

Testimony on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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**pennsylvania**  
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Good morning, Chairwoman Watson, Chairman Conklin, committee members, and staff. I am Suzann Morris and I serve as deputy secretary for the Office of Child Development and Learning (OCDEL) in the departments of Human Services (DHS) and Education. Cathy Utz, deputy secretary for the Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) has joined me today. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding kinship care and early care and education services.

Pennsylvania has a long history of providing support to kin who provide safe and stable homes to children that may otherwise be placed in foster family homes with persons they do not know. Data collected from Pennsylvania's 67 county children and youth agencies shows that a total of 15,627 children were formally placed in out-of-home care on September 30, 2016. Of those, 12,662 children were placed in family-like settings, including pre-adoptive homes, and relative and non-relative foster homes. Research tells us that children placed in family-like settings versus congregate care programs have better long-term outcomes, and children that are placed with kin have even better outcomes. Of all children placed in out-of-home care on September 30, 2016, 5,385 were placed in relative foster homes. This number has increased from 3,433 on September 30, 2011. We remain committed to increasing our efforts to ensure that children are placed in family-like settings and to increasing our use of kinship care.

Our support of kin began nearly two decades ago. In 1997, the passage of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act established national goals of safety, permanency, and well-being for all children served by the child welfare system. These amendments were necessary as children languished in foster care for extended periods of time, often with a court ordered goal of long-term foster care. As a result, children were discharged from the foster care system without relationships to positive adult role models and often ended up homeless or reliant on other public

services. These amendments furthered the tenants that foster care is to be temporary in nature and that children need permanent and stable families in order to grow and thrive.

When a child enters the foster care system, a court ordered goal is established with the focus on the provision of services to children to promote their safe return to their families. When reunification is not possible, we first look to ensure legal permanency for a child through adoption, placement with a fit and willing relative, or through placement with a permanent guardian.

Pennsylvania amended the Juvenile Act to implement these federal requirements. These amendments included the creation of a new permanency goal for children who were in the legal custody of the county children and youth agency, commonly referred to as permanent legal custodianship. Additionally, the importance of ensuring that children were placed with relatives is underscored through the permanency goal of placement with a fit and willing relative.

To support the ongoing needs of children with special needs who were adopted from foster care, Pennsylvania established an adoption assistance program. This program continues to meet the needs of children adopted from foster care in Pennsylvania through the provision of a subsidy and Medical Assistance coverage. Children adopted from the foster care system are most often adopted by their foster parents with whom they have a long-standing relationship and given the increases in number of children placed in relative foster home, we expect the number of children adopted by relatives to continue to grow.

Recognizing that in certain situations, the court determines that adoption is not in the child's best interest, we next look to achieve permanency for a child through placement with a fit and willing relative or permanent legal custodian. As a result, in 2001 DHS established the

Subsidized Permanent Legal Custodianship Program. This program ensured that families who were willing and able to become a permanent resource for a child in the foster care system were provided the needed financial support to enable them to provide the necessary care to the child. Pennsylvania recognized the important role that extended family and kin play in ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children they are related to or with whom they have a relationship and started this program through state and county funds. When this program began in Pennsylvania, federal funds were not available.

Similar practices began to emerge across the nation with positive results. Research showed that children who were placed with relatives often stayed within their communities, they did not move from home to home and they were able to remain in their same schools. We all recognize the positive impact that being connected to your community and having stability in where we live and where we go to school have on our long-term success. As a result of the improved outcomes for children placed with kin, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed in 2008. This allowed states to use federal funds to support adoption assistance programs for children up to age 21, if they achieved permanency through adoption or guardianship after age 16. This legislation focused on ensuring that older youth were supported through permanency and not exiting the foster care system unprepared for the transition to adulthood.

Having a well-established adoption assistance program in place for nearly a decade positioned Pennsylvania to be one of the first states to use federal funds, but we did not stop there. Through data analysis, we recognized Pennsylvania had a large number of children in out-of-home care age 13 and older who were staying in foster care far too long without having permanent homes. To support improved outcomes for our youth and to ensure relatives and kin

were supported in providing permanent homes for children, state and county funds are used to assist families who provide permanent homes for children between the ages of 13 and 15.

Pennsylvania went beyond the federal program requirements because it was the right thing to do to ensure greater success for youth served in Pennsylvania's foster care system and the relatives and kin who are willing and able to care for them.

In 2003, the Kinship Care Program was originally established in Pennsylvania to ensure that relatives, godparents, and persons who have a relationship with a child are supported when they become approved foster parents. Over the years, the Kinship Care program was amended to underscore the importance of family members becoming permanent long-standing resources for children. This includes the requirement to notify relatives to the fifth degree when a child enters out-of-home care and to ensure that efforts are made through the time a child and family is active with the child welfare system to locate family on a regular and ongoing basis to support the child and family indefinitely.

In 2012, the Pennsylvania General Assembly enacted legislation that codified the Subsidized Permanent Legal Custodianship Program in the Human Services Code. Additionally, the Adoption Opportunities Act and the Kinship Care Program were amended to amend the definition of child and extend subsidies for youth up to age 21 when certain criteria are met.

