COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
JOINT COMMITTEES ON
PUBLIC HEALTH and HUMAN SERVICES
and
LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT

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Room 400, City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Tuesday, December 15, 2009, 10:10 a.m.

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RES. 090753 - Authorizing the Joint Committees on Public Health and Human Services and Legislative Oversight to hold public hearings on adoption and foster care policies and programs in the City of Philadelphia and to explore ways to improve the process by decreasing wait times, implementing strategies to reduce the number of children that age out of the system, and address concerns that discourage people from considering adoption.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

James F. Kenney, Chair
Marian B. Tasco, Co-Chair
William K. Greenlee
Curtis Jones, Jr.
Donna Reed Miller
Brian J. O'Neill

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The committee is now in session. There's no need for a quorum; there will be no legislation that's coming out of committee today. This is a joint committee on Public Health and Human Services and Legislative Oversight.

I'd first like to make a few comments relative to our work here today. I want to thank you all for being here today, and this hearing aims to expand the understanding of the foster care and adoption system and discuss ways to decrease wait times for adoption, implement new strategies that will reduce the number of children that age out of the system, and address concerns that discourage people from considering adoption.

This issue is certainly sensitive and involves thousands of personal unique stories. Commissioner Ambrose and her staff are to be commended

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for their hard work, dedication, and advocacy for all of the children here, in Philadelphia, who are waiting for permanent families.

However, given the complicated situations and unfortunate circumstances that many of these young people come from, it is not surprising that there are also criticisms and suggestions for improvement.

Today's hearing will focus on having an open and honest conversation on the issues that plague DHS, additional improvements that the department can make, and enhance coordination that can occur to improve the overall experience for everyone involved.

In addition to focusing on constructive feedback, today's hearing will also recognize the significant improvements that Commissioner Ambrose and her staff have made at DHS to increase adoptions and permanent legal custodianship and decrease the number of

children in placement.

So with that, we would ask Commissioner Ambrose to please come forward and begin her testimony.

(Witnesses come forward.)

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Are there any members of the panel who have any comments at this time?

(No response.)

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much.

Good morning. Please identify yourself for the record.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Good morning. Anne Marie Ambrose, Commissioner of the Department of Human Services.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please procede.

MR. MERIWEATHER: Del Meriweather, Deputy Commission for Children and Youth.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning. Please proceed with your

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testimony.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Good morning, Councilman Kenney and members of City Council and staff. I am Anne Marie Ambrose, Commissioner of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services. I welcome the opportunity to testify on Resolution 090753 and to share with you the tremendous strides that DHS is making to assist Philadelphia's children.

Since I became commissioner 18 months ago, I have been dedicated to working with my leadership team at DHS to create a sense of urgency for better outcomes for Philadelphia's children. And I am proud to report that there are measurable positive results of these efforts. Among our many accomplishments:

We are decreasing the number of children in placement;

Decreasing wait times for children in DHS's care to achieve permanency;

And implementing strategies to

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increase permanency and/or life connections and other supports for older youth.

We have dramatically increased the numbers of adoptions and permanent legal custodianships.

One of the major measures our success is the outcomes of performance-based contracting. That demonstrates DHS's commitment to permanency for children. Permanency can be either reunification, which is our preferred permanency result, with a parent or guardian, or adoption or permanent custodianship.

PBC has resulted in record numbers of children moving to permanency as well as reducing the length of stay and care. For those who are unfamiliar with PBC, it began to be implemented in March of 2003 and changed the structure of foster care contracts, creating incentives for providers to achieve more timely permanencies.

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Since PBC's implementation, a record number of children have been moved to permanency:

8,073 have achieved permanent living situations over the last six fiscal years;

Permanency for both foster care and kinship care have more than doubled across the system;

And the instability rate has decreased by one-third.

In addition:

For foster care, since 2002, the average length of stay for children who were reunified decreased 5.9 months;

For children adopted from foster care since 2002, the average length of stay decreased 11 months;

And for kinship care, the average length of stay for children who reunified decreased 1.9 months between 2002 and 2009;

For children who were adopted, the average length of stay decreased five

months between 2002 and 2009;

And in collaboration with Family Court and our system and community partners, in the last two years alone, we have had a 27 percent increase in adoptions and a 25 percent increase in permanent legal custodianships.

Currently, there are 659 children in DHS's care who have been legally freed for adoption. It is important to note that the vast majority of children who are adopted from DHS care are adopted from either existing foster or kinship families.

For example, in Fiscal Year 2009, of the 449 children adopted, 188 children were adopted from kinship care and 259 were adopted from foster homes. Of all of the children with the goal of adoption, there are currently only 32 children for whom DHS is seeking to identify a resource family.

With regard to these children, as I will discuss in greater detail in my

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testimony, DHS is working diligently with providers and others partners, such as the National Adoption Center, to identify pre-adoptive homes for these children's.

We will continue to explore ways to remove barriers to the adoption process, as we understand that any delay in achieving permanency can be painful for the children and families involved.

Because child safety is of paramount concern for DHS, DHS has implemented the safety model of practice, which incorporates a safety assessment into all aspects of decision-making throughout the life of a family's interaction.

Within this framework, DHS is deeply committed to identifying and implementing placement reduction strategies to decrease the number of children in care, because, as evidence shows, with the right supports, children are best served with their own families.

We have a vast continuum of

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in-home services in place in order to keep children safe in their own homes whenever possible. In all of these efforts, we are working in conjunction with our essentials partners Judge Dougherty and Family Court.

However, as the resolution acknowledges, in some instance, placement may be necessary to ensure child safety and the well-being while DHS works with the family to build upon the family's existing strengths and addresses concerns before a child is reunified with the family.

Reuniting children with their birth parents is a preferred form of permanency. In the past year, DHS has identified and implemented family-group decision-making as a strategy to engage and empower families to make decisions that develop plans and protect and nurture their children in an effort to reduce the need for placement in the first place or to expedite reunification

or permanency.

As a result of these efforts, there are fewer children in placement with DHS. In fact, over the past year, placements have dropped 11.8 percent from 5,754 cases to 5,075.

And with increased collaboration with our system partners, private providers, Community Behavioral Health, and Family Court, we have reduced the number of children in out-of-state placement by 56 percent in the past year alone, from 144 children to 46, resulting in children being placed closer to home and family connections.

One major challenge facing DHS is that although the overall number of children in care has decreased, the population for older youth in DHS's care has grown by 2 percent. These older youth are at risk for aging out of the system without achieving permanency or identifying or developing supportive adults in their lives and with little

preparation to live on their own. DHS has multiple strategies and initiatives to address the needs of older youth as they prepare to transition to adulthood.

Given our understanding of the importance of supporting older youth as they transition out of care, especially for those who are not achieving permanency, DHS makes many efforts to keep older youth in care until they are 21.

In fact, DHS has the largest number in the Commonwealth of youth on board extensions. These are youth 18 years or older and who are in school or receiving treatment, who can remain in care until they are 21 years old.

Yet, achieving permanency for these youth as well as all children in care continues to be our priority. We recognize that outreach in public awareness is essential in order to generate interest in providing foster care and adoption.

Philadelphia was selected by Casey Family Programs to collaborate with Community Partners, and we have launched "Raise Me Up," a powerful, multi-media campaign designed to heighten awareness about the needs of children in foster care and child-related services and to recruit volunteers.

The campaign was launched in September of 2009 at a press conference at the Lincoln Financial Field, with Mayor Nutter, Supreme Court Justice Max Baer, and Eagles Player Jeremy Maclin as the campaign spokesperson, and it features a series of television ads, which aired on network and cable stations. And we just wanted to show those ads very briefly.

("Raise Me Up" ads shown; they can be viewed at raisemeup.org.)

* * *

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Those are some of the reasons why the work that DHS does is so important. I think you'll

hear more about it from some of the community partners who are going to be testifying today.

But, as you can see, sadly, there remain youth whose parents' parental rights have been terminated, and yet, no adopted or permanent legal custodian resource has been identified and who, therefore, have a goal of another permanent-plan living arrangement.

Our adoption unit is creating a pilot project that we hope to start in January of 2010, which will work specifically with these youth to identify permanency resources, assist with development of transition plans, and referrals to services.

All of these youths are eligible to receive services from DHS's Achieving Independence Center, which is designed to assist youth 16 years and older to prepare them for independence. AIC is designed to help young people

achieve their future goals of self-sufficiency.

Offering non-traditional hours, flexible scheduling, and onsite job training, the AIC is dedicated to providing support and real life tools for youth, including housing and education services. Other services and programs focus on education, hands-on job-training and employment, and life-skills training.

DHS believes that every child has the right to a loving, nurturing, and permanent family, and that people from a variety of life experiences offer strengths for these children. DHS has a nondiscrimination policy, which prohibits a discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as all of the other protected categories such as race, sex, ethnicity, and national origin.

