



200 North Third Street, 13th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1589

House Children and Youth Committee Public Hearing on Fostering Successful Transitions for Older Youth in Foster Care: Making Permanency and Family a Priority

Tuesday, May 14, 2019

Testimony By: Rachael Miller, Child Welfare Policy Director

Chairwoman Boback, Chairman Petrarca, and distinguished members of the committee, I would first like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in today's incredibly important hearing. My name is Rachael Miller, and I am the Child Welfare Policy Director at Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a statewide, independent, non-partisan advocacy organization focusing on the improvement of the health, education and well-being of children and youth in the Commonwealth. We are the only statewide advocacy organization with a policy agenda that spans the life of a child, and child welfare advocacy has been at the heart of our organization for over a decade. Prior to my work at PPC, I worked at York County Office of Children, Youth, and Families for ten years and served in roles as an in-home and placement caseworker, direct service supervisor, quality improvement manager, and an educational liaison. I have firsthand experience serving children and families directly through the child welfare agency, as well as a systems perspective on the foster care system in Pennsylvania.

Today I hope to set the stage for discussion on where policy and practice improvements are needed by discussing the data and outcomes through two specific sources as well as research on the nature of the transition to adulthood and group care. Our hope is that data and research are utilized to inform advocacy efforts and support initiatives that better serve children and families. The first is PPC's annual State of Child Welfare report, which provides a 5-year analysis of how Pennsylvania fares with practices around child safety, placement, and permanency. The analysis is our contribution to improving Pennsylvania's child welfare system, not only providing county-level data, but also statewide and geographic trends. The second data brief is the Annie E. Casey Fostering Youth Transitions report which highlights outcomes for foster care youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Both sources confirm that while the commonwealth has made strides in improving outcomes for Transition Age Youth in foster care, there is still more work to be done.

As of September 30, 2018, 25,441 children and youth were placed in the Pennsylvania foster care system, with the placement population increasing by thirteen percent over the last 5 years. And while we often correlate foster care with young, vulnerable children, the reality is that one third of the foster

care population are Transition Age Youth. Transition Age Youth are children age 14 to 21, who are placed through the county child welfare system in either foster care, kinship care, or group care. Positively, through historical advocacy efforts and emphasis on improving outcomes for this age group, the rate of transition age youth entering foster care as a first-time entry has decreased by approximately ten percent in the last five years. We can speculate that this is an indication that more preventative based interventions are being provided on the front-end of investigations and case acceptance in order to avoid placement. However, we must dissect the data a bit further to better understand if these enacted policies are having an impact on improving overall outcomes.

Compared to the national average, Pennsylvania has a higher rate of Transition Age Youth in foster care. According to the Annie E. Casey study, Pennsylvania's Transition Age Youth population for placement was thirty three percent, compared to twenty five percent in the United States. And while first-time entries into foster care continue to decrease for older youth, almost half of the foster care population that returns home only to subsequently re-enter care are older youth. Additionally, forty two percent of the Pennsylvania older youth population experienced 3 or more placement episodes, meaning that they were forced to move within multiple placement settings, become acclimated to new caretakers, potentially having to move into new communities and schools, and essentially, having to restart their lives. Every move a child makes is one more traumatic episode in addition to the circumstances that caused the original placement.

It is hoped, that whether a youth has a first-time entry into care, or a move into a subsequent placement, that they are placed in the most family-like setting, and ideally with kin. We know that children and youth are best raised by someone they know and trust, and kin should always be who we strive to have raise their own family members. Family-based settings are defined as foster homes, kinship homes, or specialized homes such as medical or therapeutic foster care. The least preferred setting for children and youth is congregate care, which includes settings such as group homes and residential treatment facilities. Congregate care settings are institutional in nature, which has dormitory style living, often all services are provided on grounds and youth are cared for by staff rather than an individual acting in the role of parent. Realistically, research shows that group care is rarely effective at addressing behavioral and clinical issues, and often is harmful to youth. Placement in group care prevents youth from having the opportunity to form relationships with supportive adults and people who can become permanency resources and often separates them from activities and people they care for in the community. The use of congregate care settings should be rare and when necessary, short term. All efforts should be made to promote a nurturing and family-like setting, with supportive services in the community. When we look at the data, almost half of the Transition Age Youth population were placed in a congregate care setting versus a home-based arrangement in 2018. Recent data also shows that youth of color of all age groups are least likely to be placed in family settings. This data, and the research on group care, has significant negative implications for Transition Age Youth.

