of 20% CWEL alumni.

CWEL reimburses salary and benefits for full-time CWEL students and covers tuition, fees, and other expenses for both full and part-time students in return for a commitment to the employing county child welfare agency upon graduation. During the 21 years of the program, 1,282 child welfare professionals have earned graduate social work degrees. These individuals occupy various positions, ranging from caseworker to administrator. The program has a remarkably successful record of retention, with retention rates averaging 92%.

Currently, 193 individuals are currently engaged in child welfare studies through the CWEL and CWEL programs: 80 at the undergraduate level and 113 at the graduate level. We are acknowledged as a model program in the nation. The CWEL and CWEL education programs have been recognized as key strengths in Pennsylvania during both rounds of the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). We anticipate no less in Round 3 of the CFSR. Our graduates have assumed leadership roles in practice initiatives throughout the state and actively contribute to shaping the future of child welfare services on the local, state and national level. Graduates are providing direct service, serving as managers and supervisors, mentoring junior colleagues, contributing to training curricula, conducting quality improvement initiatives and working as child welfare trainers and/or consultants. We are proud that an increasing number of our child welfare graduates have assumed teaching roles in Schools of Social Work throughout the state of Pennsylvania, many as adjunct professors, others as part-time clinical faculty, and some as Directors of Social Work programs.

Over twenty-five years of research findings have highlighted several key areas that guide Pennsylvania's investment in professional social work education for the child welfare workforce:

- Graduates of social work programs who specialize in child welfare are more likely to remain in child welfare and experience greater job satisfactionⁱⁱ
- Social work graduates tend to stay in child welfare longer, come to the agency ready to do the job, make better decisions about child protection and not be overwhelmedⁱⁱⁱ
- Higher education is essential for developing caseworker competencies^{iv}
- Social work education appears to be related to job retention and staff stability^v

Both the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) suggest that child protective services staff should have a BSW or MSW degree. Along with the results of empirical studies, we have learned much from practice on the front lines of child welfare and listening to the experience of workers, supervisors and administrators. They tell us about these key attributes of an adequately prepared and supported workforce:

- The ability to handle more complex caseloads
- The ability to perform tasks more competently
- Greater effectiveness in developing permanency plans for children
- Increased skill in engaging children and families
- The ability to negotiate conflicting job demands
- The ability to deal with a critical public and more negative, than positive, media attention
- Greater job satisfaction

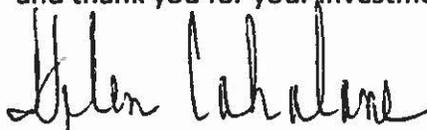
I come before you not as someone from an academic institution who has simply reviewed and conducted research, crunched numbers, and reported program statistics. Along with my faculty colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and those from 15 other schools of social work in PA, I serve as an instructor, advisor, field supervisor and mentor of the child welfare students I have spoken of today. No amount of contracts, agreements, budgets, reports, curricula, or any other academic and administrative components of these programs can produce a successful outcome without exceptional students. The vast majority of the students selected to participate in the CWEL and CWEL programs have been exceptional achievers academically, as well as leaders among their peers. They have distinguished themselves through their dedication to working with society's most vulnerable children and families, and in circumstances that involve daily exposure to upsetting situations and overwhelming crises. I salute them with sincere admiration.

The voice of our students provide the most compelling evidence of Pennsylvania's wise investment in child welfare education. You will be hearing from one of our MSW graduates of the CWEL program this morning who will share her personal story of dedication to our child welfare system. In closing, I want to share the words of a newly

admitted CWEB participant who will be entering her senior year at Temple University this fall. I spoke to her last week and let her know about my testimony today. She gave me permission to share these excerpts from her application with you.

"Since I began college, I have been striving to prepare myself for a career in social work and child welfare. I found out about CWEB in my freshman year of college and have been working to meet the qualifications and to become an exceptional candidate for the program....The turning point and most special moment in my life was when my family adopted an eight-day-old baby. He is now my nine year old brother....His story of his biological mother leaving him in the hospital defenseless, lonely, and unprotected is what really ignited something in me that changed my whole perspective on life. Life became bigger than me, and more so about having a positive impact on someone else's life....As I developed an unconditional love for my new brother, I discovered it was my purpose in life to be a spokesperson for foster children. I realized I wanted to work with foster children to improve their circumstances and quality of life. I have a strong desire to become a social worker...Since I will be the first point of contact for families whose cases are brought for investigation, my position is very important because I will set the mood and tone of how families will be treated and whether they feel supported..."

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony. I welcome your questions and thank you for your investment in child welfare workforce development.



Helen Cahalane, Ph.D., ACSW, LCSW
Clinical Associate Professor and Principal Investigator
Chancellor's Distinguished Teacher
Child Welfare Education and Research Programs
School of Social Work
University of Pittsburgh

ⁱ Zlotnik, J. L. (2013). University-agency partnerships to advance child welfare. In K. Briar-Lawson, M. McCarthy & N. Dickinson (Eds.), *The Children's Bureau: Shaping a century of child welfare practices, programs, and policies* (pp. 275-292). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

ⁱⁱ Child Welfare League of America, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, 2005

^{iv} Child Welfare Education and Research Programs (2015). Workforce recruitment and retention in child welfare: A research sampler. In *Annual Report 2014-2015*. University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Retrieved from <http://www.socialwork.pitt.edu/researchtraining/child-welfare-ed-research-programs/cweb-cwel-annual-report>

^v Child Welfare Education and Research Programs (2015). *Annual Report 2014-2015*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialwork.pitt.edu/researchtraining/child-welfare-ed-research-programs/cweb-cwel-annual-report>