



PA Election 2008 – Child Welfare

A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Why It Matters

Every child has the right to grow up in a home where he or she feels safe and part of a loving and nurturing family. However, in 2007 Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System was called upon to investigate 24,000 reports of child abuse and neglect, and served 52,000 families. As alarming are the 26,000 children each year who are served in Pennsylvania's foster care system – and the numbers of children served annually in foster care nationally total 700,000 children.

The safety of children is a paramount concern of our communities and the child welfare system. To make significant gains in reducing the instances of child abuse and neglect, and the numbers of children in foster care, Pennsylvania will need to prioritize community based child abuse prevention strategies that will strengthen families. Strong families remain intact and are able to meet the well-being needs of their children, as well as provide a sense of safety and belonging.

In 2007, the perpetration of child abuse was committed by immediate or extended family members in 75% of substantiated child abuses. Therefore, it is critical that families who are served by the child welfare system receive services to strengthen their capacity to successfully and safely raise their children in their own homes. For change to occur, child abuse investigation needs to go beyond the assessment of immediate safety and risk of future child abuse. The front-end process of child abuse investigation must incorporate a broader assessment to enable that immediate action can be taken to address the underlying family issues that are the catalyst for an abusive environment. These underlying issues can include drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, housing problems and domestic violence. Children cannot afford the delayed or inadequate provision of services which put them at greater risk of abuse and child removal.

There are extreme occasions when child removal and out of home placement is necessary, and in 2007 there were 8,560 children removed from their homes where the alleged or actual abuse occurred. When these situations arise it is critical that children be placed in a family-like setting, ideally with relatives. Out of home, or foster care placements, should further the goal of finding a permanent family for the child while maintaining his or her birth family and community connections. Currently, children from birth to age five make up 30 percent of Pennsylvania's foster care system; children six to 12 equal 24 percent of the population, while the vast majority or 46 percent of children living in foster care are teenagers 13 and older.

Challenges are present for children at every age in placement, but older youth who traditionally “age out” of the system at 18, are faced with a unique set of difficulties by not having a permanent family – or home – to call their own. It is also important to note that the numbers of children in foster care are racially disproportionate with 47 percent of the children being African-American compared to 13.2 percent of Pennsylvania’s general child population and 9.3 percent of children in foster care being Latino versus 7.2 percent of the state’s general child population.

The goal for each child involved in Pennsylvania’s foster care system is to have a forever family, and to accomplish this in as little time and with the least amount of trauma as possible. Foster care 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 in place to immediately determine alternative permanent family options for the child, such as guardianship or adoption. Clear and concerning indicators that Pennsylvania is not achieving timely permanence are the 1600 youth who are aging out of Pennsylvania’s foster care system each year to unknown situations and the average 31 months it takes 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 forever 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, and the return on investment is arguably rich if the child welfare system is equipped to facilitate these youth breaking the cycle of community dependence upon adulthood.

What Works

While foster care is a necessary resource it is not a long-term solution for child abuse and neglect. Efforts should focus on strengthening families in their homes prior, during and after involvement in the child welfare system and this should not necessarily require additional programs. 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 fully funded.

A key child welfare strategy for family strengthening and child abuse prevention is for the system to promote the values and principles of a system of care. When a system of care exists within a community there is a high degree of collaboration between organizations and an intentional effort to eliminate cultural disparities and promote cultural competence. Also, it includes a focus on community-based services and supports which meet the individualized and holistic needs of families and a true partnership between families and organizations that empower families to build upon their strengths. One of the practical outgrowths of a system of care is the integration that occurs with planning and service delivery across agencies, creating a seamless approach to meeting the needs of families.

Through collaboratively 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.

When a child is removed and separated from their home communities, schools, churches, extended families and siblings, the likelihood that the child will have a forever family is reduced and the child never feels he or she has a home. While it is evident that children sometimes need to be removed from their homes, the child welfare system's efforts need to go beyond the use of placement settings that are family-like and least restrictive to utilizing placements for children that will maintain community and family connections. This will take the cooperation of our school districts, child welfare organizations, foster care placement providers, resource families, the courts and others.

Decisions made by the Dependency and Orphans Court of Pennsylvania have a tremendous impact on placement stability and permanency outcomes. Court improvement is a central concern of the state and federal governments, and several court improvement initiatives are underway in Pennsylvania to eliminate barriers to achieving permanency. The Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts, Office of Children, Families and the Courts convenes judicial roundtables across Pennsylvania, and encourages improved family engagement, family finding strategies and professional training. Two other court improvement initiatives include the American Bar Association's Barriers to Permanency Project, and the Legal Services Initiative. It is imperative that the court system enhance its ability to positively engage and involve families in court proceedings, as well as support the concurrent planning efforts of the child welfare system.

Child welfare agencies must employ an array of family-finding and family engagement strategies following child removal to assure that the best needs of the child are met. Such strategies not only make kinship placement likely but also enhance the opportunity for family and others, with strong connections to the child, to be involved in case planning and decision making helping to assure a permanent family for the child. Family group decision making, family team meetings, services provided through the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network, and other engagement strategies are very effective in achieving permanence for children. Efforts are underway to utilize such strategies in Pennsylvania's child welfare system; however the system is a long way from every family and child experiencing this level of engagement, especially as it relates to the engagement of fathers. Older youth in foster care and children of color are at greatest risk of not achieving permanence in forever 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.

Preparation for adulthood is a primary task of what good parents provide their children. Older youth in foster care, many of whom do not have parental figures, are reliant on the child welfare system for support and guidance. A system cannot take the place of a parent, but it can do much more than current efforts to support this very vulnerable population as they transition to adulthood. Older youth want to succeed and be self-sufficient, but they need various forms of support during and following discharge from the foster care system. These supports include promotion of secondary and postsecondary education achievement, life skills instruction, transitional housing services, obtaining and maintaining employment, prevention

services, maintaining positive relationships, etc. These youth can and want to achieve positive outcomes, but their success will require direct action designed to meet their unique needs.

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 twelve 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 numbers of children in foster care are racially disproportionate with 47 percent of the children being African-American compared to 15.8 percent of Pennsylvania's general child population and 9.3 percent of children in foster care being Latino versus 7.2 percent of the state's general child population.
- Approximately 22% of children who are in foster care are in foster homes where their relatives are their caregiver; 47% 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%. 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. The percentage of children increases to 57% for children spending more than 24 months in foster care.
- Pennsylvania's re-entry rate is poor – with almost one-third of children re-entering foster care within 12 months of being reunified with their families.

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 every family. The numbers of children and youth in and entering foster care must be safely reduced, and the timeliness that children obtain permanence quickened.

It is also time for State 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 state 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 forever family for every child might be realized.