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Auditor General DePasquale Talks about Opioid Crisis Impact on Broken Child-Welfare System

FARMINGTON, Fayette County – Auditor General Eugene DePasquale today presented the following testimony to members of the House Majority Policy Committee on the impact of the opioid crisis on Pennsylvania’s child-welfare system:

**Written Statement of
Auditor General Eugene A. DePasquale
Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2017
For the House Majority Policy Committee
The Honorable Kerry Benninghoff, Majority Chair
Regarding the Effect of the Opioid Crisis on Pennsylvania’s Child-Welfare System**

Chairman Benninghoff, Representative Dowling and members of the House Policy Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the effect of the opioid crisis on Pennsylvania’s child-welfare system.

Background

In September, my Department released an 80-page special report titled “State of the Child,” which evaluated how the commonwealth’s child-welfare system is functioning. As part of the year-long review, my team interviewed nearly 130 people involved with all levels of the child-welfare system, from state officials to county agency administrators to families who have been involved with the system.

What I found was appalling. Pennsylvania spent nearly \$2 billion in 2016 to protect children – and \$1 billion of that came directly from state funds – yet 46 children died and 79 nearly died from abuse and neglect. What really concerned me was that nearly half of those children’s families were known to county CYS agencies. Pennsylvania’s child-welfare system is broken. This is not an exaggeration.

Since the report’s release in September, I have been visiting county CYS agencies and talking with caseworkers, administrators, nonprofit leaders, district attorneys, coroners, county-level officials and more.

Opioid effect

Among the topics I have focused on has been how the opioid crisis is straining an already-stressed child-welfare system. In many counties, the effect on CYS caseworkers, who are already overworked and under duress as they strive to keep Pennsylvania’s at-risk children safe, has been extreme.

Without exception, caseworkers and others who work in this field have told me that the opioid crisis has dramatically increased caseloads and increasingly jeopardized child safety and well-being.

In Northumberland County, for example, fully 50 percent of all CYS cases involve substance abuse or addiction — and the number is rising fast. Northumberland County also has an increasing number of children in foster care because of the rise in opioid overdoses, opioid-related deaths and caregivers going to jail for opioid-related crimes.

In Erie County, the number of children in placement is also rising because of the opioid epidemic. As of August 2017, Erie County Office of Children, Youth and Families had already removed 215 children from their homes – more than the overall 2016 total of 213 children. More than half of the CYs cases that involved substance abuse directly involved opioids.

Many county CYs agencies are now co-locating Drug and Alcohol caseworkers within their offices to facilitate faster, better communication on cases. Having experts on addiction and recovery readily available greatly helps CYs caseworkers make appropriate decisions about the safety of the children they are tasked with overseeing.

We absolutely cannot ignore the opioid scourge as we work to improve the child-welfare system in Pennsylvania.

Report observations

To give you an overview of my report, I determined that there is not enough support for CYs caseworkers, who are on the front lines of working with at-risk children. My report highlighted five interlaced challenges that severely affect caseworkers' ability to do their jobs:

- Difficulty hiring enough qualified caseworkers and
- Inadequate training for new hires leads to
- Caseworkers who are not equipped to deal with overbearing caseloads and tremendous paperwork they must handle.
- Add in remarkably low pay and the stress of facing dangerous situations, and the result is
- Breath-taking turnover rates — which, research has shown, is much less likely to lead to safe, permanent homes for children in the system.

I focused the report on 13 counties, which were chosen for their demographic representation. In total, these 13 counties cover nearly 6 million people:

- Allegheny,
- Bucks,
- Cambria,
- Centre,
- Crawford,
- Dauphin,
- Delaware,
- Erie,
- Fayette,
- Luzerne,
- Monroe,
- Philadelphia, and
- York.

Conclusion

When a child dies from abuse or neglect, often there is a rush to judge the CYs system and find fault with what caseworkers did. But CYs is not the sole party responsible for keeping children safe. We are all ultimately responsible for the health and well-being of our children.

This spring, I will release an action plan that gives the governor and the legislature specific recommendations on how to improve Pennsylvania's beleaguered child-welfare system as quickly as possible.

Chairman Benninghoff, Representative Dowling and members of the committee, this brief statement is simply the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the problems with Pennsylvania's child-welfare system

and the crippling effect the opioid crisis is having on it. Thank you for the opportunity to present an overview of my report and research. I am happy to answer any questions.

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