With the existence of the added youth center, new DHS staff receive training to ensure that they are

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sensitive to the needs of this population. Existing staff are also offered training, and we have sponsored several brown-bag lunches on topics relevant to serving LGBT population.

In addition, our adoption unit has consulted with the national rights campaign All Children All Families Project. In collaboration with NAC, some DHS receive training to engage LGBT families as possible resources.

While we know anecdotally that there are many members of the LGBT community who adopt children who are in DHS's care, DHS does not currently collect data on the number of LGBT families that adopt children, nor do we collect other demographic data on adoptive families. Going forward, we plan to collect this data to measure our progress in this area.

Finally, we want to ensure that those families who do adopt are aware of resources that support their efforts. We

encourage adoptive parents to attain the resources that may be available to them if they adopt children, including the adoption tax credit, which is now referenced in our adoption subsidy agreement.

Our community partner Tap Link has also developed educational materials about the adoption tax credit that have been distributed at community events cosponsored by DHS, such as National Adoption Day.

Despite the tremendous progress that DHS has made, we know that there is a long way to go. We have increased accountability by creating the Division of Performance Management and Accountability, which measures and monitors outcomes for children served by DHS.

We are using data-driven and evidence-based measures to track the efficiency and effectiveness of our services, both internal and external.

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And we have implemented Child Stat, while randomly selected cases are reviewed in-depth by a cross section of DHS management and staff to target and correct impediments to progress and continually improve performance.

We have also developed a five-year strategic plan aimed at establishing realistic goals and objectives consistent with our mission and core values. Of course, permanency for youth in our care is one of our key goals.

We are eager to continue to improve our performance and welcome your suggestions on how to achieve better outcomes for children in our care.

Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much.

(Addressing Mr. Meriweather.) Are you going to offer testimony?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: No, just help me answer the questions.

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. Just for information sake, what age does the child attain when they are considered an older youth?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: We look at them as 12 and older. And we considered older youth and start working on some of the efforts to engage them in life skills and those kinds of things.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And that's currently now 12 to 21?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Correct.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. How many children are in that category in Philadelphia County?

MR. MERIWEATHER: Approximately 45 percent of our children are within the ages of 12 and older.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And what is the aggregate number?

MR. MERIWEATHER: 5,075, I believe, today.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. And they're in various stages of either in

foster care or kinship care, and the goal is for their adoption, the ultimate goal.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Correct, permanency, which can take the form of adoption, reunification, or permanent legal custodianship.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay, okay.

Are there any questions for the witnesses?

Councilwoman Miller.

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: Good morning. Good morning.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Good morning.

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: Can you further define "permanency"? What is "permanency," particularly for a young person that's aged out? Or what exactly is permanency?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Permanency is finding a permanent, loving, stable resource for that child. And it can manifest itself in a variety of different ways.

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Legally, that child can achieve permanency through adoption or permanent legal custodianship or reunification.

And traditionally, the system -- and this is a national issue, not just a Philadelphia issue. The system hasn't necessarily focused on permanency for older youth.

So this goal that we talked about, the (indiscernible), that is sort of a long-term foster care goal, and we don't have long-term foster care since the adoption of the state Families Act. So the system has had to readjust itself, 'cause when you speak to older youth, they want permanency for themselves; they want a permanent, loving, stable home. And their needs are pretty intense as they grow older.

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: Well, don't you think that permanency for youth aging out could help that maybe prevent some of what we saw in this film?

And I've seen the commercials

on TV, and I couldn't figure out whether you wanted families to adopt or whether you just want volunteers and volunteers to do what.

But, you know, the first couple times I saw the commercials, I thought they were very interesting, and I thought they were good, but I really didn't know what you wanted.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: So the goal of Raise Me Up, the slogan is, "You don't have to raise a child to raise them up. Just let them know you care."

And the goals that Philadelphia has chosen for the Raise Me Up campaign are recruitment of foster and adoptive families, mentoring, and older youth.

And so, there's been a series of stories that Channel 6 has done on each of those areas. And some of the assistance to older youth is just volunteering at an after-school program or tutoring, 'cause some people don't want to make a full commitment of being

an adoptive or foster parent, but there are little things that they can do that contribute to the lives of these older youth, volunteering at the Achieving Independence Center.

So Women's Christian Alliance is one of our community partners, and they followed a mentor volunteer who went and worked with some of the children there in an art class.

So there's a variety of different community partners that we've selected to assist in all of these goals.

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: Okay. I could probably sit here and ask you a million questions, but I won't.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. You had indicated earlier, in answer to my question, that 45 percent of the children in the system are 12 to 21. How many children younger than 12 in the aggregate are in the system?

So you said there was 5,000 or so 12 to 21. How many children in the

system younger than 12?

MR. MERIWEATHER: That would be about 55 percent of 5,000 children.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Oh, it's 5,000. I'm sorry.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: 5,000.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: The universe is 5,000?

MR. MERIWEATHER: Yes.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Right.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And 45 percent are 12 to 21.

MR. MERIWEATHER: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. Part of the reason for this hearing is to kind of understand the process, 'cause a lot of us -- I know I don't, and when we started getting into this, I still have questions of how things actually work.

DHS contracts or has relationships with agencies that place or attempt to place children in some permanency?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Correct.

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We have a contract with foster care agencies, and actually, some kids are in different levels of care group, so they might be in a group-home situation, but it's most likely to be a foster-care situation.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Are all of these private agencies or nonprofit agencies, are they all attempting to move the child to permanency, whether it is reunification, whether it is adoption, or a custodianship?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yes. And, in fact, as a part of the performance-based contracting, there are incentives for those private agencies to be successful in getting permanency outcomes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Financial incentives?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yes, financial incentives in that that they fewer cases for those cases that they move to permanency. So ultimately, they

can reinvest the resources for the contract into the work that they do.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And you had indicated in your testimony that your department abides by all the non -- all of the federal laws that are nondiscriminatory relative to who you deal with, who you try to place children with, who you try to get to adopt children.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Correct.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Are all of the agencies that you contract with required to follow the same nondiscriminatory policies?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: They are, and I think there are some providers who do a better job of that. For instance, we have about 21 agencies in our performance-based contracting family foster care.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: About half of those actively recruit the LGBT

community. So one of them actually goes to a church that has largely LGBT members. Some of them aren't as active in recruiting; although when we did a survey of them and they know they have to follow the federal and state law, they've said that they will assist any of those families who come to their attention in moving towards adoption and permanency.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Even if they're faith-based agencies that perhaps maybe will follow the law but don't necessarily agree with the law?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: They've -- they've claimed that they follow the law.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. Do we have ways of making sure that that's the case?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Absolutely. And this is something that's shined a light on something we need to take a closer look at, and we'll be working more closely with our providers.

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Over the years -- I mean, I know you've only been here 18 months, but I know you've been in in this arena or this environment for many years -- have we have been able to track children that age out of the system?

I know that the commercials, the PSAs bring that right close to your face and heart as to what happens to folks who sometimes age out of the system. Have we have been able to -- I know it's difficult from a homelessness standpoint, but have we been able to track the children or adults now that have aged out and wound up incarcerated?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Not very well, although there's new federal legislation that will require the Fostering Connections Act that will require in 2011 for the states to collect that data and report it out to the federal government.

So we're really working closely

with the state and will look for some direction from them on doing it.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I guess of the children who have been in the system, and we know who they are and their names and Social Security numbers and former addresses, I mean, could we possibly do that now by going into our criminal justice system and determining whether or not there -- I mean, I know there is a relationship, you know, a connection, but to be able to quantify it in some way so that we know, as a county in the State of Pennsylvania, just how many of our kids wind up aging out and in jail.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I actually think we could do that through the care system, so I'll defer Dr. Schwarz to help us pull that data together, 'cause I think it would be very telling about --

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: That would be sadly, sadly interesting.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I that's

right, I think you're right.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Councilman Greenlee.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just one question. I'm sorry if you maybe said this in your statement and I missed it.

For the youth that attain permanency, what percentage are reunited with their original -- with their parents? How many go to adoption or custodialship? Do you have that?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I do have it.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Okay.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: About 63 percent -- okay, we're look at kids right now. About 63 percent return to the parent; 16 percent, adoption. These are the goals that we have. So the goals currently are 63 percent are returned to a parent, so that's our preferred permanency goal.

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COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Mm-hmm.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: We haven't actually done as well on reunification as we could.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Mm-hmm.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: We're hoping that creating the continuum of in-home services that we've recently created is going to contribute.

As I stated in my testimony, DHS believes that supporting families where they are and giving them the services necessary to keep their children is our first option. And, actually, that's what the law tells us we should do.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Sure, sure.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: And so, while reunification is a goal for us, we haven't done as much as we should to support families.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Now, have those numbers changed much since you've

been studying it? You know, gone up, down?

