

Good morning. I'd like to first thank Chairs Bullock and Jozwiak for inviting me to speak with you all today and all of you for being here to learn more about the current Child Advocate role.

HISTORY

About three years ago, I stepped into the role of Child Advocate for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and I had no idea when I accepted it, just how much of an honor it would be.

The Child Advocate position was created out of an Executive Order by Governor Wolf in 2019 after several congregate care facilities had been flagged for complaints of abuse to children, and news outlets were reporting on the alarming rate of child fatalities from abuse and neglect. Over the past three years, I've sat on several state-level working groups, supported a variety of community-based initiatives, and encouraged collaboration across all state agencies on a variety of child protection topics such as human trafficking prevention, child abuse registry reform, trauma-informed policy development, ACEs awareness, and much more.

SUCSESSES

I want to share a few specific things with the committee that I have been able to do in this role, starting with developing and implementing various resources to prevent adverse childhood experiences in Pennsylvania. At a macro level, I worked with a team of professionals across several state agencies to help publish the *Trauma Informed Pennsylvania (TIPA) Plan*, which is being utilized as a roadmap across all state agencies to reform their policies and practices. Additionally, I worked with statewide stakeholders and continue to maintain [HEAL PA](#), PA's first-ever statewide Trauma Informed Coalition, with over 3,000 community members disseminating our free resources and support throughout the Commonwealth.

In addition to managing the statewide coalition, I visited over 400 of our OCY-licensed residential facilities and spoke to children, staff, leadership, and county Children & Youth Agencies. During my site visits, I provided the history behind the position being developed, provided everyone with the contact information for the office, and received feedback from youth and leadership at each facility about what they needed in a state-level child advocate.

The concerns that have been brought to my office have been from children and families, kinship providers, caseworkers, and county children and youth administrators, who have felt they didn't have anywhere they could turn to within their system for support. They all required a deeper look into a variety of supports from several Commonwealth agencies such as DHS, DDAP, PDE, among others. Sometimes the outreach provided the opportunity to direct them to resources that were indeed available, but other times the outreach led to a review of data across multiple agencies to determine process gaps or breakdowns in our child protection practices as a whole. The goal of these efforts is to make better informed decisions on how to change our policies and/or practices to more effectively protect our children. At times, this process is successful. For example, we have had multiple complaints received that have included both the child welfare and education systems. During those complaint resolution calls, it has become apparent that some of the common behavior intervention practices in our schools related to restraint and seclusion are responded to differently when investigated by the education system vs. the child welfare system. For example, in child welfare, a child being secluded in a room is seen as a crisis intervention when behaviors place them or others in danger. In our schools, seclusion is a last resort – and restraint is an alternate option. For the child welfare system, restraint is seen as a more restrictive process. While the identification of this issue was beneficial, the disconnect between the two systems made rectifying the concern for the constituent very difficult. The result was the provision of further training for the school staff, and an acknowledgment from ChildLine on the difference in lenses across systems.

PROCESS AND BARRIERS

When a complaint, concern, or request for assistance comes into the Office, I make sure that the grievance channels already available to the constituent have been exhausted. Following the initial receipt of complaint, I review their concern, request that each agency involved investigate the concern, and coordinate a multi-agency meeting to review the outcomes of their investigations. A challenge presented in this process is that multiple agencies conduct

simultaneous investigations, only viewing from the lens of their own systems. Because of this, it's often difficult to provide any independent or holistic review of the concern, which has led to disjointed recommendations and limited real-time support for those who have reached out to the Office.

FOCUSING ON THE OPPORTUNITIES

Over the past two years, I've been an active voice for PA children as a member of the United States Ombudsmen Association. What I learned about other Child Advocate offices is that they also act as a resource, not just for the children directly, but for all constituents who seek to advocate on a child's behalf. Ombuds Offices receive feedback from child welfare professionals, medical staff, family courts, and the public when concerns arise for the welfare of a child/children. Since accepting my role, this is one aspect of such an office that I have been able to provide. I have received concerns from children, caregivers, school staff, social workers, county caseworkers, District Attorneys, Judges, nurses, to name a few. Concerns are not specific to our child welfare system. The concerns have been for overarching child protection in Pennsylvania including the impact of substance use on children, youth mental health, suicide, foster and kinship care support barriers, etc. Unfortunately, being developed by executive order created limitations in how our office could respond to those concerns. For instance, other state Ombuds Offices who are developed out of statute rather than executive order can conduct independent reviews and coordinate systemic approaches to child abuse prevention. For example, Colorado's Children's Ombudsman Office has been convening a Mandatory Reporting Task Force aimed at producing recommendations to improve their states mandatory reporting laws. Additionally, others are able to publish systemic findings such as New Hampshire's Office of Child Advocates Out-of-State Residential Facility Brief. In this way, when developed in statute, the Offices can provide enhances support to our children and our child protection systems overall.

CONCLUSION

Over the past three years, I've dedicated my career to being a resource, a sounding board, and a voice at every state table I can for our children. However, the extensive research and advocacy that I've been doing related to child advocate offices across the country, has been (I believe) the most critical component of my work. I'm looking forward to seeing what the future of child advocacy will look like for Pennsylvania.

Thank you.

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