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Kelvin Abrashoff  
*Administrator*  
*Children's Services*  
Monday – Friday  
8:30AM – 4:30PM  
(814) 643-3270

## **Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania**

OFFICE OF

### **CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

412 PENN STREET  
HUNTINGDON, PENNSYLVANIA 16652

### Senate Hearing for Child Welfare

April 3, 2024

My name is Kelvin Abrashoff, and I am the Administrator for Huntingdon County Children and Youth Services. I am in my second year as the Administrator, and currently have eight years of experience in child welfare. Huntingdon County is a small and rural class six county that currently staffs 39 individuals that are dedicated to ensuring the safety of our most vulnerable population: our children. We are currently represented by Senator Ward who also serves Blair County, Mifflin County, Juniata County, and Fulton County. I am grateful and honored for the opportunity to present today on the issues revolving around child welfare.

I would like to highlight the challenges regarding investigating child abuse, providing services to families, assessing safety, and providing services to ensure that children are provided with nurturance, family connections, support as they transition into adulthood, and services that allow a child to remain safely in their home or return home as expeditiously as possible, falls to the child welfare professionals of Pennsylvania. Child welfare professionals work in difficult and emotional situations with children who have been victimized by physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and other forms of maltreatment.

Child welfare workers never meet individuals during their best day. Instead, staff are met with individuals in crisis situations, struggling with mental health challenges, suffering from drug and alcohol afflictions, poverty, and other difficult issues. Child welfare professionals are required to develop substantial knowledge and skills surrounding the rights of families, the laws surrounding child welfare, how to develop culturally sensitive services, and the legal processes governing the system. While performing these duties, child welfare workers are met with long hours, tremendous demands, and with dramatic impacts to their personal lives. Every year, child welfare professionals are injured or killed in their pursuit to protect children in Pennsylvania.

Because of the nature of this work, there is a staffing crisis in child welfare. Counties are finding themselves understaffed, overworked, underpaid, scrutinized, with no resolution in sight. There are substantial challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff, while reports continue to come in. While a college degree, a requirement to qualify for this work, continues to rise over \$100,000, child welfare professionals continue to be underpaid. Staff are not only working a full-time job with a demanding work schedule, but they are finding themselves working second or third jobs to pay their bills. We cannot continue to pay our workers pennies when they are dollars in debt.

Currently, two thirds of Pennsylvania county children and youth agencies fall under the hiring requirements of civil service. These requirements prevent experienced workers from gaining employment. They are also preventing young and eager workers the ability to help their community unless they have college experience. Current hiring processes under civil service require a job posting to be made for their open position. The listing generally stays active on the civil service website for two weeks. Once the posting comes down, it takes the county roughly one week to receive the list of qualified applicants. This prevents county agencies from quickly engaging with applicants as they apply. In today's hiring world, companies cannot expect applicants to still be interested in employment if it takes the company three weeks to make the initial contact.

Child welfare professionals need to have immediate access to qualified applicants as they come in, and they should be able to hire based on experience without requiring a college degree. In 2023, Pennsylvania removed the four-year degree requirement for tens of thousands of state government jobs. It was said that "In Pennsylvania, the people should decide what path is best for them, not have it decided by some arbitrary requirement or any arbitrary limitation." I believe it is time for that change to come into effect with county government jobs. With fewer and fewer individuals going to college for social work, and with the commonwealth seeing a 25% decline in new hires, we cannot wait to make changes while our current workers are struggling.

Child welfare professionals are being asked to do too much. They are required to be educated in federal and state laws, educational requirements, medical requirements, and all other tasks of the job. Children and Youth staff are to investigate reports of child abuse and neglect. However, our system continues to be flooded with cases that no other agencies are willing to take because they do not have the answers. Child welfare is commonly known as the umbrella agency that receives their primary responsibilities, but also everything else. This forces our agency to either act or put children at risk if we decide the case does not meet the standard of abuse or neglect.