MR. MERIWEATHER: The reunification rates have actually decreased by about 5 percent over the last two years.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Mm-hmm. Any rough idea why that would be, or just --

MR. MERIWEATHER: Probably the intensive focus on adoption.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Hmm, more focus on adoption.

MR. MERIWEATHER: And more permanent legal custodianships within a specific time frame, as outlined by the federal (indiscernible) regulations.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Okay, all right. Thank you.

This thank you, Mr. Chairman.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Just a general philosophical question about reunification versus adoption or custodianship.

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Although I think, as a goal, it may be wonderful to want children reunified with their parents, but is it always the best thing?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: No.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And is it also more traumatic to be reunited and then be unreunited again?

And, in some cases, would it be better that the child is adopted or in a different permanent situation?

And, I mean, that's kind of a judgment call that you guys have to make or, you know, I guess, ultimately the agency makes or the department makes. And is it a problem?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I think it's a huge problem. I mean, first and foremost, we have to focus on safety. And if children aren't safe in their own homes, we have to remove them. And then we have to work with the parent to try to get them to be able to create an environment where that child can be safe

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and won't be neglected or abused.

And philosophically, we believe in that; but ultimately, children need to be safe, and so, removal is necessary.

I mean, one of the things that we're really proud of at DHS is the number of children that we have in kinship care. We're leaders, I think nationally, in kinship care; we're certainly leaders in the state.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And kinship care is a relative?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Is a relative.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Right. So if they can't go to their birth parents, we really do search through and look for family resources for them. And the outcomes for children who go to kinship as opposed to family foster care do better.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Is there a limit on the number of reunification and

then removal situations? Or is there a point where the department says, you know, We've done this two or three times and now we're going to move in a different direction?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: We do that and also the court does, and the federal law guides us there. The Adoption and Safe Families Act says that there's a 15-month time limit on reunification, and then the court usually changes the goal from reunification to a more permanent outcome.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And then finally for me, one of the agencies that -- is one of the agencies that you deal with these older children the Mural Arts Program at all?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: We have a contract with the Mural Arts. They do a lot of terrific work with us, with our kids, both on the juvenile justice side, on the prevention side. And recently, we supported a grant that they're trying to

get in the Strawberry Mansion section, and we actually want a woman who does some work for us at the Youth Study Center to help identify some kids in the neighborhoods who need some help.

So we view Jane and the work that they do at Mural Arts as great partners.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Great.

Councilwoman Miller.

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: Thank you. I have one more questions.

It seems that the numerous placements always appear -- or people always state that they've lived like in numerous homes; it's really negative in terms of outcomes. And I'm looking at outcomes for children, particularly those aging out.

What is the main reason or the most common reason that children are placed from home to home?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I think the most common reason, based on the data

that we collect, is probably behavior issues. That's hard to quantify.

And sometimes it's about not working closely enough with our partners in the behavioral health system to make sure that that child and the family get the supports that are necessary to stabilize the environment.

But that is the most common --

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: So it's the behavior of the person in placement, not the family.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: That's right. And oftentimes, these kids have been so traumatized that sometimes they're testing out the waters and seeing whether this family is really going to stick it -- stick by me throughout the course of this.

And sometimes we don't give enough training to foster parrots, and we don't provide enough support to that child to get through the tough times. And so, it's something that we're working

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on.

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: So does data show that those children that are placed in maybe less homes or fewer homes are more successful?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Correct. And, actually, stability is one of the factors that we use in working with our PVC agencies; that's something they're measured on.

So the number of moves, there's an incentive to not move kids around, and they really try to adhere to that.

COUNCILWOMAN MILLER: Okay, all right. Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: What is the percentage of foster and kinship placements that ultimately turn into adoptive parents? I mean, is it a common thing or not as common a thing?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yeah, in Philadelphia, almost all of our adoptions, as evidenced from my testimony, turn into adoption, so --

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Placements of foster care turn into adoption?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Correct. Most of kids who are ultimately adopted come from foster or kinship care situations.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: No, but I'm saying, how many folks who actually take on a foster child or kinship placement ultimately adopt the child?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I actually don't have that.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And, again, these questions on numbers that you don't have, you know, feel free to provide it when you can get it.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Okay.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I mean, I understand that you're not prepared for every question.

Are there any other questions for these witnesses?

(No further questions.)

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: By the way,

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I want to make sure that the record's clear that the committee today consists of Councilman O'Neill, Councilwoman Miller, Councilwoman Tasco, and Councilman Greenlee.

So thank you for your testimony.

PANEL MEMBERS: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Mr. Mullner, Ken Mullner, please.

(Witnesses come forward.)

MR. MULLNER: Good morning.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning. Please identify yourself for the record.

MR. MULLNER: Ken Mullner, Executive Director, National Adoption Center.

MS. HOFFMAN: I'm Gloria Hoffman, Director of Communications for the National Adoption Center.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning.

MS. HOFFMAN: Good morning.

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Whoever would like to start, please begin.

MR. MULLNER: Good morning, Councilman Kenney and members of the Council of the City of Philadelphia. I'm Ken Mullner, Executive Director of the National Adoption Center and the Adoption Center of Delaware Valley, and I'm also an adoptive dad.

I appreciate this opportunity to participate in today's hearing to consider ways to improve adoption opportunities for Philadelphia children.

I'd like to tell you about Alma, a 13-year-old who came from a background of abuse and neglect and who very much wanted a family who would love her and give her a good home.

The first time I saw Alma was a rollerskating rink, the scene of one of the Adoption Center's semiannual adoption parties. Here potential adopters have a chance to meet and mingle with children who live in foster care, while waiting

for the permanent families they want so much.

I saw a woman looking at Alma as she took her first tentative steps into the rink. It was Alma's first time on skates, and she held tight to the hand of her social worker. The woman couldn't take her eyes off Alma, and I knew that we probably had made a match here.

The story has a happy ending: Alma has been living with her new family, a mom and a dad, for more than a year, and she is about to have a sister, a 14-year-old girl who will soon be joining her family.

I like this story because it demonstrates what we know to be true: That once families know about the children, once they know that older children, children with emotional challenges, siblings who need homes together, are available to be adopted, they come forth to adopt them.

When the Adoption Center opened

its doors 37 years ago, it didn't know whether anyone would want to adopt a child who was blind or had Down syndrome or who came with brothers and sisters. Now, 22,000 children later, we know that the first step is to let people know that the children are out there.

The center has been working with the City of Philadelphia for a significant part of those 37 years, with its offer to provide visibility for its children to give them opportunities where they can be seen and heard by someone who might want to make a home for them.

Many of you are probably familiar with "Wednesday's Child" on NBC 10, a twice-weekly show where former Eagle, and now sports anchor, Vai Sikahema spends time with a child waiting to be adopted. Vai goes where the children say. He has taken dance lessons, ridden a horse, and cooked chili at a midtown restaurant as the children have fun following their dreams for a

day.

Some of you might hear Larry Kane of KYW News Radio every Wednesday as he interviews children who hope someone will hear their stories. The children tell Larry things like, "I want a family who will always be there for me" or "I want to wake up in the morning with the same mom and dad" or, sadly, "I want a family that won't hurt me.

As all of you who still read newspapers know, the Philadelphia Inquirer has been running a "Monday's Child" column every week for more than 30 years. And the Philadelphia Tribune has been doing the same thing for the past 20 years.

These, along with our adoption parties and other media opportunities are among the ways we try to work with Philadelphia's Department of Human Services. Both they and we have the same goals: to find permanent homes for children. And we are heartened that the

numbers of adoptions in Philadelphia have risen. Many of these children, of course, have been adopted by their foster parents, and we fully support that.

We would like to see the numbers rise even more, especially when it is not foster parents who are able to adopt the children but newly-identified families who learn about them because they heard them on the radio or lost their hearts to them on television or were captivated by their pictures in the newspapers.

These are children who might have grown up in foster care and become part of the 25,000 children who, each year, age out of the system and turn into appalling statistics:

25 to 40 percent become homeless;

42 percent become parents themselves;

Only 20 percent are able to be self-supporting;

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Only 46 percent graduate from high school;

47 percent have long periods of unemployment;

And 69 percent are incarcerated at least once.

In addition to this emotional toll, the financial costs of keeping children in foster care rather than placing them for adoption are staggering. Research shows that the adoption of a child from the foster care system saves, on average, $258,000 in child welfare and human services costs.

For a couple of years now, we have done something unique: We have had adoption parties just for teenagers, for those children in foster care who are among the most difficult to place for adoption. We have given these parties in New Jersey, Delaware; and last year, through a grant from Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption Network, had two parties, one in South Philadelphia and

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one in Pittsburgh. This year we'll be doing one in central Pennsylvania.

A hundred children attended our Philadelphia party. Only ten were from Philadelphia. We would love to have a party strictly for Philadelphia's teenagers and are awaiting to hear from DHS staff about moving forward with that.

