

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
October 27, 2022
Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS)
Acting Secretary Meg Snead

Senators Haywood, Muth, and members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee – thank you for allowing the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (PA DHS) to provide written testimony about our work with the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (Philadelphia DHS). Pennsylvania is a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system, and we are committed to supporting county child welfare agencies and private service providers working to support and protect children and families in their communities.

Following reporting from the Philadelphia Inquirer this summer, I, as well as leadership from PA DHS’ Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) quickly engaged with Philadelphia DHS leadership to discuss specific challenges and concerns raised related to the use of the childcare room. I appreciate and commend Philadelphia DHS’ willingness to address the situation with us directly and honestly. I’d like to share some of the insights shared by Philadelphia DHS:

1. Nearly 90 percent of children who have had to utilize the child care room at Philadelphia DHS’ offices do so because of an abrupt and unplanned disruption to their placement. They are either brought there by a foster or family placement who can no longer care for them or they voluntarily arrive themselves after running away from a foster care or kinship home placement. Philadelphia DHS is establishing a resource hotline for caregivers who may be contemplating terminating the placement to provide additional support in the hopes that a disruption can be avoided and the caregiver and child can get the support they need to ease circumstances. The Childcare room is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and is staffed with DHS Social Workers and Recreational Specialists. Youth who come to the room do go through a formal assessment process when they arrive and efforts begin immediately to find alternative placements. Most youth are only in the room for one night before being placed with a contracted provider. The room is equipped with food options and even a shower if needed. Philadelphia DHS provided us with a series of strategies to reduce the use of the room and the OCYF Southeast Regional office continues to monitor the implementation of these strategies and the use of the Childcare room.
2. The offices at 1515 Arch have security, and children must sign in and out as they come and go. The building and the rooms are secure, but children are not there in place of detention. Staff work to quickly secure new placements and to mitigate risk of the youth leaving without placement, but staff cannot forcibly prevent the child from leaving. If children do leave before placement can be secured, staff are mandated to report the incident.
3. Philadelphia DHS is reporting an increase of children who are seen at an emergency department for a behavioral health need but are discharged from the ER setting with no treatment plan or direct referrals to ongoing care, be it in-home or at a residential facility. There are limited options for placement between full hospitalization and in-home

services, and because treatment providers are typically privately-run, they have a right of refusal. Additionally, if a county is seeking residential treatment for a child involved in the child welfare system, the county must hold a contract with that provider. We continue to encourage Philadelphia and other counties to continue to pursue relationships with additional providers to help address their needs as the system continues to experience staffing and capacity challenges broadly.

4. The agency is working on improving data collection because, given how data is collected, they are not able to “de-duplicate” cases of individual children, meaning that if a child comes and goes multiple times within a certain period, they are not able to accurately determine how many check ins or check outs can be applied to that child. Despite this, Philadelphia DHS indicated that, as of our meeting in August, no child had spent more than three consecutive nights at 1515 Arch based on data collected this year.

Thank you for your attention on this issue and for your support of children and families around Pennsylvania.