Permanency planning and service delivery is required as soon as a child enters placement and must be provided until the youth exits to permanency. Permanency is one of the goals of the child welfare system: ideally youth return to their own homes or are placed with caring adults who commit to being their family. Family is crucial to meeting the needs of children. The support, guidance and nurturing of family is also essential for youth to make a successful transition to adulthood. The material and emotional support that parents and family provide youth as they transition to adulthood is significant

and lasts well into a young person's twenties. While it is probably no surprise to the parents of teens and young adults at this hearing, family and permanency are vital to the transition to adulthood.

Counties have flexibility in the services they can provide to achieve permanency. One key way Pennsylvania has decided to deliver permanency services is through the State Wide Adoption Network (SWAN). There are multiple permanency services offered through SWAN that are contracted through providers with the county child welfare agency that assist the child with understanding permanency and working toward achieving it. The services offered through SWAN include child profile, family profile, child specific recruitment, child preparation, adoption finalization, and post-permanency services. A family profile is often referred to as a home study and provides an overview of the family dynamics and assists with matching children to the family. A child profile is a comprehensive overview of the child's life history. Child preparation includes a process of multiple individual sessions that helps children work through the difficulties that can often become barriers for them in finding a permanent home. Child specific recruitment is a service that assists with locating a permanent resource for a child, which also includes family finding efforts. Adoption finalization is the last step in the permanency process and assists with ensuring that the legal process is completed, and once that is done, the family is eligible for post-permanency services. Post-permanency services can be utilized which includes case management, support groups, and respite services, among others. These services are critical to ensuring that the child is prepared for the permanency process and towards expediting permanency planning. SWAN services have been very effective in helping youth find permanency and many counties have been innovative in ensuring that these services meet the needs of older youth. However, data included in a report submitted to the legislature in 2016 by DHS showed that older youth with the permanency plan of Another Permanent Planned Living Arrangement (APPLA) are receiving these services in small numbers, reducing their chances of achieving permanency.

All children placed through the child welfare agency are required to have a court ordered primary goal, and concurrent goal. The goals that can be assigned to a child include adoption, permanent legal custodianship, placement with a fit and willing relative, and Another Permanent Planned Living Arrangement (APPLA). All goals, other than APPLA, indicate that the child is moving toward permanency being finalized in a family-based setting. APPLA also often correlates with residing in group settings, and the message that permanency cannot be achieved. It ultimately produces poorer outcomes for youth, which frequently results in the lack of lifelong connections to help them through transitioning into adulthood and navigating life's major milestones. Twenty five percent of the Transition Age Youth population currently have a court ordered goal of APPLA. When we look at outcomes for youth at the age of 21, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has confirmed that foster youth in Pennsylvania have poorer outcomes than their peers who remain at home with parents or guardians. Specifically, only forty-four percent of youth have part-time or full-time employment at age 21; and only seventy-five percent have achieved obtaining their high school diploma or GED, compared to ninety-two percent of their peers. Additionally, only sixty-three percent have stable housing.

Beginning at age 14, once a child enters out-of-home placement, the county child welfare agency is required to assume transition planning with the youth. A transition plan is a needs assessment in primary life domains that assist with developing a formal plan to provide a successful transition to adulthood. Some of the areas covered include life skills, education and training, housing, mental/behavioral health, and preventative needs, among others. The plan is intended to assure linkage to appropriate services to teach the youth skills in the areas identified. Transition plans are to be

updated every six months and reviewed during six-month permanency review hearings through dependency court. Additionally, the youth must be engaged and involved in the planning process, in order to obtain their views on how to move toward self-sufficiency and independence.

While I have just provided a large amount of data for you all to process today, I am hoping that this provides a broad snapshot of transition age youth in placement in Pennsylvania as a basis for further discussion from our panel. Historically, Pennsylvania has been among the leaders in the country on meeting the needs of and supporting Transition Age Youth in foster care. As we approach the 20 year anniversary of a federal law, the Chafee Act, that highlighted the needs of Transition Age Youth and a wealth a data and research that shows that older youth in the child welfare system continue to leave our systems in large numbers without finding family and at risk for poor outcomes, we are faced with a challenge to do more and do better by these young people. I trust that Pennsylvania will meet this challenge and continue to be a leader in investing and supporting these youth.

I am sure you are all eager to hear thoughts and ideas on what we can all do to continue to build upon the hard work already being implemented by the state and local county child welfare agencies. I am excited for you to hear about potential policy reform from Ms. Jennifer Pokempner from the Juvenile Law Center.

Thank you for allowing me to speak before the committee today. As the data shows in PPC's State of Child Welfare report, as well as the Annie E. Casey Fostering Youth Transitions report, we all have more work to do to improve outcomes for older youth in foster care. We hope that you take this data into consideration and you hear the rest of the presentation and consider what you can do moving forward to advocate for Pennsylvania's foster youth to transition successfully to adulthood.