



Senate Aging and Youth Committee 4/3/2024

Thank you Chairwoman Ward and Chairwoman Collett for convening this meeting, and for your interest in this important topic.

I am Chris Kirchner the Director of Children's Advocacy Centers of PA, our state organization that supports our 41 CACs across the state and is working to develop new CACs where there are none.

As you know from our hearing last August focused on CACs, a key component of our programs is a multi-disciplinary team response to abuse that includes children and youth, law enforcement, prosecution, medical and mental health agencies working together with the CAC to respond to cases of alleged child sexual abuse and serious physical abuse.

Our children and youth workers partner with the multi-disciplinary team at their CACs every day. In 2023 there were 14,922 children referred to a CAC, including 10,589 reports of sexual abuse and 3,883 reports of physical abuse, as well as 1500 cases including serious neglect, witness to violence, and drug endangerment. Some of these cases were "law enforcement only," but the majority were a joint child welfare/law enforcement investigation. In 2023 there were 11,020 forensic interviews and 5,487 medical evaluations conducted at a CAC or through a linkage agreement.

We know that collaboration on these cases is vitally important, but collaboration takes time. C&Y workers must come to the CAC for team meetings, forensic interviews and case review, and must often follow up with law enforcement, medical providers, prosecutors, and victim advocates, to get updates and share information between meetings. This is recognized as best practice, and yet it can be challenging to achieve due to various factors, as shared by our CAC Directors in a survey we did to prepare for this hearing.

Not surprisingly, the most common challenge mentioned was open staff positions, and high staff turnover at our C&Y agencies. One Director shared: "The lack of experienced case workers creates major challenges for the system. Workers go through basic training and then are expected to go into the field and work independently. Their role is very complicated, and each and every child and child's family situation is unique to them, and the caseworkers don't always have the knowledge, skill set or resources to address their needs. They are literally expected to make life and death decisions."

It was also shared that "Staff that do stay in their jobs, often have a higher than ideal caseload, and in some cases supervisors are also investigating cases."

In rural counties that don't have a CAC, the trip to an adjacent county's CAC, can take up the caseworker's entire day, which isn't always feasible with limited staffing.

"Staff turnover creates a knowledge vacuum and new staff don't know what they don't know. They have good intentions but don't have adequate experience to make informed decisions."

Recently one of our C&Y agencies dismantled their specialized sex abuse unit, due to staffing and coverage challenges.

Finally, "Staffing shortages must be addressed in some long-term way, or staffing and morale problems will continue. The high turnover creates a large number of always new employees, robbing the agency of the benefits it can get from a veteran staff."

Suggestions for addressing the challenges presented by staff turnover include:

Increase pay- Higher wages would not only help retain staff but would allow individuals with more experience to be recruited. Consider standardized salaries for C&Y workers across the state. Consider a pay incentive to stay beyond the first or second year.

Ensure new staff have access to ongoing training, mentoring from a supervisor, and a team approach to making difficult case decisions that can leave caseworkers feeling stressed and burnt out.

“This should not be a stepping stone career; this should be a career professionals seek to join.”

Another way to support C&Y is to ensure that CACs have all the resources needed to respond to C&Y referrals as soon as the referral is received. C&Y workers (and the MDT) cannot wait for a forensic interview, nor should families have to wait.

As you know, we are seeking state funding to ensure that every CAC in PA has the capacity to respond quickly to referrals, and to offer a full array of services to all children in a timely manner. We continue to seek \$4.5 million in the 2025 PA State budget to bring additional resources to our CACs. We want to support our C&Y and law enforcement partners with a timely response for all services.

We also support recommendations made by the Keystone State Child Abuse Medical Forum, which aims to “Reduce child morbidity and mortality from all forms of child maltreatment, by ensuring children have access to high quality medical exams.” This 26-page report identifies challenges and barriers to accessing medical care for children, and makes recommendations to improve that access, including by increasing C&Y worker’s access to real-time consultation with specially trained health care professionals. They are requesting \$2 million for a state-wide pilot project.

Finally, in spite of many challenges, CYS in the majority of counties is a strong partner in the critical work being done by MDTs and CACs across the state:

“Our CYS Administrator was the leader in the initial creation of the MDIT and CAC. CYS regularly attends forensic interviews and case reviews.”

“The relationship is now strong from leadership down, and this has been evident with the participation and open communication that we have with our CYS. We are very lucky to have such a solid partnership with them.”

“CYS is great at working with our CAC. If we have concerns, we are able to discuss them and come up with a better plan moving forward.”

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