

THE CHILD WELFARE  
SYSTEM IN PENNSYLVANIA:

# Innovation in Action



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**T**he child welfare system in Pennsylvania has been the topic of tremendous discussion and reform in recent years. The magnitude of this system is enormous. Its financial and family impacts can't be overstated. There are few other systems that have more immediate benefits to the safety, health, and welfare of the state's most vulnerable population, our children.

Unfortunately, the unpleasant reality of this system is that it is a perpetual balancing act between the protection of children and the constitutionally protected right to be free from governmental intrusion in deciding how to raise your child. The practical outcome of this balancing act is that, for the most part, someone is always unhappy with whatever the county child welfare agency does. If an agency is over protective and consistently errs on the side of caution, they can expect to be in federal court for violating due process and are labeled as draconian. If they lean to the side of families and accept greater risk with their cases in order to keep families intact, they risk a child being injured or worse, which carries with it a host of second-guessing and Monday morning quarterbacking to question why they didn't take a certain

action; always easier to determine considering hindsight is 20/20.

## PEOPLE CARING FOR PEOPLE

Everyone has seen the media excoriations of child welfare agencies, whether deserved or not. The criticism and vitriol can reach a fever pitch since it involves harm to a child. The review and assessment of failures within the system is critically important and needs to be undertaken to better the system, but so often there is a critical piece missing.

The "system" is not some large, uncaring machine bent on self-perpetuation, but a vast number of people, none of whom went into the field with the goal of having harm come to a child under their watch. The system is county child welfare administrators doing their best to make the funding stretch far enough to work and to find and retain a sufficient workforce. It is commissioners who prioritize limited county funds to assure child welfare agencies have sufficient funds to operate. It is legal counsel who forego promising and lucrative careers as litigators to take up the mantle of child

protection. It is private providers who make sure services the counties need are made available. Most importantly, it is caseworkers who actually knock on the doors to be greeted by hostile parents, talk to traumatized and broken children, wade through filthy homes, testify in court to be attacked by opposing counsel, visit children in the intensive care unit, and sometimes endure the pain when a child dies despite their best efforts.

What has been a constant within the child welfare system is that the people working in it are some of the most committed and caring individuals you will ever meet. Even the most long-term and cynical managers will move heaven and earth to make sure kids are protected and that they are given a chance at the best life possible. Even with all its frustrations and difficulties, most can't see themselves doing anything else. These people are also some of the most resourceful and innovative around, always looking for new ways to improve the lives of the children they serve. I wanted to take this opportunity to highlight some of the exceptional programs that Pennsylvania counties have enacted to improve their services, strengthen families, and better protect children.

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### THE 412 YOUTH ZONE

In Allegheny County, the Department of Human Services (DHS) recently opened a “one-stop shop” called the 412 Youth Zone that is a centralized location for a plethora of services for current and former foster youth and young adults who are homeless, estimated to total about 1,500.

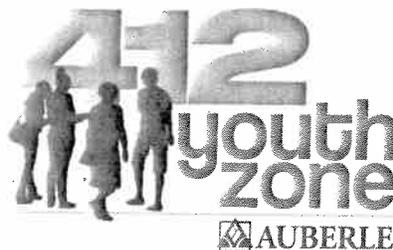
Operated under a \$2 million contract awarded after a competitive bidding process to Auberle, a suburban Pittsburgh human service agency, the 412 Youth Zone is located in Downtown Pittsburgh on the bus line and has brought together dozens of providers from all spheres, as well as individual and corporate volunteers, to support youth with workforce training, physical and behavioral health, housing placement, nutrition, the arts, and more.



The center covers two floors in an office building and boasts a full kitchen, laundry and recreation facilities, computers and work stations for youth to meet with those who are boosting the youths' futures.

Besides about 35 Auberle employees, the center is staffed partly by DHS's Independent Living Initiative (ILI) program, whose young adult staff members coach youth aging out of foster care.

DHS Executive Marc Cherna, at the 412 Youth Zone dedication in March, said the center resulted as a response to needs identified in a DHS study issued in May 2014. Titled "I'll Never Get Used to It: Young People Living on the Streets," the report included interviews with youth who said that a centralized approach to the myriad of issues that block their path to life success would be most beneficial in assisting them.



