



**Pennsylvania  
Partnerships  
for Children**



**PCCY**  
Public Citizens for  
Children and Youth

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## **U.S. ELECTION 2008 - Child Welfare**

### **Why It Matters**

The welfare of children is a predominant concern of all of us. Those children whose families have not been able to provide them a safe nurturing environment need help from the community and the public sector. In 2007, Pennsylvania's child welfare system was called upon to investigate 24,000 reports of child abuse and neglect. The system served 52,000 families last year; about 26,000 PA children were in out-of-home placement. Nationally about 700,000 children and youth were living outside their birth families.

The federal government provides support and guidance to states in strengthening their child welfare systems. Over the years, the national focus of protecting children has moved from placement to in-home support, from temporary foster homes to permanent adoption, from treatment to prevention. In most instances the systems have ended their support when the child turned eighteen. Cognizant of the many problems teens that aged out of foster care face, there is growing support in many states and the nation to extend the support to youth until they reach at least 21.

When families are served by the child welfare system, the primary goal of the services is to provide safety to the child; the secondary goal is to strengthen the family. By strengthening the families' ability to care for their children, the child welfare system helps the families and the children grow stronger and more stable. To make significant gains in this arena, PA must prioritize community-based child abuse prevention strategies.

The goal for each child involved in Pennsylvania's placement or foster care system is to have a permanent family, and to accomplish this in as little time and with the least amount of trauma as possible. Out-of-home placement is a temporary strategy to ensure child safety and well-being while services to reunify the child with his or her birth family are provided. When reunification is not possible, concurrent efforts by the child welfare system should be underway to immediately determine alternative permanent family options for the child, such as guardianship or adoption. Pennsylvania is not achieving timely permanence for many children. There are nearly 1,600 youth who are aging out of Pennsylvania's foster care system each year to unknown situations and it takes an average of 31 months for children to achieve permanence through adoption.

These rates are disturbing because research indicates that children who spend extended time in foster care and are not part of permanent families have poor outcomes related to making successful transitions to adulthood. The indicators include lack of education, early parenthood, criminal justice involvement, homelessness and poverty. Clearly youth in foster care are a vulnerable population. A strong return on investment will be realized if the child welfare system is successful in facilitating these youth into positive adulthood and breaking the cycle of community dependence.

### **What Works**

Programs that focus on strengthening families in their homes prior, during and after involvement in the child welfare system are generally viewed as more desirable than out-of-home placement. Several evidence-based child abuse prevention programs exist that have shown success in preventing child abuse by improving parenting skills such as Nurse Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers and Parent Child Home Program. Some of these programs are in place in some communities in Pennsylvania but they are not available to many who would benefit by them.

The Child Welfare System needs to restructure its efforts to better meet the needs of children at risk of child removal through better networking of community supports and services. Federal policies must drive this type of systemic change. This will require leadership to realign federal funds so that financing is tied to improved outcomes for families and not to service types, such as foster care maintenance. For instance, federal incentives should exist to improve timeliness of achieving permanency for children whether through reunification, adoption or guardianship. Permanency through adoption is currently federally-funded through adoption assistance; however, federal funds are not available to promote permanence through other means, such as legal guardianship. States also should be given the flexibility of using federal funds for child abuse prevention and family strengthening, instead of the greater majority of federal funds being earmarked for foster care maintenance.

Through strengthening families Pennsylvania will be able to safely reduce the number of children in foster care. However, these efforts require the recruitment of a professional workforce that is able to positively engage and partner with families. In addition, these child welfare professionals not only need to develop specific skills, but they need to be able to demonstrate appropriate parenting skills and techniques to build the capacity of families. A workforce of this quality then needs to be retained so this level of family engagement and partnership with families can exist in every case. This is the direction in which Pennsylvania's child welfare system is striving through training, technical assistance and engagement practices such as Family Group Decision Making and other team decision making models.

Older youth in foster care and children of color are at greatest risk of not achieving permanence in families. Strategies for finding extended kin and recruiting resource families for older youth and children of color should be prioritized if permanence for these populations is to be achieved. Youth who are in care also need independent living services and supports as they make the transition to adulthood. The eligibility for

the Federal Title IV-E Chafee Foster Care Independence Program should be expanded from the age limit of 21 to age 25, and the funding for this critical program increased. Similarly, Title IV-E foster care maintenance and adoption assistance funding should be extended to age 21: Medicaid coverage for youth who have been in out-of-home care should be available until age 21.

### **Where Are We Now**

Consider the facts about Pennsylvania's Foster Care System:

- Children from birth to age five make up 30 percent of the foster care system; children aged six to 12 comprise 24 percent of the population, while the vast majority or 46 percent of children living in foster care are teenagers 13 and older.
- The foster care system is racially disproportionate. Forty-seven percent of all children in foster care are African American compared to 11 percent of all children in Pennsylvania's general population.
- Approximately 22 percent of children in foster care are in foster homes where their relatives are their caregiver; 47 percent of children are in foster homes where the caregiver is not a relative. The number of children in foster care not living in families is 25 percent. These children are either in group homes or institutions, also referred to as congregate care.
- More than 30 percent of all children who spend between 12 and 24 months in foster care experience three or more foster care placements.
- Pennsylvania's re-entry rate is high – with almost one-third of children re-entering foster care within 12 months of being reunified with their families.

Currently, Title IV-E of the Social Security Act guarantees foster care maintenance and adoption assistance funding for all eligible children. However, the eligibility for these payments is based upon the antiquated criteria of the defunct Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC). This is problematic as this links eligibility to a poverty standard that has not been adjusted for inflation for over a decade. It also raises the question as to why the federal government only financially supports child welfare services for poor children and not all children who have experienced child abuse or neglect.

The INVEST in Kids Act (H.R. 5466 introduced in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress) would link funding to meeting the needs of children but not based upon the income of the birth family, It would have also extended Title IV-E support to foster alumni up to age 21 and to relative caregivers. Fostering Connections to Success Act (H.R. 6307 introduced in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress) is a variation of the INVEST in Kids Act. It does not de-link Title IV-E eligibility with AFDC, but it does extend eligibility to children in care until age 21 and to subsidized guardianship. Fostering Connections to Success Act was passed by the House and is currently in Senate committee.

Another proposal, the Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act, would extend the Adoption Incentives Program through year 2013 (S.3038 introduced in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress). This act had similarities to the previously proposed Kinship Caregiver Support Act (S.661 and H.R. 2188 of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress) that would provide federal subsidies to relative guardians.

Finally, the formerly proposed Education Begins at Home Act (S.667 and H.R. 2343 of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress) would have provided funds to create or expand evidence-based home visitation programs. Home visitation programs are effective and provide the prevention and family strengthening services that Pennsylvania's families need.

### **The Time Is Now**

It is time that Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System prioritizes working collaboratively to ensure a supportive network of community-based child abuse prevention and family-strengthening services that meet the individualized and holistic needs of families. The numbers of youth in and entering out-of-home placement must be safely reduced, and the timeliness that children obtain permanence quickened.

It is also time for the federal government to do its part to ensure that all children grow up in homes where they feel safe and part of loving and nurturing families. It is imperative that federal policy and funding align with desired child and family outcomes. This will drive programming, service array and practice, and provide opportunities for meaningful state and local accountability. As outcomes improve, leadership must recognize the importance of reinvesting savings so that quality system improvement might continue and our goal of a permanent family for all children are realized.

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