



**Testimony of Jenna Mehnert, MSW, Executive Director of NASW-PA**

**Senate Aging and Youth Committee**

September 24, 2008

Pennsylvania's child welfare system faces many challenges. A county-based system permits local control that allows for the tailoring of services to the specific needs of each community. But, such a system also allows for services to be influenced by local politics and limited budgets. Local control leads to a system where the quality of services received by children and their families varies based on a child's zip code. While child welfare services do consume a great deal of government resources, if there is one role that government must fulfill, free of partisan politics, it is protecting children.

There are many policy recommendations, that if implemented, could prevent future tragedies. The most important set of recommendations were developed several years ago through a partnership between the Department of Public Welfare, the Children and Youth Administrators, and the Child Welfare League of America. Strong practice standards were developed for Pennsylvania. But, these practice standards remain "recommended" rather than mandated. If we know what it means to provide quality child welfare services and we have clear, grounded and informed standards, then I cannot find a reason – other than the clear lack of funding- why these standards are not the mandates for our systems.

These practice standards touch on many aspects of child welfare practice; the one that I would like to focus your attention on is who is doing the work. The best laws and regulations do not create a strong and effective system. Even the Ombudsman's Office the Secretary of DPW is calling for alone will not create a system that protects children. People protect children. Appropriately educated, trained, and licensed people working in ethical environments that hold employees accountable, is how we create an effective system. The Kelley case serves as another reminder of how poorly individuals can act when there is not proper accountability and consequences. It will come as no surprise that as a professional social worker and former child

welfare worker, I strongly believe that we need to re-evaluate the requirements to be hired as a child welfare worker, the amount of time allowed to be certified, the lack of certification for 80% of child welfare services, the need for a professional code of ethics to be institutionalized, and the lack of any professional license for human service professionals.

The state civil service requires 12 social science credits to be a child welfare worker; some counties have a slightly higher standard of a college degree. But, there is still not the requirement that to serve as a case worker one must have a degree in a social science such as social work, sociology, human services or psychology. While all of these degrees do not equally prepare you for child welfare, they are at least all grounded in working with people. It appears only rational to expect that someone has selected a major and completed significant course work to prepare them to be effective in human services if we are to expect them to protect children. **I would call upon the legislature to create the minimal standard of a social science bachelor degree to receive state funding to provide any reimbursable services to children and families within the child welfare system.**

According to the PA regulation, a newly hired caseworker has 18 months to complete training and be certified as a direct practice worker. The General Accounting Office of the federal government has found that on average individuals without a social work degree last 2.5 years as a child welfare caseworker. This means that many of the individuals working in child welfare in PA burn out before they are even certified. The training should happen before an individual is able to start working with families. **The expectation that core training requirements be met before employees start working with families seems like a logical standard.**

Another rational expectation is that all child welfare services be delivered by someone who is certified. Right now certification is for public child welfare workers, yet estimates say that about 80% of child welfare services are delivered by private providers. However, due to funding limitations, these individuals are not permitted to participate in all the courses offered by the University of Pittsburgh's child welfare training program. **All professionals working with children and their families that are funded by needs-based state funding should be certified before they start working with families.**

Finally, there is the question of licensure. If I were to paint your nails for payment or cut your hair, I would need to be licensed. Folks selling cars at dealerships need to be licensed, even those that care for us once we die are licensed, but the group of people who work with the most vulnerable and dependent among us are not required to hold any license. This means they are not required to pass a basic competency exam, have an appropriate educational degree, follow a code of ethics, or attend on-going continuing education. The Kelley case is a perfect example of how important the culture of an agency or sub-unit is to the quality of care children receive. It is critical that all child welfare agencies (public and private) have the

expectation that their employees will follow a code of ethics. It is discriminatory and harmful to say that those who receive critical government services should receive those services from unlicensed folks. **To that end, I would urge all of you to support House Bill 2352 to create a bachelor level human services professionals license.** Our most vulnerable citizens deserve this level of accountability to ensure quality services

Finally, as we look to improve accountability, we have to support those who are doing this incredibly important work. If we truly value protecting our children, then we HAVE to demonstrate that value by supporting this critical workforce. When a caseworker can start at \$19,000 in PA, it is hypocritical to talk about raising the bar and expecting professional behavior. The model practices standards developed several years ago stress the desire to recruit BSWs at the direct practice level and MSWs to serve as supervisors. However, there is not a separate pay track to recruit degreed social workers into child welfare. Social workers do not expect to be rich, but if we want to recruit appropriately educated and trained professionals, we need to make it possible for them to pay their education loans, their rent, and still eat. I understand the desire to create greater accountability and external review, but we cannot expect a professional system unless we invest the necessary resources to have a system that ONLY employs professionals. **To that end, I would strongly urge you to consider utilizing one million dollars to provide 200 degreed (at the bachelors or masters level) social workers employed in public or private child welfare with one year of up to \$5,000 in loan forgiveness.**

NASW-PA strongly believes that addressing the crisis in our child welfare workforce is the first step toward building stronger systems. I hope you will give serious consideration to the recommendations presented today. Most of all, I hope that once the media attention has quieted you will remember that a kind, sweet child suffered unbelievable pain and torment. Addressing workforce issues is a huge challenge- but it is one that we must address.

Thank you!