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To change how the agency serves children, begin with a foundation.

First steps to fixing the DHS

By Debra Schilling Wolfe and
Richard J. Gelles

The release last week of the grand jury's report on the tragic death of 14-year-old Danieal Kelly could be subtitled, "How not to protect a child."

The report describes in graphic detail how the Philadelphia Department of Human Services and an agency contracted to provide in-home services failed to protect Danieal, not once, but over and over again. This was not a failure of one or two caseworkers - Danieal's death was the result of a complete system breakdown.

A photo of the smiling child, confined to a wheelchair by cerebral palsy, has appeared with the headlines. Inside the more than 200-page grand jury report is a very different photo, that of a child horribly neglected, with bedsores and worse, who would have appeared to be on the verge of death had anybody bothered to notice.

The horrific death of this child and the public outcry from the grand jury's findings once again bring to light the critical life-and-death decisions made all across the country, every day, by child-welfare workers who are charged with protecting our most vulnerable children.

It is a sadly repeated truth that change in child-welfare agencies tends to occur only after truly catastrophic events. With each case that makes the headlines, we naively hope that this will be the case that makes a difference. Experience tells us otherwise.

It is encouraging that Mayor Nutter and the leadership of DHS did not choose to respond by simply throwing more money, more staff, and more training onto the pyre. It is also heartening to see that the mayor and

his team are looking at systemic failure, rather than merely blaming the caseworkers on the front line.

The majority of caseworkers and staff at DHS are caring and competent, and do the best they can with the tools they have at hand. However, the best they can is often not enough. It is absolutely necessary that Mayor Nutter, Deputy Mayor Donald Schwarz, and DHS Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose develop a longer view on how to reform the agency.

With the benefit of recommendations from a comprehensive Child Welfare Review Panel Report issued in June 2007, the administration has the road map to implement critical change. Yet, with more recommendations than one can count, full implementation of the panel's recommendations will be a daunting task.

Numerous changes are needed in order for DHS to shift from an agency fraught with dysfunction to one that can truly respond to the needs of victims of child abuse and neglect. The following recommendations are a necessary foundation of system reform:

Remember that the client is the child. Danieal's caseworkers, when they actually visited her home, saw Danieal's mother as their client and struggled to help her cope with the many stressors in her life. Danieal was virtually invisible, not because the caseworkers were callous, but because they forgot she was their client.

Spend individual time with the child to ascertain his or her well-being. If Danieal were truly seen, enrolled in school, or taken to a physician, she would be alive today.

Casework supervisors need training, tools and systemic support to do their jobs. DHS supervisors need to meet as a group to provide critical input into agency policies and procedures.

Communication is critical among those involved in child-abuse and -neglect cases. Case reviews and decision-making needs to include all those involved with a case, not merely the caseworker and his or her supervisor.

Caseworkers need appropriate education and training to be prepared to do their jobs. With the new benefit of a federal-loan-forgiveness program for child-welfare social workers, there is now financial support for professionally trained social workers to enter the workforce.

Mayor Nutter should appoint an ombudsman as an external monitor of DHS.

We have seen only too clearly that a child welfare system cannot adequately monitor itself. The creation of an outside monitor with unfettered access to information creates a watchdog for future cases and a source of systemic feedback.

Sadly, no child-welfare system, no matter how well it functions, can guarantee that no child under its watch will die.

We are encouraged, however, that the mayor will do whatever it takes to ensure the well-being of the 6,500 children in the care and custody of the City of Philadelphia.

Debra Schilling Wolfe is the executive director of the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania. E-mail her at dwolfe@sp2.upenn.edu.

Richard J. Gelles is Dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice. E-mail him at gelles@sp2.upenn.edu.