We have opportunities for radio and television exposure, all done sensitively and with the children's best interests at heart, that we hope can include more Philadelphia children in the future.

We'd like, two, to develop for DHS a website on which Philadelphia's children can be seen quickly and easily by potential adopters. We have developed such a website for the federal government's Department of Health and Human Services, which it believes is responsible for its significantly increased adoptions awaiting children.

We are also excited about two

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free opportunities that are our center can provide to DHS. Through our technology expertise, agencies can now list their services on a free online database, where potential adopters can connect with them.

And we are able to offer an interactive online course from foster family to forever family to Philadelphia foster parents thinking about making that transition. We made this offer to DHS more than a year ago and keep hoping that they will take advantage of it.

But, of course, adoption doesn't begin and end with public awareness and recruitment. Those interested must work with adoption agencies to see make it happen for them.

And we are distressed by the complaints we hear from prospective adopters. Perhaps because we are not an adoption placement agency, families feel safe in confiding their frustrations to us.

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We hear a lot about poor customer, service social workers not returning phone calls in a timely way or at all. We hear about adoption studies that take too long, dragging on sometimes for years, while the child, or children, they want linger in the system.

We hear about the attitudes of adoption staff toward gay people or single people or disabled people or those interested in adopting across racial lines that effectively nudge them out of the adoption picture.

We have a policy at the Adoption Center: Every contact, whether by phone, mail, or e-mail, is responded to within two business days. We think this is a model that should be adopted by every agency working in adoption.

Prospective adopters tell us that they are frustrated about poor communication, not being told what the adoption process involves or being informed clearly of its timetable. They

don't know why it takes so long to update earlier home studies or why the home study for being a foster parent and an adoptive parent can't be done simultaneously.

They don't know why it is so difficult to adopt across state or even county lines. I've heard people tell me that it is easier to adopt internationally than it is from Philadelphia.

And mostly, we hear this: "I don't need. You have all of these pictures and all of this publicity saying that children are available, but when we go to agencies, they make the process so difficult, so unwieldily, so unfriendly, that we wonder what is really going on. Do agencies really want to place the children?"

I know you'll be hearing from some of those frustrated adopters who will be telling you about their experience.

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Meanwhile, I think about Juiara. She's eight. Her favorite sone is the one that comforts her when she's feeling sad; it's called "We Fall Down But We Get Up." It affirms for her that everyone can be triumphant even after enduring difficult and trying times. But I just wonder whether that will happen for Juiara.

Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much.

(Addressing Ms. Hoffman.) Could you please provide your testimony? And then we'll have questions.

MS. HOFFMAN: Yeah, I'm just here as a helper to answer questions.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. The criticisms that you outlined in your testimony, are they interactions between potential foster and adoptive parents with the agencies that are -- that we contract with?

MR. MULLNER: Yes.

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Or is it from our own employees?

MR. MULLNER: Most of the families, they're prospective families, it's their interactions with the provider organizations.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. In some ways, I do empathize with Commissioner Ambrose because of all the vast amount of responsibilities that department has, not just from this particular area, but in every other area, so I can understand from time to time a little bit of delay in interaction with our own employees.

But you're saying that these are agency employees that we contract with to do this work, are not returning phone calls and not --

MR. MULLNER: To the best of my knowledge.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. And is there -- you know, obviously, we don't have a policy against interracial

adoption. Do you think that that is something that is prevalent within the system?

MR. MULLNER: I can only report what our constituent tells me, and there have been quite a few instances where people, for whatever reason, are -- they're not getting the children they hoped to get, and they're not necessarily given a straight answer as to why.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: If you could -- I mean, obviously, we have limits on our ability to change things, you know, quickly or, in some ways, at all.

But I'm wondering if you have any suggestions on what we would need to do, or should be doing, either through DHS or with -- or changing the relationship between DHS and the City of Philadelphia and these agencies.

What would you recommend to improve the complaints that you're hearing?

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MR. MULLNER: Well --

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I mean, again, you could you give me some ideas now, but you could also follow up with some issues.

MR. MULLNER: Well, to me -- to us, it comes down to pure customer service a lot of times. And, again, I just can't tell you how many times that I personally have taken calls, or a staff have taken calls, from people that say, you know, "I saw one of the children on Wednesday's Child" or "I went to one of your match parties and I fell in love with this child and I'm ready to go and I filled out all my paperwork, but I can't get anybody from the agency to return my call or respond to my e-mail."

And out of that frustration, they just too often drop out of the system.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: What role does the National Adoption Center play in this process, if any at all?

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MR. MULLNER: Well, we have -- I guess we're a small provider for DHS. We help them deal with recruitment. But, you know, again, what we're saying is what our constituents tell us.

We think we can help DHS, and that's why we are here; we want to support DHS and we want more kids adopted. And whether it's cultural competency training or customer service or helping come up with legislation that may help cut down barriers for adopting across state lines.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Are any of these barriers able to be remedied through city legislation, or some of them state and federal laws that need to be abided by, and that delays the process?

MR. MULLNER: Well, certainly, in terms of intrastate and interstate adoptions, it's different from state to state.

And, for instance, in the Commonwealth, every single county has a

different law and a different rule; whereby in New Jersey, it's the same rule that's statewide.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Has there been any efforts in the past to interact with county officials or even state officials that would allow for a more simpler process?

'Cause it seems to me that in Philadelphia -- I mean, certainly there are a number of people in Philadelphia that want to adopt and are capable of adopting and, you know, would be good adoptive parents or foster parents.

But also, I would think that in the suburban areas, where maybe their people are wealthier or have more means or their children are getting older themselves and they larger homes, that would be a pretty good match --

MR. MULLNER: Right.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: -- between those folks who have the wherewithal and who want to do it and some of our kids

who are, you know, living in poverty and strife.

MR. MULLNER: One of the issues that we've had, Councilman, is, for instance, we did pay a visit to our colleagues in Montgomery County. And the response from them was that there are only eight children in all of Montgomery County that need to be adopted. And we have no way to substantiate these numbers, but we kind of find that hard to believe or fathom.

But I don't know what the past may be in terms of intrastate or interstate.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Do the people that you interact with find resistence from county officials outside of Philadelphia relative to taking Philadelphia children or being able to adopt Philadelphia children?

MS. HOFFMAN: No, I think that they would allow Philadelphia children to be adopted. It really depends on the

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county because they are all different.

But I think you asked earlier what could be done between DHS and these provider agencies. And I think there needs to be more accountability, that agencies, unfortunately, are very different. As Anne Marie pointed out, there's not consistency among agencies in their customer service or their policies toward gay and lesbian families or interracial families.

But if they're not held accountable for it, then it's not going to change.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: The Commissioner had indicated in her testimony that there are some outcome research and assessment that's being done.

MS. HOFFMAN: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And, again, she's been here 18 months.

MS. HOFFMAN: Yes, sure.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And, you

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know, I assume the system is as unwieldy as it is for a long time now and not just, you know, over the last few years.

MS. HOFFMAN: Absolutely. I think she's done a really good job in moving things forward; it can't all be done at once. But that's one of the big issues.

And if there was a recourse -- if a family that is having a problem had a place they could go, if there was somebody in DHS that they could call and say, This is what's happening to me, and somebody would listen to them and hear them, I think that would go a long way, and I think it would make the provider agencies a little more cognizant that they have to give good service to these people.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: 'Cause, I mean, obviously, it's very clear through the initial testimony and just anecdotally that there should be an urgency to get these kids adopted in

place.

MS. HOFFMAN: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Because, down the road, we're going to spend a lot of money, in a sad way, in dealing with the outcome of their broken and shattered lives.

MR. MULLNER: Right.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: So there should be urgency on the part of the agencies, urgency on the part of DHS, which I sense, you know, that there's a better environment but not yet fixed, to keep our costs down -- just to be coldhearted about it, to keep our costs down as taxpayers, 'cause I'd rather have these young people, you know, working and contributing to our tax bases as opposed to using services through the court, prison system, and, you know, homeless agencies.

MS. HOFFMAN: Right.

MR. MULLNER: One of the things we think needs to be looked at is the

time it takes for the judicial system commit to terminating parental rights and not just kind of -- how long do you wait for birth parents to, for lack of a better word, get their act together.

We think there are many different types of permanency but we also believe adoption is the best.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. What I would like for you to do, going forward, is to kind of continue to be in contact with my office and with Sarah to try to come up with some ideas that we can vet to see what it is we're capable of doing as a legislative body and also who we need to talk to on the county level and on the state level to get them engaged in helping to streamline the system and reform a system that obviously needs some help.

Councilman Greenlee?

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You mentioned just a minute ago

about the courts? And I know that the Commissioner had said that, you know, there's good cooperation with Family Court here, in Philadelphia.

