



House Bill 1076 – Family Conferencing 2013 Fact Sheet

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The Need for Family Conferencing

When children are unsafe Pennsylvania's child welfare system should be called into action. But government interventions are not a long-term solution for meeting the needs of children – families are. In recent years the child welfare system has become increasingly focused on encouraging families to involve their extended relatives and kin – or their extended family – in helping address the concerns that led to the family's involvement with the county child welfare agency.

Family conferencing is a process of bringing extended family together, at the invitation of the family being served by the agency, to help develop and implement a service plan. These family-driven service plans outline the steps the family will take, and the resources they can rely on, to address any child safety, well-being and permanency concerns. This practice broadens and strengthens a family's natural support network, and encourages reliance on this network to promote better outcomes for children. Families are invited to participate and the process is facilitated so all family members have a voice in creating a service plan that is supported by the family, agency and court. Family members help carry out the plan, capitalizing on the informal and long-term resources and accountability within the extended family.

Family conferencing is not new to Pennsylvania. Many counties are already engaged in this process and the practice is growing. But not every child and family involved with the child welfare system benefits from this process. Family conferencing is encouraged and financially supported by the Department of Public Welfare but not currently required.

The Pennsylvania General Assembly should adopt and the governor should sign into law HB 1076.

This legislation would require county child welfare agencies to offer opportunities for families to participate in a "family conference" at key decision-making points during child welfare agency involvement (e.g. prior to seeking court involvement, when children enter foster care, etc.). HB 1076 would help families work together to resolve the concerns that led to government intervention by:

- Requiring the child welfare agency to offer and coordinate family conferencing when in the best interest of children, and help identify and prepare those who are invited to participate.
- Bringing extended family members together to develop a family-driven service plan that meets the approval of the child welfare agency and courts and builds on the capacity of the extended family.
- Identifying extended family members willing to be a short- or long-term placement resource if removing a child from their home becomes necessary.
- Phasing in the requirement to offer family conferencing to all families accepted for services by county child welfare agencies over the next five years.