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**Democratic Caucus Policy Committee
Testimony of Commissioner Kimberly Ali, Philadelphia Department of Human Services
DHS Overnight Stays
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Good morning Senators, Katie Muth, Art Haywood, and members of the Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Caucus Policy Committee, my name is Kimberly Ali, Commissioner for the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS). I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding DHS and the utilization of the childcare room which is in our main office building at 1515 Arch Street in Philadelphia.

DHS' mission is to provide and promote safety, permanency, and well-being for children and youth at risk of abuse, neglect, and delinquency. In 2013, DHS embarked on a comprehensive, citywide system transformation aimed at improving the outcomes for children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system in Philadelphia. This approach is based on the premise that positive outcomes are achieved through the use of children protection and child welfare services that are family-centered, community based, culturally competent, integrated, timely and accountable for results. To accomplish this goal, the Improving Outcomes for Children (IOC) system transformation was implemented.

The four goals of IOC are:

- More children and youth are safely in their own homes and communities.
- More children and youth are reunified more quickly or achieve other permanency.
- Congregate care use is reduced.
- Improved child, youth, and family functioning.

DHS continues to operate the 24/7 Philadelphia child abuse hotline, conduct investigations, identify placements, and assist with permanency for children whose parental rights have been terminated. DHS is mandated to investigate reports of abuse and neglect, when the alleged abuse and neglect occurs in Philadelphia. In Fiscal Year 2022, DHS received 32,868 hotline reports. These reports of abuse and neglect are called into the child abuse hotline at any time, day, or night.

DHS prioritizes support to children and youth in their own homes and communities. These efforts have resulted in a significant decrease in the number of children and youth in placement. Since 2017, DHS has reduced the placement population by a total of 2,349 children and youth, which is a 38.8% reduction. We continue working to ensure that families receive the services that best fit their needs, and that children and youth only come into DHS care when there is a safety threat that prevents the child or youth from remaining safely in their own home. When a child or youth has been removed from their home, we prioritize placing them with kin, meaning we place them with someone who knows the youth and/or family. Currently, a total of 1,881 or about 51% of children and youth are placed in kinship care.

The DHS childcare room has existed for over 20 years to provide short-term emergency care for children and youth when placement is required due to a safety threat. The childcare room is staffed by DHS employees and is open 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. Children and youth come into the childcare room for a variety of reasons, but mostly because despite our best efforts and often due to intense trauma, they have experienced a placement disruption and require a new placement and/or because our staff need to identify a placement for youth during an investigation. To support children in a time of crisis, DHS has developed a welcoming and safe space to receive children and youth while DHS works on developing an appropriate plan for the child or youth. Some youth stay only for a few hours, but others may need to stay overnight. The childcare room is equipped with a shower, kitchen, and sleeping quarters for children and youth.

During Fiscal Year 2022, we saw a significant increase in the use of the childcare room for overnight stays. To better understand this increase and to inform strategies to reduce the use of the childcare room, DHS analyzed data to learn more about who was using the childcare room and why.

Our research revealed that the childcare room is most frequently used by children who are between the ages of 11 and 17 (58%), female (58%), and African American (72%). The details of each circumstance that results in a child using the childcare room are unique, but the most common reason is a placement disruption, meaning that the youth was already in placement with DHS, and something has occurred that has caused a placement move. After analyzing the data, talking to children, youth, kinship and foster parents, DHS, and provider staff, it became clear that the following were contributing factors to the increased use of the childcare room:

- The needs of the children and youth who utilize the childcare room are more complex and require more efficient integration between the child welfare and behavioral health systems to address their needs.
- During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, foster care recruitment was severely impacted. Potential foster and kinship parents were hesitant to accept children and youth in their homes for fear of COVID-19 transmission; therefore, recruitment of new foster homes has been limited.

While Philadelphia's child welfare system has seen progress, we know that we still have more work to do. We are actively working to implement solutions that will lead to a decrease in the utilization of the childcare room. These solutions include:

- **Conducting placement stability meetings.** Because placement disruptions are a major driver of the use of the childcare room, DHS will continue conducting placement stability meetings. These meetings include the child or youth as well as their family, foster or kinship parent, and other members of their team, and focus on developing a plan to stabilize the placement before a placement disruption occurs.
- **Expanding the Professional Resource Parent program.** DHS launched the Professional Resource Parent program on September 1, 2022, through a contracted provider. This program provides training to resource parents whose sole responsibility is to care for and provide support to children and youth with complex behavioral and health needs. DHS will continue expanding this program.
- **Collaborating with the behavioral health system.** DHS will continue collaborating with Community Behavioral Health (CBH) and the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services (DBHIDS) to provide children and youth with

necessary services and immediate access to behavioral health supports while in their own homes or in their placements.

- **Increasing the total number of emergency foster care homes.** DHS is increasing the number of emergency foster care homes, where foster parents can accept children and youth for placement at any time, day, or night. To support this, DHS is also increasing the per diem for emergency foster care.
- **Building a Kinship Navigator program.** DHS released a Request for Proposals for a Kinship Navigator program that will assist with further exploring kinship care resources for children and youth throughout their involvement with DHS.

DHS will continue to implement these strategies to decrease the utilization of the childcare room for overnight stays. Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony. Please reach out to my office with any questions. I would be happy to address them.