Have you seen that problem with cases dragging on? Have you looked at Philadelphia particularly; is that a problem in your opinion here or --

MR. MULLNER: It's a problem everywhere.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Okay. Everywhere.

MR. MULLNER: And it's certainly a problem everywhere. And we have just, again, countless stories there of -- was supposed to be a gentleman here testifying, and he could not be make it, but Gloria's going to be reading his testimony.

And, you know, it's a situation where they keep giving the birth parents chance after chance after chance. In fact, the last chance they gave her was when they did a surprise drug test, and

she came back positive. And they said, Well, you know, we'll give you one more chance. And, you know, that's a dozen chances later.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Mm-hmm.

MS. HOFFMAN: And in this particular case, the child said, "I don't want to go back to my mother. She can't take care of me, she is always on drug or alcohol. If I go back, I'm going to run away."

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: How old is that child?

MS. HOFFMAN: The child is 13.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Mm-hmm, yeah, 'cause I know there's always been this sort of, I guess, feeling among some people that the best place is with the parents. But as the chairman said earlier, that's obviously not always the case.

MS. HOFFMAN: Right. And you asked about the judiciary.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Yeah.

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MS. HOFFMAN: Judges do not like to terminate parental rights --

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Right.

MS. HOFFMAN: -- because it's a basic tenet of democracy in this country, is the right to raise your own child.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Right.

MS. HOFFMAN: And judges don't like to do that.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: (Indiscernible.)

MS. HOFFMAN: But there are some times when it's necessary.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: And it may be in the best interests of everybody.

MS. HOFFMAN: Absolutely.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: 'Cause, the parent, if they can't get it together, you know, it doesn't help them either eventually.

So, okay. Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Will you please continue to give us some ideas on

what we can do going forward --

MR. MULLNER: Sure.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: -- in the next year legislatively, and coordinating legislative issues with other levels of government.

MR. MULLNER: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much.

MS. HOFFMAN: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Shirley Core, Kathy Murphy, and Regina Lyons.

(Witnesses come forward.)

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning. Please identify yourself for the record.

MS. CORE: Good morning. My name is Shirley Core, and I'm a foster mother.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Miss Core, could you please pull the microphone closer to you.

MS. CORE: Okay.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you.

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Please proceed with your testimony.

MS. CORE: I've been a foster mother for 13 months. I have two little girls, and they came to my home one day one day. And I looked at they eyes when they got out of the DHS worker's car, and one of 'em kept their face down, and the other one had a big smile. And she said, "When we was driving down your block, I saw you and all of the neighbors clapping," and she said, "I knew I was coming to the right place."

And that made my heart feel good because she had been -- they had been very abused by their parents, and all they was looking for is someplace to be safe, and I was there, waiting for 'em.

One of the things I want to tell you about is, when these children come to our home from these agencies, the agency gives 'em to you, and then it's like they step back a little bit to see how you are going to relate to the

children that they placed in your home.

They have no medical, they have no clothes most of the time; they came with one piece, one garment. No school background. And they place 'em there and they just sit there and look at you. This is what they do: They just look and watch and listen to hear what you saying about them since they've been there.

Now, the older one, Azariah, she didn't talk for about three months; she's very inward. The baby one was five; she was -- just couldn't wait to tell me all about what happened to her in her parents' home.

They didn't get a physical for three months. I kept calling 'em and telling 'em, "They need to be looked at."

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I'm sorry, ma'am. You were calling who?

MS. CORE: The agency. They didn't have a physical.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: No, I'm saying, you were calling the agency that

placed them with you?

MS. CORE: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And what's the name of the agency?

MS. CORE: Children's Choice.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. Please proceed. I'm sorry.

MS. CORE: Yes. And I asked them, you know, when was they going to get a physical? and they said as soon as their insurance kicked in.

So I -- my niece had a doctor from Torresdale, and she told me, "Take 'em there. He might just look at 'em." Well, it was a coincidence: The mother had took those children there before. And we he saw 'em, he said, "Is it brothers that go with these kids?" and I told him yes. And he told me he would look at 'em for me and gave 'em a physical.

Now they have been in my house three whole months. They didn't bring 'em no clothes, didn't give me any money

or anything to try to help me get started with 'em.

December the 27th of 2009 [sic], that's when I got the check, at the Christmas party; they invited 'em to a -- you know, us to a party. I went out and shot the whole check for 'em, 'cause they didn't have anything -- coats, boots, everything.

The main thing was, both of these children needed mental help because they had been in such trauma. They had nightmares; they roughed all night. Just like you hear this chair, this the way they slept -- screaming in the night. I slept on the floor in their room every night for three months because they was traumatized at night.

And till this day, they send 'em to this place to have therapy, art therapy; had nothing to do with what they needed to empty out of they heads.

And they were -- the oldest one was a abused kid. The therapist would

grab her and pull her all around and tell her to sit up and listen. The mother and father would sit in this family therapy and curse me and call me all kinds of names because they wanted that older girl to say she wanted to come back. And she said, "My heart tells me to stay with Moms" -- that's me.

And this person still have her job in this place.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: So they create a therapy situation for the foster children, with the birth parents?

MS. CORE: Yes. And he selected where he wanted 'em to go.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I'm sorry. Who's "he"?

MS. CORE: Huh?

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Who is "he"?

MS. CORE: The father.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: The father of the children.

MS. CORE: The father picked

the therapy.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Right.

MS. CORE: And the agency went along with him.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. How are they doing today?

MS. CORE: The older one is going to school. She had missed so many days before I got her, but the Philadelphia library system, they work with me, sir.

They took this child two hours a day, and I sat in that library with her until she could actually read. Her mind would just go somewhere.

And the little one is off the hook. She pretends she's someone else. She has never had no evaluation; the father won't allow it.

See, they give the parents a lot of authority with those children; he has to sign for certain things.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I guess I -- I don't need the Commissioner to come

back, but we can get an answer to the question.

I'm a little unsure of what birth parental rights there are relative to children that are placed in foster care. It would seem kind of counterintuitive that the abusive parent who's had the child removed from the home in the foster care would have anything to say about the ongoing disposition of the children's mental health, physical health care, those kind of things.

Is that court-ordered?

MS. CORE: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: (Addressing Commissioner Ambrose.) You may have to come back. If you could just pull up a chair on the side and then use the microphone there. Thank you.

(Commissioner Ambrose comes back to the witness table.)

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Usually these are court-ordered. The birth families have the right to supervise

visits; I'm guessing that some of these are supervised visits.

And then the family -- until parental rights are terminated, the family actually has to consent to all kinds of treatment. Sometimes the delay is an issue of consent from the birth family 'cause we sometimes can't locate them and get them to cooperate with what we think is best in moving forward with the children.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And so, this is -- the genesis of this particular problem that our witness is explaining is a court-ordered requirement?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: In most circumstances.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Or is it state law that -- if anybody can come up to the --

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Vanessa Garrett Harley is our city solicitor who handles all the court cases for DHS.

(Witness comes forward.)

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MS. HARLEY: Good morning.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please identify yourself for the record.

MS. HARLEY: Vanessa Garrett Harley; I'm chair of the social services law group for the Philadelphia Law Department.

Just to briefly explain, until the time that a parent's parental rights are terminated, while it may be hard to understand, they do retain certain rights. Some of that right is that they have the right to know about what medical treatment and/or mental health or behavioral health treatment that their children receive. They have the right to attend those visits. We keep them informed.

Because of confidentiality laws that are state laws as well as some federal laws and other consent laws, even to get the children medical treatment or mental health treatment, we require the consent of the parent.

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Now, there are ways around it. If the parent does not consent, we have to go through a full-blown court hearing, and you put in other documents.

But some of what they're describing is correct. I know it may seem unfathomable that a person who could have abused a child retains such right, but they do, in the way the court system is structured and the laws of Pennsylvania are structured.

So basically, what she's saying is, the family therapy is sort court-ordered therapy, because one of the things that the department does when we remove a child from the home, you try and secure safety and make sure that the child is safe and that all of their physical and mental needs are met.

But you're also trying to stabilize that family and trying to determine whether or not this is a family that can be saved and perhaps the child can be returned home. Often, family

therapy is considered a component of that.

So that is the mental health therapy piece where the father and the mother may participate with a licensed clinician or therapist. Hopefully -- if that explains your question.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Yeah. I guess it would be clearer to me that a parent, or parents, who are having the experience of their children being removed by the court would not be the most cooperative people in the ultimate permanent disposition of those children, whether it's adoption or legal custodianship. It would seem that it would be in their twisted interest to try to obstruct any of that activity.

MS. HARLEY: Sometimes that goes on. However, sometimes the parents are very cooperative because they want to get their children back. Not every child that is taken from a parent -- many of these parents are rehabilitated, and they

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do appropriately interact, and they do what the court asks them to do, and they get help get, and they get themselves together, and the family is reunited.

