

Public Policy Recommendations: 2011-2012

The goal of the Porch Light Project is to safely reduce the number of children in Pennsylvania's foster care system through assuring legal permanency and well-being for every child.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Advance child welfare financing that is driven by the following principles:

- **Alignment:** Financing should promote services that align with improved outcomes for children and families. This should be accomplished through a performance-based system that enhances accountability, promotes continuous quality improvement, and provides appropriate state commitment for mandated services.
- **Prevention and Intervention:** Pennsylvania's child welfare system needs to shift its emphasis toward a more proactive response to prevent child abuse and neglect and safely reduce foster care placement. This will require a greater emphasis on home- and community-based services, including flexibility to combine other human services funding streams.
- **Flexibility:** One size doesn't fit all. Families across the Commonwealth differ in the challenges they confront. Flexible financing is required so agencies can ensure individualized services are provided to address the comprehensive needs of children and families.
- **Incentives and Performance Awards:** Financial incentives and performance awards are needed to drive the use of evidence-based and promising practices. These are needed at the county and provider levels to promote the achievement of performance benchmarks and improved outcomes for children and families.
- **Reinvestment:** Any savings from improved outcomes for children and families should be used to drive prevention efforts and improved system performance. Counties should not be penalized for their successful efforts to safely reduce the number of children in foster care.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Assure that all families at-risk of involvement with the child welfare system have access to home visiting services that are evidence-based or which utilize promising practices to strengthen families.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Assure that women, regardless of their race and ethnicity, are treated equitably by hospitals that conduct prenatal and postnatal substance abuse screening.

- Urge the Department of Health and professional organizations to develop a system that would effectively identify substance use in pregnant women in order to maximize the number of women obtaining treatment before the delivery of their infants. Strategies to implement this identification system should be applied universally to all women.



RECOMMENDATION 4:

Require county children and youth agencies to engage in family finding efforts until permanency is achieved - the diligent search and recruitment of relatives and extended kin including *both* maternal and paternal family members in order to keep children safely in their family networks.

- Family finding should occur at the onset of involvement with child welfare services and be updated at least annually
- Family finding efforts should be considered and acted upon in all appropriate case reviews and court proceedings.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Assure that all families involved in the child welfare system have opportunities to safely engage in family conferencing. Family conferencing is an ongoing process that supports families to develop action plans designed to address the underlying causes of their involvement in the child welfare system.

- Families are ultimately responsible for implementing the steps in their action plans. Action plans should be integrated into the family service plan, adequately resourced by the county agency and considered in all case reviews and court proceedings.
- Family conferencing should not be used in situations where the safety of family members cannot be adequately ensured.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Create a legal means for the courts to reinstate parental rights when in the best interest of older youth so that youth do not “age out” of foster care as legal orphans, but only when the county agency has exhausted all other means to help them achieve permanency.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

Assure that children in foster care and their birth parents receive appropriate legal representation:

- Provide adequate state support to pay for legal representation for children in foster care and their parents.
- Require legal representatives for dependent children and families to follow the PA Rules of Professional Conduct and practice standards as outlined in the Juvenile Act or similar rules, and to establish similar practice standards for parent representation.
- Urge the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court to collaborate in the creation and utilization of a standard model county contract for legal representation. Link state reimbursement to county utilization of the model contract. The model would include the following key elements:
 - *Adherence to the provisions of the Juvenile Act or other similar policies related to quality legal representation; appropriate attorney caseload size limits; and, minimum legal training requirements for attorneys as part of certification to represent children and families in relevant court proceedings.*
- Urge the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court to establish a training certification program and enforce a minimum training requirement for judges and hearing masters involved in child welfare court proceedings.
- Require training for child welfare professionals on the duties of legal representatives.
- Provide information to all parents and youth involved in dependency court proceedings on the duties of legal representatives.



RECOMMENDATION 8:

Expand the use of three-month permanency review hearings by the courts for all children in foster care as evidence continues to demonstrate its effectiveness in promoting permanency.

RECOMMENDATION 9:

Provide post-permanency services as needed to every child who exits the foster care system to assure successful reunification, adoption or guardianship. Develop and provide specialized aftercare services as needed to support youth who age out of foster care services without a permanent family.

RECOMMENDATION 10:

Limit the use of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) as a permanency goal to decrease the number of children aging out of foster care or living in long-term foster care. Rule out all other permanency options before allowing the use of APPLA as the permanency goal. Provide on-going permanency services regardless of the child's permanency goal until permanency is achieved through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or placement with fit and willing relatives.

RECOMMENDATION 11:

Extend adoption and guardianship subsidies to youth until age 21; and allow youth to extend in foster care to age 21 per the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

RECOMMENDATION 12:

Improve data collection and reporting:

- Develop a statewide child welfare data and information system to capture all key service delivery points, from the initial report to the conclusion of case involvement, including elements on both agency performance and family outcomes.
- System design should facilitate integration with other human service data systems.
- Annually collect and report data on the race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status of children and families at all key service delivery points.