### SIMULATION SAFETY TRAINING

Noting a need for improved skills for caseworkers related to safety when they enter people's homes, Dauphin County approached the Municipal Police Training Academy at the Harrisburg Area Community College. They worked closely with trainers there to develop a curriculum to help teach caseworkers some basic skills that are commonly taught to law enforcement on how best to assess safety risks within a residence, where to position themselves as they move through the home, and how to know when it is too unsafe for them to even be there without law enforcement. Through simulation training, they were able to better train their workers to make good assessments in a home and to keep themselves safer.

This program turned out to be so popular with staff and the feedback was so overwhelmingly positive regarding the effectiveness of the training that this program has since been expanded through the Child Welfare Resource Center so it can be provided to all counties. Several counties already have been through the training and continue to sing its praises, with many more scheduled for training in the coming months.

## DE CLUTTER

De Clutter began with a seed grant from the Centre County Council for Human Services in the fall of 2007 and is now funded through the Human Service Block Grant. The brainchild of Youth Service Bureau's Family Services Division Director, a graduate student at Temple University, De Clutter aims to prevent children from being removed and/ or to prevent families from losing their housing due to home conditions. This program has helped to prevent placements due to home conditions, allowing children to remain safely in their homes.

The main goal of the program is for each family to feel their home is organized in a way that they can maintain while working through the grief and loss associated with giving up things. The priority of the project is to engage and empower family members during the De Clutter process. With coaching, family members identify their own needs, formulate tasks and goals, clean and organize, and maintain their new home conditions through a series of meetings and work sessions with the De Clutter staff. The De Clutter team is composed of family members, a YSB staff person, and volunteers. The De Clutter team is an essential resource for the family to accomplish their own goals. Family members identify areas of the home in which they need help cleaning and organizing (clothing, toys, kitchen, children's bedrooms, closets), decide which areas are priority, and then set up work sessions. Once the process is in motion, family members make all decisions about what belongings they want to keep, toss, or donate. In addition, family members are actively involved in cleaning, organizing, and creating plans and routines to maintain the home.

De Clutter recognizes that many of these families are products of trans-generational poverty, trans-generational clutter, and suffer from mental health issues which lead to the hoarding behavior that creates the cluttered environment. Unsanitary home conditions are a way of life and without hands-on intervention, nothing will change. Ultimatums, even those

directed at losing one's children or housing, simply do not work if families lack the necessary skills and stability to make the change. That is where De Clutter comes in. Staff is available to do the hands on work required to give a family a fresh start.

Throughout each stage of the process, staff work directly with the family members to process their related feelings. Staff are in close contact with the referring worker and any other mental health professional involved with the family to ensure consistent messages are being sent, and most importantly, safety is maintained. Near the close of services, the De Clutter staff will ask permission for aftercare and follow up visits to evaluate adherence to the plan and provide support to the family as needed. Aftercare visits will occur at a frequency determined by the family, De Clutter worker, and referring worker. Follow up contacts will occur at the three, six and twelve month marks to collect outcomes data.

## CUSTODY MONITORING PROGRAM

The Custody Monitoring Program is a non-crisis based service provided through Centre County Children and Youth Services. It is funded through the Needs Based Plan and Budget. The purpose of this time-limited program is to assess current custodial arrangements and limit continual contact with the court and/or Children and Youth Services (CYS) as it relates to matters of custody. The program is not intended for "indefinite supervised visit" or "drug and alcohol testing only" services.

With this program, parties to custody actions sign a release for the county child welfare agency. An intake meeting is held with each party to complete a Family Resource Sheet to help identify the natural supports or resources for the family. Staff discuss the custodial arrangements, decisions needed regarding custodial arrangements, future custodial arrangements the parties are pursuing, and change needed to reach this goal.

Clients sign all necessary releases so that program staff can coordinate services with other providers and perform case management. Because the program was not established to be a "crisis intervention" program, sessions with each client will be used to identify resources for crisis needs. Staff will offer recommendations to the court or referral source during the course of the clients' participation in the program, as well as at the close of services. Clients also will be referred to other services when appropriate.

Staff work with each family through regularly scheduled contacts to establish healthy communication between parties in order to empower each family to make decisions without the need for involvement of the court or CYS. Any and all information shared with staff, by any party, may need to be verified. Staff may request a custody conference, if deemed necessary, and may have direct contact with the court to request guidance or clarity. As a purchased service provider for Centre County Children and Youth Services, each case is reviewed, at least monthly, with an agency representative.

