



September 13, 2022

To the Members of the House Children and Youth Committee,

When considering the focus of today's hearing, it is important to identify a common factor at the center of the discussion: trauma. A pioneer clinician, researcher, and teacher in the area of posttraumatic stress, Dr. Bessel van Der Kolk's research identifies childhood adversity and trauma as our nation's largest public health problem. Governor Wolf's Office of Advocacy and Reform, and I as the Child Advocate, corroborate Dr. van Der Kolk's understanding of traumatic stress and recognize the urgency for a cultural shift in Pennsylvania that promotes resiliency and healing in our communities as a safeguard for our children.

Whether we are discussing child fatalities from abuse or neglect, suicide, or death by gun violence in our schools or on our streets, we must identify actionable steps that can be taken to protect our children. This starts with consistent and comprehensive reviews of all childhood fatalities. In 2010, Pennsylvania reviewed 70% of all childhood deaths. In 2019, this decreased and we reviewed just 43% of all childhood deaths. The issue of quality within these reviews has also been called to attention by advocates over recent years. It has been consistently reported that Pennsylvania's Act 33 review teams are struggling to meet the guidelines provided on how to appropriately convene and develop review reports.

To support our child welfare system with this process, the Department of Human Services and the Office of Advocacy and Reform jointly penned a letter requesting the presence of the Pennsylvania Child Advocate at all reviews. DHS and OAR are dedicated to offering support to all counties to improve current review practices.

Experiences from children must also be prioritized by an office dedicated to raising up these concerns. Thirty-four states throughout the country have children's ombudsman's offices dedicated to receiving complaints directly from youth and reviewing/investigating, as appropriate, in order to resolve both individual and systemic issues. Pennsylvania has yet to confirm an Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to support children at the state-level. Legislation to confirm such an office would be a monumental outcome to mitigating adverse childhood experiences, making informed recommendations for changes across state agencies and the legislature, and fostering a healing culture for all Pennsylvania youth.

I have included as attachments the letter penned by myself and Jon Rubin, Deputy Secretary - Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families, as well as the draft legislative language for OCA.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Maryann McEvoy', is written over a faint, light-colored signature line.

Maryann McEvoy, M.Ed
Executive Director, Office of Advocacy & Reform | Child Advocate