

HOUSE CHILDREN & YOUTH COMMITTEE

Child Welfare Education for Leadership Program

Tasha Hannah, MSW, LSW

05/16/2016

Good morning, Chairwoman Watson, Chairman Conklin, committee members and Staff.

My name is Tasha Hannah and I am an Intake Supervisor at the Philadelphia Department of Human Services. I began my twenty year tenure at The Philadelphia Department of Human Services in 1996 as a Clerk Typist in which I was solely responsible for typing Social Worker case notes. In this position I learned about the services The Department provided to children and families. It was in this position that I was first exposed to child abuse and the trauma that children endured. This captivated me because I had no previous knowledge of the child welfare system and how it impacted and improved the quality of life for less fortunate families.

I decided that I wanted to make a difference. At that time I was working on an Associates Degree in Paralegal studies with aspirations to become an attorney. However, my desires to be a part of a system that is less punitive and more rehabilitative became stronger with each case note I read. I began to interview the social workers to gain an understanding of the barriers and rewards they experienced with working with families. This is where it all came together, that I wanted to be a part of the system that prevents, intervenes and resolves child abuse.

I strategically designed a life plan that would focus on becoming an integral part of reducing child abuse and neglect. I tailored my school curriculum, which enabled me to reach my goal and successfully became a Social Worker for The Philadelphia Department of Human Services.

As a Social Worker trainee I participated in Charting the Course job training where I was taught what to expect in the field of child welfare and the policies that govern the work that we do: My first Social Worker position was in Ongoing Services where I handled cases that had been accepted for services and needed case management. I helped my clients develop coping

skills to deal with challenges of living in impoverished neighborhoods plagued with drugs and violence while having an active case with The Department.

As a social worker I had to take on many roles to deliver the best service to families: teacher, advocate, arbitrator and listener. These roles enabled me to help some clients reach their goals of independence from the child welfare system.

I knew that poverty, lack of education and lack of resources were elements that crossed all racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds and they often are the major contributors to abuse and neglect. I had the opportunity to learn about the many different cultures that are in the city and have seen first hand the prejudices that go along with these cultures.

I have been forced many times to face and reevaluate my own prejudices and preconceived notions. I had to understand that distinct cultural behaviors in the inner city have not only been shaped by race and poverty but it also shapes the responses to poverty, which may contribute to its perpetuation. I do not believe that parents are inherently bad or any parent desires to harm or neglect their children however there are structural oppressions that have generated certain behaviors to manifest.

I often leaned on my supervisor for guidance with interacting with families, maneuvering through barriers that impeded our work as well as learning how to be in tune with myself. My supervisor was a sounding board for me. He was very empathic and understanding. I felt comfortable discussing my weaknesses in relation to my social work practice. He discussed ways that I could improve upon my therapeutic skills while respecting my individuality. He never imposed his social work style on me however he enabled me to develop a style of my own. The guidance and directives provided by my supervisor is what made me aspire to become a supervisor.

I often pondered ways to seek my Masters of Social work degree so that I could become more proficient in my career. I desired to mirror the qualities of my supervisor and bestow my knowledge and experience upon other upcoming social workers.

I wanted to attend Graduate school for the personal challenge that it represented. I liked the atmosphere of academic excellence coupled with the spirit of teamwork and support. Pursing a graduate degree would allow me to expand upon the skills already gained, foster my passion for social change and ultimately prepare me to become a leader and support to other social workers through a supervisory role.

However, due to financial constraints and family commitment it seemed that my dream of obtaining my Masters Degree would remain a dream. Nonetheless, I continued to navigate through my agency holding various Social work positions; continually expanding my social work toolbox.

I worked in the Court unit as a Court representative liaison where I represented the Department's position in dependent and delinquent cases in Family Court. I also worked in the Hotline unit accepting reports of child abuse and neglect made to the Department.

I learned about the Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL) program offered through the University of Pittsburgh and I knew I needed to be a part of this program. The process was comprehensive, thought provoking and forced me to self-reflect on my readiness to undertake graduate level social work education. The program offered me a way to reach my goal of obtaining my MSW degree without financial stressors.

Through the CWEL program I attended the University of Pennsylvania School of Policy and Practice where I developed greater clarity about theoretical perspectives, clinical skills and an understanding of intrapersonal and interpersonal functions of clients and family systems. I

had the distinct privilege of being recognized in the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice Review as the future of social change. This recognition highlighted my most rewarding opportunity which was my work within the Character Enrichment Program, "Girls Track", offered through The Philadelphia Department of Human Services. In this role, I served and continue to serve as a life coach to at-risk teenage girls to help them embrace their unique characteristics, pursue their highest level of education and become positive and productive members of society.

As a Girls Track life coach I am able to reconnect to my community roots of West Philadelphia. I found it extremely disturbing to know that West Philadelphia is home of the country's first zoo and yet many of the neighborhood children are too impoverished to visit such a historic and pleasurable place. I ensure that the members of Girls Track experience and are exposed to a variant of opportunities they may not otherwise have. I have the ability, through funding from the Department of Human Services, to take the girls on college tours, participate in community outreach projects, volunteer with the elderly, and of course visit the zoo just to name a few of our many activities. I would not be apart of such a life affirming role if it were not or CWEL.

The CWEL program allowed me to broaden and deepen my skills and knowledge base as it relates to building effective outcomes for families. I received prompt and thorough attention from the CWEL staff throughout my academic journey and was always treated with patience and support. I am certain that without the CWEL program I would not be standing before you today with my MSW degree, as a Licensed Social Worker, a life coach to teenage girls and a Philadelphia Department of Human Services Social Work Supervisor. I have been able to broaden my professional development, enhance my skills and strengthen the commitment I have

for my community and its children and families as a result of the investment that was made in me. I believe that it is my obligation to pay this investment forward by being the best mentor and supervisor I can be.

As a Social Work Supervisor in the Intake Unit of The Philadelphia Department of Human Services I am charged with assessing the needs of and improving the culture of the agency. I am responsible for the workers that are deployed to deliver services to the families of Philadelphia. I am responsible for the transference of knowledge, skills, evidence based practice and motivation that has brought me to where I am today. I have the obligation to ensure that new workers are equipped with an evolving understanding of best case practice to strengthen families.

I believe in the family system, family roots, family development and family support. I believe that everyone wants to love and be loved and it is through this belief that I continue to use my ability as a social change agent to strengthen those families that are marginalized and have limited access to resources.

Child welfare work is challenging, fulfilling, sometimes heart-wrenching, and always demanding. I support my staff in meeting these challenges every day, and have the deepest respect for their dedication to children and families. I also believe that families want the best for their children, and that it is all of our responsibility to assure that families receive the support that they need to keep their children safe, protected and nurtured.

It would be remiss of me not to pass on the invaluable opportunities that I was afforded through CWEL. Social work is not a profession but a vocation. It is a labor of love because we are important, the work that we do is important and the families we serve are important.