If risks are identified during contact, a decision may be made to suspend visits until further assessment can be made. Drug and alcohol testing may be conducted. Goals and tasks may be established on a case by case basis, through a service plan, outlining what needs to be accomplished by the parties. While consultation will occur with any attorney, and information gathered taken into consideration, the Custody Monitoring Program will make an independent assessment that will be provided to the court.

This program has helped to free up child welfare staff time in those custody situations where there are no real safety risks, but frequent concerns and referrals are made to the county child welfare agency. This has been a benefit to the court, as well, providing an independent evaluation and someone to help facilitate coordination between parents who may be struggling with their custodial situation.

## DATA FELLOWS

In child welfare, we recognize the need to leverage resources to achieve better outcomes for children and families. We believe data can help answer the question of which investments produce the most return. To that end, Washington County has partnered with the organization Public Catalyst to grow the capacity of county staff in deploying data, analysis, research principles, communication, problem-solving and leadership skills to support improved practice and outcomes for the children and families in Washington County.

Over a ten month period – through a hands-on, active coaching model - a cohort of fellows learn how to apply quantitative, qualitative and analytic skills to their day to day work. The program utilizes data made accessible by the county agency, incorporates exercises built from existing challenges, incorporates project work focused on a high priority agency program area identified by leadership, and provides opportunities for the fellows to interact with leadership through presentations and discussions.

CYS recognizes that children and youth develop best in healthy, stable environments. In Washington County, the cohort of fellows are digging deeper into this important area of practice - placement stability. How stable are the children and youth in Washington County? What elements of stability are most successful? What are the challenges? And what opportunities are there to improve stability for the children and youth? The leadership fellows are paying close attention to topics, such as placement setting and educational stability during their research studies.

If you want to observe the impact of leadership fellows, which has inspired our staff and reconnected them with our mission, Washington County CYS invites you to see our final presentation on June 29, 2016 from 9 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. Please RSVP to Dianne Bucci at [Buccidia@co.washington.pa.us](mailto:Buccidia@co.washington.pa.us) by

June 15, 2016. For further information about leadership fellows see <http://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/New%20Jerseys%20Manage%20by%20Data%20Program.pdf> and [www.public-catalyst.com](http://www.public-catalyst.com).

This program is also utilized extensively by Allegheny County. A detailed report on their program can be found at <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research-cyf.aspx>.

## PERMANENCY ROUNDTABLES

Always looking to improve permanency outcomes for children, Franklin County, along with several other counties, initiated Permanency Roundtables with the help of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

A permanency roundtable is a structured, professional case consultation that results in a plan to expedite permanency for a child in care and identifies and “busts” systemic barriers to expediting permanency.

Each Permanency Roundtable has expected outcomes for the child or children involved in the process. The primary goal for every Permanency Roundtable is to achieve legal permanence through reunification, adoption or guardianship. For other children, even if their permanency status remains the same immediately following the Permanency Roundtable, the expected outcome would be a reduction in the level of restrictiveness of the child’s living situation and increasing connections with at least one significant adult in their life.

The Permanency Roundtable process also has some expected outcomes for the organizations that participate such as increased staff competency, identifying and ‘busting’ systemic barriers, and strengthening systems integration. The key values of the permanency roundtable are a sense of urgency, a relentless insistence upon permanency for each child, bringing a fresh perspective to cases, it is strengths-based, solution-focused & non-blaming, transparency, and accountability for results at all levels.

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Franklin County Children & Youth Service in collaboration with Statewide Adoption Network (SWAN) and the Casey Foundation implemented PRT's in 2015. SWAN and the Casey Foundation provided training and technical assistance. FCCYS conducted two rounds of PRT's, one in the spring and one in the fall, and reviewed a total of 16 children. Within the first 30 days of the reviews, the agency saw an increase of 36 percent in permanency and/or connections for the children.

Overall, FCCYS saw an 83 percent increase in permanency and/or connections of reviewed children, as a result of the PRT's within the first year of implementation. A connection is defined as a significant adult in the child's life that maintains at least frequent communication with that child. FCCYS has committed to conducting two PRT's or more per year.

These are but a few of the innovative practices counties are doing in Pennsylvania. While the dramatic increases in referrals based on the 2014 changes to the Child Protective Services Law have been difficult for counties to absorb, they continue to look for better ways to do their work. The focus most recently has been on preventing sex trafficking and giving youth in out of home care more opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities, as well as more skill building to help them transition to adulthood. I for one, have absolute faith in the counties to develop many more innovative practices to improve the lives of the children in the commonwealth and I look forward to seeing them. ♣



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