There are no easy cases. Each day, the reports of child abuse and neglect continue to worsen in severity, and they require extensive care. Children are being locked in dog cages; they are being sexually abused or trafficked; children are test samples for their parents' drugs; they are being physically abused simply because they cry; and they live in deplorable homes rummaging through the garbage for food. These children deserve to be protected and cared for. They deserve to have essential and readily available resources. They deserve to have a bed to lay their heads on at night. Instead, child welfare professionals are being forced to temporarily house children in their office to ensure safety while they combat placement shortages in residential facilities, and declining resource families.

The stress and emotional strain that child welfare professionals face each day cause workers to question their decisions. Workers are fearful for what may happen if their decision is wrong. They fear their decision will be a front-page article or the 6 pm headline on the news. They fear threats from the community via email, Facebook, and other measures. We see a disconnect between law enforcement and child welfare agencies where child welfare workers are being criminally charged for doing their job. These fears create burnout and fuel the staffing shortages that we have been drowning in for years.

The public needs to be properly educated on what abuse and neglect is. They need to know that if they see it, hear it, know it, suspect it, you must report it. Law enforcement, schools, elected officials, and countless others need to meet with their child welfare providers to understand everyone's roles in investigating abuse and neglect. There needs to be a community committed to combating child abuse, not just one government agency.

In August of 2023, Senator Ward held a hearing for the need for more child advocacy centers calling them an essential resource. I wholeheartedly agree and hope that her push continues with the

support of others. A child needs to be able to disclose their traumatic event one time with a trained professional, and they should be able to do so in a familiar environment: not somewhere unknown and more than an hour away. They need to have immediate access to disclose and not have to wait weeks. With the push for more child advocacy centers, there needs to be a push for permanent funding to ensure each child has access to an interview. Currently, the child advocacy centers of Pennsylvania are funded through the birth certificate funding which is roughly \$47,000 for each of the 41 child advocacy centers. As new centers open, that number will go down. This forces child advocacy centers to fundraise and apply for competitive grants each year just to keep the lights on.

I voice these current struggles within our system because I have hope that things will change, and I can see a brighter future with good things happening in our commonwealth. Having this hearing today is a prime example of a positive step forward. Meeting with our elected officials, our law enforcement agencies, our schools, our court system, and working hand in hand with them can and does happen.

I am here today as proof that parties can work together. In Huntingdon County, we meet at least annually with our local enforcement agencies to review protocols on responding to abuse; we bring in person mandated reporter trainings to our school districts; we work behind the closed doors with our commissioners to roll up our sleeves and work through countless issues that we face every day; we work on establishing a positive relationship with the public by attending social events to educate the community on what we are doing; and we continue to grow and learn new ways of serving and protecting our children. A good example of this would be our Chief of Police and myself attending the Crimes Against Children Conference in Dallas Texas last August. Our Chief of Police and I have also developed and incorporated a handle with care program that alerts the child's school if they potentially experienced a traumatic event. This allows the school to offer resources to the student instead of punishments for sudden changes in behaviors.

Everyone in this room supports our children. I also believe that everyone in this room wants to provide the next generation with a world in better shape than how they found it. It is my belief that this hearing will facilitate future discussions on how we can support our child welfare workers. With that being said, I am willing to roll up my sleeves and put in the work.

I would like to thank everyone here today for their time and attention to these issues. Your presence alone means something. It means you care to hear about our struggles and how you can help us ultimately help our children for the sustainable future.

I would like to thank my county commissioners for their countless efforts in working hand and hand with myself and my staff to better serve our workers and children. Their willingness to meet and have an open and honest discussion makes change possible. I would also like to thank my staff. My staff are the reason I am here today before you. They are working nonstop and efficiently to serve our community. They are the ones who put in the long hours every week and respond to unknown situations every time they go out. They listen to change and my viewpoints. More importantly, they share their needs and ideas on how to improve our child welfare system. They are the front line, and they deserve to be heard and represented. I am incredibly proud of the work that Huntingdon County Children's Services is providing. It is the work of all child welfare professionals that children can be safe, can live a healthy life, can be loved unconditionally, and can have a voice.