

Testimony Before the Montgomery County Commissioners

Public Hearing

Human Service Block Grant 2013 – 2014

Montgomery County Human Service Center

Norristown, PA

November 19, 2013

Debra Schilling Wolfe, MEd

Executive Director, Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research  
Montgomery County Office of Children & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee

My name is Debra Schilling Wolfe and I am serving my second term appointed by the Montgomery County Commissioners to the Montgomery County Office of Child & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee. I am a resident of Whitpain township in the heart of Montgomery County and Executive Director of the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania, a collaboration of Penn's Schools of Social Policy & Practice, Law, Medicine, and Nursing, and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, whose focus is on child welfare reform.

Victims of child abuse and neglect rarely have a voice in public hearings such as this. Their parents surely aren't going to identify themselves and advocate for funding and better programming. The Montgomery County Office of Child & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee formed a Public Policy Work Group to conduct research and offer recommendations as well as give voice to the county's children and their families. I respectfully submit the following testimony in regard to the 2013-2014 Montgomery County Human Services Block Grant on behalf of the Montgomery County Office of Child & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee.

The Montgomery County Office of Children & Youth is a statewide model for county services for victims of child abuse and neglect, and those at risk for harm. The county is frequently offered the opportunity to implement new initiatives and promising practices, and collects data to demonstrate program outcomes. The Montgomery County Office of Child & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee Public Policy Work Group reviewed the needs and proposed services and fully endorse the use of flexible funding to allow the county the flexibility to fund services as they are needed by the community. The Office of Children & Youth strives to meet the ongoing and emerging needs of the county's children and families through this approach. By utilizing Special Grant Initiatives to bring evidence-based and promising practices to the county, they have successfully prevented children and families from needing a higher level of intervention, ultimately keeping families together and saving precious county resources.

The approach of investing in prevention and diversion allows the Office of Children & Youth to direct its resources where they are needed most. This is borne out by the data. In the most recent data available, in 2011, there were 2,709,084 reports of child abuse and neglect nationally. Of these, only 61% rose to the level of needing an investigation, with only one out of four of these investigations (36,551) being "substantiated," that is, finding sufficient evidence to validate the allegations in the report. This data mirrors the substantiation rate in Montgomery County. By providing services to at-risk families before children are harmed and therefore require a higher level of involvement and family disruption, protective service resources can focus on those truly needing that level of intervention. Not only does this approach keep families together, it ultimately saves dollars and saves lives.

The Office of Children & Youth has identified the most pressing needs of children and families that come to their attention and have proposed programs and services that address these needs. Many of these have already been in place through special grants and have shown promising results. Others have been utilized elsewhere and are

deemed excellent opportunities to serve the county's high-risk children and families. The Montgomery County Office of Child & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee endorses the use of Human Service Community Block Grant funding for the following recommended initiatives:

- *Alternative Response to Housing (ARHI)* provides funding to mitigate homelessness and foster care placement. It assists with security deposits, rent supplements, payment of back rent to avoid eviction, temporary housing post-eviction, utility support, funds to eliminate unsafe housing conditions, and purchase of bedding and major appliances. Housing is one of the top five reasons that children are removed from their homes, with a one-time high of 48% of children in placement impacted by unstable housing; currently the level is 21% in the county. Children should never be removed from their parents' care for reasons of poverty. This year, the program has been extended to support youth transitioning from placement to independence.
- *Alternatives to Truancy Prevention* provides diversion from the court system for youth are truant from school. Since the Office of Children & Youth took over responsibility for services for truant youth from Juvenile Probation, a prevention and intervention approach shifted the approach from court involvement as the rule to court involvement as the exception. Since truancy is often the symptom of a larger issue with the youth and/or family, the approach is focused on the cause of the problem, increasing its impact.
- *SAFE Families for Children* offers a community based support system for families experiencing a temporary crisis through identifying, screening, and training volunteer host families to provide respite care and mentorship through an informal arrangement between families, with an agency Family Coach/Social Worker overseeing services. Children remain in the custody of the parent and therefore custody does not need to be transferred to the Office of Children & Youth; the agency is merely a conduit for the service. Although the program model allows for placement of pregnant and parenting teens and new mothers, the Office of Children & Youth will not be using this service for that population.
- *Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)* is a nationally-recognized model of case planning, facilitated by an agency and empowers family members to identify and develop community based resources and supports. This model reduces the need for out-of-home placement while increasing family and community involvement in case planning.
- *Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST)* is an intensive family and community-based treatment model geared toward youth ages 10-21 who exhibit high-risk behaviors or who are deemed ungovernable or chronically truant. MST is a home-based program that strives to empower families to develop a natural support network through family and community resources. This model targets children and youth who would otherwise need higher levels of care and/or placement outside of the

home. This program is a collaborative effort with the county's Behavioral Health Department who will transition any eligible youth to Medical Assistance, thus saving county dollars.

- *High Fidelity Wraparound Services (HIFI)* is a team-based model that coordinates the complex needs of youth who are involved in multiple systems and at risk of placement in institutional settings and/or experiencing serious emotional and behavioral difficulties. The HIFI process is intended to divert families from formal child welfare involvement, reduce the length of time a case remains open, support reunification efforts, reduce youth behavior that requires intervention by the authorities, and reduce re-entry.

In addition to these programs specifically for child welfare populations, the Montgomery County Office of Child & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee Public Policy Work Group sees new opportunities for cross-system collaboration. As families do not live in the funding silos that our rules, regulations, and funding streams create, our services should reflect their world, much like the county's new Community Connections approach. The implementation of Human Services Block Grants offers communities the opportunity to think outside the box. For example, historically children often needed a mental health diagnosis to receive services when, ironically, their behavior was only in response to a larger family issue. By looking at human services needs more globally, children may not need to be saddled with a diagnosis that follows them through life in order for the family to receive the help it needs. Cross-system collaboration puts the family first in order to find solutions.

We would encourage the county to support the Human Services Cabinet to entertain the following four proposals as a joint, cross-system effort:

1. Youth aging out of the foster care system have pressing needs. Transitioning from child-serving to adult-serving systems is difficult at best, and needed services that were formerly available to foster youth can become out of reach. As the adult behavioral health system focuses largely on those with serious mental illness, many youth who are still in need of such support fail to meet the diagnostic level of medical necessity. We would encourage this group to explore programming for transition-aged youth that is not based on a medical model, but on the developmental and social needs of this population. The county has assumed responsibility for the care and well-being of these youth, and it is our responsibility to give them the best opportunity possible to become successful adults.
2. Safe and stable housing has been identified as the number one human service priority for Montgomery County. To maximize efficiency and reduce duplication of efforts, we recommend that housing support become a cross-system function.

3. Employment services for older youth and parents impacts those involved in multiple systems. This is an issue of poverty, not child welfare, and should be addressed as such.
4. The Family Group Decision Making Model empowers families to take responsibility for their own case planning and helps them develop natural support networks in their communities, reducing their dependency on systemic intervention. Widely in use in child welfare, we recommend this model for potential use in other departments.

Thank you for the opportunity to convey the recommendations of the Montgomery County Office of Child & Youth Citizens Advisory Committee. We are honored to serve in this important advisory capacity.

###