There are certainly those are -- as you say, are obstructionist and don't agree with anything and will do whatever they can to either sabotage a placement where the child. And that is, I believe, some of what was being testified to, is that the parents may be telling the children very negative things and that kind of thing. We experience those issues as well.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: But it's your testimony that we're a bit hamstrung by the court system and, I guess, the state law that puts that in place?

MS. HARLEY: Well, there's state law. To court law will actually act based on the information that is presented to them.

I don't know this individual or particular case. It is a very troubling

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case to me from what I'm hearing, and it sounds as if there's certain information that may need to have been relayed to a judge; I don't know whether or not it was actually related to the judge because I don't know the specifics of the case certainly.

But certainly in a case like this, this is information that some additional things should have taken place. A number of the things stated should not have happened with the appropriate intervention.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And I understand, and I want the people from DHS to understand, I mean, this is not -- this is an effort to try to this legislative body understand the system, whether it's -- what works, what's broken, and what levels need to be addressed in order to make it right.

So, I mean, I consider all of us in this together, not competing forces and people -- because it's children

involved, people get -- are understandably distressed and emotional about their frustrations.

And part of, I think, what we want to try to do is let those folks understand that a lot of this frustration frustrates you as much as it frustrates them, but because we have to follow certain regulations that we could hopefully address and change, that maybe we won't have this frustration going forward.

But I do thank you for your explanation.

(Addressing Ms. Core.) And you can resume your testimony.

MS. CORE: Okay. The children, both of them are very happy in my home. And like you said, a lot of times, the parents, they get very resentful because they're very comfortable and they like it there. They're being fed every day, they're being bathed every day, they go to school every day, they have friends;

and they didn't have that before. So naturally, they would, like children all, they want to be there.

And I'm sorry that I'm a decent person and I believe that this is the way all children should live. My five grew up decent, and I think some more can be raised.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Don't be sorry for being a decent person. Are you by yourself in the home?

MS. CORE: No. My husband works for the City.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. Oh, great.

MS. CORE: Uh-huh. And he's a good dad to our five. And now we trying to get as many healthy in their mind as in their body, and it's a pleasure for me to do it.

I'm anxious to have two more. I just fixed another room in my house for two more little girls, because I want 'em to be some princesses and less frogs as

possible.

(Laughter.)

MS. CORE: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: You're a very commendable and wonderful person.

MS. CORE: Okay, thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And they're very lucky to have you. And you're extremely unselfish. And after raising your own and taking on more, that says something about you.

MS. CORE: It's a pleasure.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you. Thank you for your testimony.

MS. CORE: Mm-hmm.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please identify yourself for the record.

MS. LYONS: Hi name is Regina Lyons. I'm an adoptive mother of two and a foster parent of one, and I also have a 18-year-old daughter sitting right back there, whose name is Charmaine.

Okay. As I said, my name is Regina Lyons. I was blessed with one

biological child; her name is Charmaine. Charmaine is 18 years old. I also have two children whom I adopted in 2008. Nysara is three and Kala is two.

I would like to thank you, Councilman Kenney and members of City Council, for this opportunity to tell you about problems that have occurred with DHS and the adoption of Shanna who is 18 months old.

I had Shanna in my home for almost nine months, and my goal for Shanna is adoption. Shanna is Kala's birth sister, and we would like them to grow up together. Shanna is presently a foster child.

I have had very little contact with Shanna's DHS adoption worker. I am not informed by DHS about what is going on about the adoption.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Excuse me. I don't want to interrupt but I want to make sure we're clear. Are your interactions with DHS or with the agency

that DHS contracts with?

MS. LYONS: It's DHS.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay, thank you.

MS. LYONS: Mm-hmm. When I call the adoption social worker, she does not return my phones. I have to go through the supervisor or the administrator for her to return my calls.

There was a desired need to change Shanna's daycare because she was continuously being infected with viral infections, ring worm -- which she had twice -- and pink eye on three occasions. Arrangements for the daycare transfer had to be made by the DHS worker. After three long months, Shanna finally started her new daycare on this Monday.

Now my husband and I are waiting to adopt Shanna, and it's moving very slowly. It is very frustrating. We are already adoptive parents and don't understand why this process has to take so long.

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There is a need for the agency, the DHS social worker, adoption worker, the foster parent, and adoptive parent to be able to communicate; and without communication, there is no hope for the kids in need.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Let me ask you a question about the daycare issue.

MS. LYONS: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Why were you not permitted to just take her to another daycare; was there a reimbursement issue or --

MS. LYONS: No, 'cause DHS was paying for her daycare.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Right.

MS. LYONS: I applied to CCIS.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: What is CCIS?

MS. LYONS: Um... It's subsidized daycare.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay.

MS. LYONS: And they had paid for her daycare until this CCIS kicks in,

which didn't kick in yet. So they was paying for it, and in order for her to be transferred, they had to do the paperwork.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: How did she wind up initially in the daycare she was in, where you were having the problems?

MS. LYONS: There is a list, they have a list of daycares that they will pay for.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: All right.

MS. LYONS: So that was one of the daycares that was on the list.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Was it near your home?

MS. LYONS: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And the new one is also near your home?

MS. LYONS: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay, fine.

Again, part of this process is to try to hear from you and address those issues and try to fix those problems so that you, in the future, and others like

you will not go through that.

And I just want to echo what I talked about there with the earlier witnesses, that your unselfishness is just astounding. You have, again, another grown. Mine are 20 and 16, and I'm like, you know, let's go.

(Laughter.)

And it takes a special person to want to bring an 18-month-old back into your life.

MS. LYONS: Mm-hmm.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: But thank you for being here and thank you for your testimony.

MS. LYONS: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please identify yourself for the record.

MS. MURPHY: Good morning.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning.

MS. MURPHY: My name is Kathy Murphy. Councilman Kenney and members of City Council, thank you for this

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opportunity to testify and hopefully expand the chances for Philadelphia children to find permanent adoptive families. I am most grateful for the level of concern that is evident from what I've heard so far.

I'm here to talk to you as a board member of the National Adoption Center and as an adoptive parent. The center believes that adoption is in the best interests of the child when his or her own parents are not able to make a home for him.

The foster care system, while promoting the reunification with the biological family, treats adoption as a last resort. Safety, stability, love, and permanency are what these children need.

While my husband and I did not adopt from Philadelphia and would have, had Philadelphia children been made available to us, our experiences, frustrations, and challenges mirror those

of potential adopters that come through the National Adoption Center.

John and I began our search to adopt children out of the foster care system in 2003. We wanted to provide a permanent home and family to older children who did not have one.

The first challenge that we encountered was a lack of information on the process. We had no idea where to start. Many of our calls to lawyers, private agencies, and state agencies went unanswered. We received no response to many inquiries via websites as we continued our search for children.

The unresponsiveness was particularly troubling. We felt as though we were the only ones out there who desired what we did -- to adopt a child from the foster care system.

State and city agencies were focused on finding foster parents, not adoptive parents.

Even with good agencies, the

information we were given on waiting children was too vague. We would receive reports listing only children's first name, age, sex, race, and special needs or challenges. There was no photo, no bio information. It is very difficult to search for a child with this little information.

We found our first daughter through a lawyer's online network. She was placed with us in August of 2005. Finalization was in March of 2006. Autumn is now 12.

We found our second daughter on a state website, which is no longer available due to lack of funding. She was placed with us this past June. Our finalization is January 5. Desiraya is eight.

We've had five home studies in six years. In the last six years, we were never once presented with an opportunity for a child from Philadelphia.

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Lack of information and unresponsiveness is a deterrent for finding permanent families for the many children who are in the foster care system and are available for adoption. Many people give up in frustration because it takes too long, or they can't figure out what they have to do or whom they need to contact. There are many things that need improvement.

I'm asking you today to focus first on three key areas to help the children of Philadelphia find permanent homes.

1. Streamline the process and reduce the time that children are in foster care when parental rights have been terminated or are certain to be.

Begin with concurrent plans for biological parents and the children at initiation into the system to reduce the time involved in terminating parental rights when it becomes clear that they will not be able to resume care of their

children.

2. Make home studies valid for longer than one year. This timing does not match the timeline of the search, identification, placement, and finalization process. Home studies should be valid for at least 18 months.

3. Raise awareness via the Internet. Provide a resource in the format that most people use today for research -- the Internet.

I encourage you to engage the National Adoption Center to create and maintain a website of Philadelphia children who need to be adopted, along with their photos and short bios, as well as instructions of what to do and who to contact.

The center has worked with Philadelphia's Department of Human Services almost since its inception in 1972. These are different times and call for more aggressive efforts. The waiting children are older and present more

challenges.

Prospective adopters, while more savvy, still need guidance through this process. And resources to reach these families must include, in addition to traditional media, the opportunities available through the Internet.