Our data suggests that efforts are being made to support families through the Subsidized Permanent Legal Custodianship Program. In state fiscal year 2015-16, 11,448 children were supported through subsidies to their permanent legal custodian totaling \$34,462,089 with the federal Title IV-E share of those expenses being \$10,371,183.

Working, low-income families may also receive supports and connect to family-supportive services through early care and education programs. Pennsylvania is a recognized leader in providing access to early care and education settings that meet both children and families' needs. Through the commonwealth's subsidized child care program, Child Care Works, low-income, working families meeting income thresholds below 200% of the federal poverty level may receive financial support to assist with the cost of child care. In 2016-17, approximately 200,000 slots for children age six weeks to 13 years old were supported through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).

Decades of research show that stable, high-quality early care and education provide both an important work support and lays the critical foundation for children's healthy social, physical, and mental development. Providers and caregivers who regularly care for young children can have a positive impact on children, but instability in the availability of child care can be a detriment to positive child outcomes. Daily instability, including unpredictable routines, structure, and frequent changes in teachers are linked with poorer child well-being and teacher child interactions (De Schipper et al., 2003). Multiple care arrangements across even a short period of time are linked with negative child behavior (De Schipper et al., 2004(a), 2004(b); Morrissey, 2009) and cognitive outcomes (Tran & Weinraub, 2006). Recognizing that a more stable experience benefits all children in child care, but particularly children whose parent or caretaker has been displaced, OCDEL is proposing to promulgate subsidized child care regulations that allow continuity of care for the remainder of a child's required 12-month eligibility period during a break in or following the loss of work, education, or training. The child will receive a full 12 months of eligibility as long as family income does not exceed 85% of

state median income (SMI) which in Pennsylvania is \$90,821 for a family of four, and family assets do not exceed \$1 million.

When a child's home life is in flux, a level of stability in the child care arrangement becomes that much more valuable. Instability in the child's care arrangement further disrupts parental employment and education, harms children, and runs counter to nearly all the purposes of CCDBG. Therefore, the proposed rulemaking allows continuity of care for the remainder of a child's required 12-month eligibility period when there is a change in the child's primary parent or caretaker. This ensures continuity of care for children experiencing the trauma of a parent or caretaker leaving the home for reasons including death, inpatient treatment centers, incarceration, or military deployment. CCDBG prohibits the DHS from acting on information between 12-month redetermination periods that would reduce the family's subsidy unless the information provided indicates the family's income exceeds 85% of SMI or family assets exceed \$1 million.

Supporting the family structure in home and community-based settings is foundational to holistic and healthy family development, including families whose primary caregiver is a grandparent. Pennsylvania's Family Centers are community-based places that provide a variety of services to help children and families become healthy, safe, and self-sufficient and prepare children to succeed in school. Family Centers have helped Pennsylvania's families build protective factors including social connections, concrete supports, knowledge of parenting and child development, child social and emotional competence, and resilience that result in positive outcomes.

Family Centers are an early childhood, parent education, and family support program serving families throughout pregnancy until their child enters kindergarten. Each family center

offers a core set of services, such as the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Home Visiting Program, to provide caregivers with knowledge and resources to prepare their children for a stronger start in life and greater success in school. Parents as Teachers defines parents to include people with relationships to children which may be biological, adoptive or foster, grandparents, older siblings or other adults who create a family for a child. In 1992, the first Pennsylvania funded Parents as Teachers programs were implemented in 13 newly created family centers, by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Today, PAT is being used by 43 family centers and in other settings for a total of 70 organizations with 95 program sites. Parents as Teachers is federally recognized as meeting rigorous standards for effectiveness, and encourages active parent participation in advisory committees and provides opportunities for leadership in the community.

Pennsylvania Family Centers are funded with \$3,258,000 in state dollars through the DHS line item, Community Based Family Centers. State funds match \$5,783,699 in federal funding through Title 4 B part 2 and Community Based Child Abuse Prevention. Additionally, many family centers augment their funding with contracts with county children and youth agencies, and from foundations and other fund development activities. Research shows that Family Centers, by using the Parents as Teachers model, accomplish several key outcomes including preventing child abuse and neglect, increasing child development skills and school readiness, and improving maternal and child health. Currently there are 31 Family Center Grants and close to 7,000 families were served in 2015-16.

OCDEL also provides funding to local communities for evidence-based home visiting programs. In 2009, through the Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting federal funding opportunity, OCDEL expanded services to vulnerable low-income pregnant women, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers through four evidence-based home visiting models. Local



communities completed a community needs assessment and applied to provide Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, and for the expansion of Nurse-Family Partnership or Parents as Teachers. In 2009 as well as 2014, OCDEL also submitted and received Early Head Start Funding through the federal Office of Head Start.

Home visiting provides comprehensive support services based on the selected model. Services include parenting, healthy growth and child development, support of social systems, and strengthening families. There are 31 local home visiting implementing agencies and they are projected to serve 2,378 families in 2017-18.

In addition to the expansion of services, this initiative includes supportive practices to assist with prevention of child abuse and the early identification of children with special needs or developmental delays and supports multi-generational families and in the case of Early Head Start and Parents as Teachers, would support kinship care families.

Thank you for your continued support of children and families who are achieving permanency through lasting connections with relatives and kin, gaining positive outcomes in child development, and developing stable, caring relationships