

Performance Audit of Pennsylvania's Children and Youth System

HR 426 calls for the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to conduct a performance audit of PA's children and youth (C&Y) system. In FY1997-98, PA spent \$717.4 million on these services: 43% federal; 39% state; and 18% county.

Findings and Issues:

- ***PA is one of 15 states with a state-supervised/county-administered C&Y system.*** Such a system gives counties a relatively high degree of autonomy, but makes it difficult for DPW to ensure appropriate services for all children.
- ***Fiscal issues appear to consume an inordinate amount of state and county managerial effort.*** Concerns over fiscal issues, if they become predominant, can affect an organization's ability to carry out its core mission. The C&Y system appears to be at or near this point. Key issues include county concerns over DPW adjustments to county needs-based budgets and delays in payments and allocation letters to counties.
- ***The number of children in out-of-home care has increased by 87% since 1980, creating a scarcity of foster homes.*** The scarcity of foster homes can result in out-of-county placements, which make visitations difficult, and mismatches between the child and the foster parent, which can lead to children being moved from one foster home to another.
- ***DPW conducts thorough annual inspections of county C&Y agencies and private providers.*** The large majority of counties and private providers adhere to DPW regulations. However, for those relatively few counties that have had repeated difficulty meeting these regulations, DPW has little choice but to continue granting provisional licenses.
- ***County caseload regulations are overly simplistic.*** Caseloads are to be no greater than 30 families per caseworker. In some situations, caseloads of 30 are too high; in other situations, caseloads of 30, or even more, may be reasonable.
- ***Child abuse substantiation rates vary widely from county to county.*** Substantiation rates varied from 10% (Chester) to 48% (Snyder). However, all the counties with high rates are all small, with populations of less than 50,000.
- ***In 1996, PA had the nation's second lowest rate of substantiated reports of abuse and neglect.*** PA's rate is low, in part because our definition of abuse includes only severe cases of abuse and neglect; other states use a broader definition.
- ***Many counties have high caseworker turnover, resulting in cases being continually reassigned.*** Caseworker I turnover rates averaged 33% but were much higher in some counties. Low pay and high stress were among the factors cited.
- ***PACWIS should be an effective tool to monitor counties.*** PACWIS, a new computerized casework management system, should provide detailed management reports and allow "benchmarking" to compare county performance.
- ***Neither DPW nor PDE has developed guidelines to implement Act 1995-29, which requires that schools refer habitually truant students to county C&Y agencies.*** As a result, practices vary widely from county to county.

Recommendations:

The Department of Public Welfare (DPW) should:

- improve communications with the counties, especially on how it approves needs-based spending levels;
- hire sufficient staff to process approvals, advance payments, and reimbursements in a timely manner;
- modernize and streamline the needs-based budgeting appeals process;
- continue its efforts to obtain \$800,000 annually in available federal monies for child abuse protection;
- consider allowing counties to receive quarterly advanced payments of 20-25%, rather than 12.5%;
- modify its regulations governing caseload size to reflect the type of service being rendered;
- use its new computerized PACWIS system to "benchmark" counties;
- develop a policy for when and how to conduct child death reviews;
- review its regional office staffing needs and give additional guidance to these offices regarding provisional licenses;
- help counties recruit foster parents and report to the Legislature on the merits of subsidized custodianship programs;
- expand the drug and alcohol training included in a county caseworker's core certification training;
- explore the need for additional mental health services for children;
- with the Department of Education, develop a joint policy statement regarding truancy referrals; and
- work with appropriate judicial agencies to develop a training program for judges and court masters.

County Children and Youth officials should:

- consider conducting follow-up visits after a child's case is closed; and
- begin to implement relevant recommendations contained in this report.

The General Assembly should:

- consider imposing penalties for false reporting and additional punishments for assaults on C&Y workers;
- amend Pennsylvania's Adoption Act to better reflect ASFA changes; and
- consider raising the age (currently 14) at which children can refuse mental health services.