So many children count on us. We must not let them down. Help us be accountable to them.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you for your testimony.

Where did your adoptive children come from?

MS. MURPHY: Our daughter Autumn came from Iowa, and our daughter Desiraya came from Ohio.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And what was your experience and what -- I guess you dealt with the agencies in those states?

MS. MURPHY: At certain points in time, we actually worked through a local agency in New Jersey as our local

representative.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: You're a New Jersey resident?

MS. MURPHY: I am.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. And you had made an effort, or efforts, to adopt a child from Philadelphia?

MS. MURPHY: From Pennsylvania. We reached out to swan.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: What is that?

MS. MURPHY: SWAN? Statewide Adoption Network.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay, okay.

MS. MURPHY: We also had reached out to DHS, or DYFS in New Jersey. Finally selected -- finally found an agency who was representative of both Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Delaware, and New Jersey.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Now, your home inspection or home -- what is it?

MS. MURPHY: The home study?

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: The home

study. That's done every year?

MS. MURPHY: It's valid for one year.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And that's a New Jersey requirement?

MS. MURPHY: And it's also, I think, Pennsylvania and Philadelphia.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: But annually you need to do this as a result of New Jersey regulations?

MS. MURPHY: Correct.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: But also applies here in Philly?

MS. MURPHY: Well, it applies in other states as well. I don't know if it's national. But I know in Iowa as well as in Ohio it is as well.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay, fine. All right.

Councilman Greenlee?

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Yeah, thank you.

I wonder if I could go back to something that Miss Core said earlier.

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You talked about what wasn't provided to the children when they came. It sounds like they basically just had their clothes on their back kind of thing, right?

MS. CORE: Sure.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Was there any discussion before they came?

MS. CORE: No.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Or anything even writing that addressed those things? I mean, was there, you know -- or did you just kind of assume -- and I would understand why you would assume there would be more. But, you know...

MS. CORE: Well, I just figured that by them just coming out of the clear blue sky like that, they just call you and tell you they're on their way.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Right, mm-hmm.

MS. CORE: And I said, "Come on," and they were there.

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COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: So you would assume there that they would have been provided with more when they were coming.

MS. CORE: Right, 'cause, listen. The kids I had before them was a baby, and they didn't bring one Pamper with 'em. I had to wake my sister to come from her home on Huntington Park, to come to house to take me to a overnight drugstore so I could get a supply of Pampers and the proper milk, you know, things, because I took the baby in the middle of the night, at 12:30 at night.

So when they come, they just come with the kids, give 'em to you, and walk right out.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: And you don't know what child is coming till then, do you?

MS. CORE: No.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: So you don't know what --

(Indiscernible; parties talking

over each other.)

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: ... and you don't have the ability to have clothes available 'cause you don't even know if they're eight years old or twelve years old or something.

MS. CORE: Well, this is what we do. The friends that I have that are foster mothers, you know what they did for me? They set me up a little clothes bank. They taught me how to, you know, keep everything on hand. The only thing -- and I keep powdered milk so if they come in the night, I can get the blender out and make the milk.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORE: See, 'cause I didn't know. You're very green at first; you don't know what's going on. But now, I'm a pro at it.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: It sounds that way.

MS. CORE: They can bring different sizes, any color; I'm ready.

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(Laughter.)

MS. CORE: I am really ready.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: If we all could be so organized.

MS. CORE: Yes, I'm very organized.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: These children come from DHS? Did DHS bring them?

MS. CORE: DHS brings 'em, but the agency comes; in two to three days, they appear.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay. Commissioner -- I want the make sure that the record's clear 'cause the commissioner seems like she wants to...

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I'm just distressed by some of what I'm hearing, obviously.

We, actually, in some instances, do bring the children. It's usually the agency that we contract with.

And unfortunately, they should be giving the children what they need when they come to your house; you shouldn't have to be scrambling in the middle of the night. The agency gets paid to do those things.

And there's two resources that I want folks to know about. Number one is, we have a very, very good director who's in charge of provider relations, and we're now promoting accountability around providers as well. If you have circumstance where providers aren't doing what they need to do, you need to call DHS.

And I also have a Commissioner's Response Office. If I don't know about the situations that you have to struggle through, I can't help. And so, I really encourage people to call the Commissioner's Action Response Office. And also, complaints about providers, we will deal with them.

And this home study issue, if providers aren't doing home studies in

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the prescribed period of time, we're not going to pay them.

So if I know about it, we can put in mechanisms to make sure that, number one, you get what you need for the children you're caring for; and number two, that providers are held accountable for delivering the services that we pay them to deliver.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Commissioner, one of the things that occurs to me during this conversation, which was similar to what we had a number of years ago with Behavioral Health, was that the system got unwieldy, and we were spending money for agencies that were supposed to be delivering services that weren't. And Commissioner Richman at the time developed this CBH model.

I'm wondering -- I mean, not exactly, but I'm wondering if a model like CBH would make sense in the coordination of these agencies that do this work that we contract with.

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I mean, it's certainly just an idea that I just threw out there now, and it probably needs to be vetted over a period of time. But I know that the CBH, when they first brought it to our attention, I was like, "This is never going to work" and was dead wrong about it and, you know, voted for it, kind of not sure.

And as time went on, I think it really has been a major improvement in the delivery of behavioral health services for our folks who live in the city, and it basically squeezes every dime out of, you know, the available resources.

So I'm wondering if at some point in time we ought to maybe study a similar model for these agencies. That would be maybe helpful.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yeah. So I'll tell you two things.

One is that we have studied other systems that have gone to -- New

York is the best example. It's called Improving Outcomes for Children, and it's making sure there's not a duplication of effort. And so, we can advise you about where we are in exploring that.

The other issue is the creation of the Division of Performance Management and Accountability. We now have a report card for our foster care agencies; I'll share that report card with you.

We also have evaluations of the agencies. And we've created a new tool that we're using to evaluate the agencies that really gets to the heart of what we should be doing on behalf of children. And I'm happy to share that information with you as well.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Are you aware -- I was not aware of your hotline or your, I guess, ombudsman phone number.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Are all of our foster care folks in the city provided with that number?

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COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: I believe we handed out two folks. And frequently, cases that are problematic come to my attention; we investigate those cases.

You know, lack of response is certainly something that I hear frequently. So it's something that I will address if I'm aware of the problems.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I'm just wondering whether or not we should require our contracted agencies to give someone a brochure of something with kind of tips of where to call and what to do; and when the child is brought, whether it's in the middle of the night or during the day, that they get something in their hands so that if they have a problem, they know where to call.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yes. I think that's a great idea. The ideas that I've heard around using the Internet in a different way -- I mean, there's

lots of things that I'm taking notes on and certainly will take back and implement at DHS.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay, thank you very much. Thank you.

Councilman Greenlee?

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Commissioner, while you're there, can I just ask one just to kind of follow up, sorry.

Just so I'm clear -- again, my question to Miss Core -- when you have some kind of agreement or contract with these agencies, and it says pretty much what they're supposed to provide, okay?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yes.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Could you provide to the Chair a copy of that?

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Sure, sure.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Just so we can see, you know --

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Clothing allowances.

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COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Okay.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: All of those things are things we pay for, diapers.

I mean, for you to get a child with one article of clothing, the provider agency is paid to do these kinds of things. These are unacceptable circumstances that --

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Okay. So they're getting money and not spending it.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Yes.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: At least on her case, they sound like they might have gotten some funds and not spent it in that --

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: Well, then we need to investigate that.

COUNCILMAN GREENLEE: Yeah, right, okay.

COMMISSIONER AMBROSE: You know, so actually, we have members of the Commissioner's Action Response Office

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here that I'd like to have at least the two of you so that we can work through whatever issues you're experiencing now and make sure that the children are getting what they need and we're working on your case the way it needs to be worked on.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you for your testimony.

MS. CORE: Okay, thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Councilwoman Tasco, please.

COUNCILWOMAN TASCO: Yes. I'd just like to say to those of you who have come down for the hearing today, to apologize for leaving the table. I had a press conference with the Mayor regarding or foreclosure program, so that's why I had to leave. So I apologize for that.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much.

Warren Meltzer, Elia Morris, and Phyllis Stevens.

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(Witness comes forward.)

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning. Please identify yourself for the record.

MS. HOFFMAN: Good morning, Councilman Kenney and members of Council. I do not look like Warren Meltzer.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I thought I saw you before.

MS. HOFFMAN: However, he became ill today and asked if I would deliver his testimony for you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please.

MS. HOFFMAN: So I'm going to read it to you as he's given it to me.

Councilman Kenney and members of City Council, thank you for taking the time to listen to my thoughts on this important topic that has become central to my family. I'm Warren Meltzer, an attorney. My partner is Roy Ross, also an attorney, and we have been partnered for 20 years. We happen to have a wonderful 13-year-old foster son for over

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one year.

More than two years ago, we decided to go down the path of adopting a child from foster care. We have a loving home and wanted to share our life with a child in need, knowing all the joy a child would bring to us as well.

Overall, we had been looking for a boy, any race, ages 7 or 8 or up. We went through the approval process and had our home study done. Then we turned toward finding a child. Then a wall hit.

The effort involved in finding a child is huge, and I was met by overwhelmed case workers, recruiters, and a system so intent on checking every box and finding the perfect family that many families like ours may well, and probably do, walk away.

One can look at all of the children listed on the Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange. This is the website handled by the statewide adoption network, where many children available

for adoption in Pennsylvania are listed. There are probably a few hundred on that list at any one time.

I screened through all of the children and then started calling the listed contacts, one by one, often two or three or four times, before getting a return phone call. It became a big effort just to keep track of all the calls made.

When I spoke with the contacts, some refused to talk with me, saying they would only talk with our case worker. While understandable, I thought to myself, Our case worker won't be raising the child or paying for college, so why not talk to me.

When the contact would talk with me, I would try to get basic information about the child and his background. Then I would try to tell my family story. Sadly, after I would tell many of these contacts that we are a same-sex couple, you could hear the

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enthusiasm leave their voices. Of course, nothing would ever been said explicitly, but it was quite obvious by the change in tone. This happened all too often.

Overall, we inquired about more than 50 children. We had only one case worker follow up with us as a prospective adoptive family; and that, unfortunately, fell through. Otherwise, the responses we got included:

Not a good fit;

Johnny would do best with a mom and dad;

Billy had issues with his dad, so it would be best not to have two of them.

And so on.

All the while, I wondered, maybe the person who had issues with potential same-sex adoptive parents was the person I was speaking with or his or her supervisor or the county Family Court judge. Who could know, but what could

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you do. Despite my best efforts, I can't educate the world and eliminate all prejudice.

Even after you would talk with the contacts and had sent them to your home study with all your deeply personal information, often the response you would get is nothing. No thanks, but no thanks. No, not a good fit. Just silence.

For a while, I would call the contacts to see what happened after we sent out home study, but at some point, you just stop. Why spend your time chasing someone down just to be told no.

I will note that one key exception to all of this has been our contacts involving the National Adoption Center. They have at all times advocated for us with the people in the system, and the center always makes sure each inquiry we made has closure, even if negative.

Recently, I saw a child on the website who was one of the first I ever

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inquired about. As I recall, I was told that his foster family was considering whether to adopt him. I was told a few times to keep checking back; I did a few times and got the same story. Now he is back on the same website, and I can only assume that since his information says he wants to keep in touch with his foster family that that path for him got closed.

But if the system is so desperately in need of adoptive parents, why hasn't someone reached out to us to see if we are still available and interested. Process-wise, the system is failing this child if they are starting the search all over again, not looking into the file to see who has already inquired about the child.

One other point worth noting: Many times, children available for adoption have not had their parental rights terminated and, therefore, are not yet legally free. For a child who is not legally free, I believe the risk for gay

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and lesbian people trying to adopt a child is even greater.

While many relatives of the child may sit by and let the child be adopted by a straight couple or individual, some relatives may object to a child being adopted by a same-sex couple or a gay or lesbian individual, even if it is okay with the child.

If adoption is truly about the best interests of the child, DHS needs to enforce with its provider agencies that many kinds of people can be excellent parents, even those whose sexual orientation may not match those of your social workers or administrators.

Thank you for your time.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much for reading the testimony.

Please identify yourself for the record, whoever is next.

And also let the record that Councilman Jones has joined the committee.

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MS. STEVENS: Good morning. My name is Phyllis Stevens. I'm executive director of Together as Adopted Parents.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good morning.

MS. STEVENS: First, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the thousands of children and youth that are in foster care who cannot speak for themselves.

My name is Phyllis Stevens. I'm an adoptive mom and I have been a foster mom, a kinship mom. All four of my children were adopted out of foster care, and all four of my children have special needs.

I am also executive director of Together As Adoptive Parents, TAP. The main purpose of TAP is to keep kids that have been placed in permanent homes from reentering the foster care system. We do this by providing resources, support, trainings to adoptive, foster, and

kinship families and their children. TAP also hosts monthly parent meeting in Montgomery and Philadelphia. Not only adoptive, foster, and kinship parents attend these meetings, but many pre-adopt families are there as well. These meetings are a safe place for families to vent.

Because we are a parent-run organization, we constantly receive calls on our help line from parents who are fed up with the system. We get calls from parents who have been waiting for years to adopt a 12- or 13-year-old youth.

I know of two great families who are members of TAP and have dropped out of the adoption process because their wait was over two years to adopt an older youth.

I recently received a call from a family that was in the process of adopting a sibling group of four, ages 6 to 17 years. The adoption was stalled because there was a power struggle

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between the case worker and the pre-adoptive mom.

I talked with one devastated mom who was told by one case worker that the agency's plans were to change the goal to adoption for the child because the child had been at her home as a foster child for over three years. The agency has changed her case worker three times, and the goal is still -- has still not been changed to adoption.

Not all of the news is bad news. We're starting to see changes, and I would like to spend the last few minutes talking about the changes we need.

For the past nine years, Together As Adoptive Parents has been working with adoptive, foster, and kinship families in Philadelphia. Under Commissioner Ambrose, I am seeing something that I have not seen in nine years: The commissioner has sent representatives from her office to sit in

on our parent group meetings, which means a lot to these families.

Adoptive foster and kinship families are finally being heard. Their complaints are being taken serious and acted upon. Families have started to feel that they are valued. Children are getting services that they need.

I, Phyllis Steven, have been invited to become a member of the Department of Human Services advisory board and have accepted; this will ensure that the voices of the families are heard.

We have the power in our hands to save our children's lives -- and we're talking about lives. If we do nothing or if we do not continue to improve our system, shame on us.

Time in a child's life is not the same as time in our lives, an adult life. When you tell a child that you will find a home for them soon, they think tomorrow, maybe in two days; but

certainly not two or three years.

Are there problems? Yes. But I believe we are moving in the right direction.

Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much for your testimony and for your commitment to children. But also, I'm glad to hear -- and am not surprised, frankly -- that this particular DHS administration is reaching out to folks like yourself and bringing you into the system and hearing what you have to say, 'cause I think, unless we all start talking, or keep talking, to each other, we're probably never going to get where we want to be.

So I'm glad you've agreed not only to do what you're doing with our children, but also to spend some of other free time contributing to this process. Thank you.

MS. STEVENS: And I would like add just one thing.

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Yes, ma'am.

MS. STEVENS: I'd like to take a little bit of responsibility for Shirley and Regina not communicating with DHS, because they are part of our organization, and I was a little bit confused on sort of the chain of command. So I think a lot of their situation would have been taken care of if I kind of would have --

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: How long have you been on the committee, the advisory committee?

MS. STEVENS: I just joined actually.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I think it will be a real short time before you figure out what the system is. I'm sure it will be a short learning curve.

Thank you very much.

MS. STEVENS: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please identify yourself for the record.

MS. MORRIS: Hi. My name is

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Aleah Morris. I'm an adoptive parent and a foster parent as well.

My journey for adoption started in 1993, when I adopted my first daughter. I have four adopted children. Now they're all grown and doing quite well.

They encouraged me to pursue adoption again. You know, based on their experience, they said, "Mom, you should adopt, you should adopt."

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Who is "they"?

MS. MORRIS: My daughters.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Oh, okay, your children, okay.

MS. MORRIS: My daughter, Carrie, who's 19 a daughter; I have a daughter, Faleeka, who's 22; a daughter, Portia, who's 20; and my daughter Bessie who's 18.

They said, "Mom, you should adopt again. You did a great job with us and you should try." I said, "Okay, that

sounds good." I said, "Well, you know, maybe I'll do foster care. Maybe I'll try that."

So I did sign up with the agency that I had previously adopted my daughters from, which was the Juvenile Justice Center, and I was a foster parents with them before as well. And in that process, you know, they placed a child with me once I was approved for a foster parent. And the child had been placed so many times that stability for her was not a answer. So she ran away. Like, after just being with me for two days, she was gone, they never found her.

So in April -- that was in February. So in April, I told my permanency adoption social worker that I wanted to do adoption versus foster care, and I asked if they had any children in a agency that needed permanency, and they didn't at the time.

So I then pursued to go online and look for children who are up for

adoption. So my social worker called me and said, "Oh, there's a matching party." It was May the 30th, and I attended. And I met a young lady there who was up for adoption through Jersey, and me and her spoke for a while. She was 13 at the time. And I then did a interest form online, you know, requesting that they send me some information and that I had a home study in the process.

And that was back in May. And my home study is actually still not completed because of the agency, you know, not having enough people to work on it; when, in previous times, when I did adoption before, there was, like, a team that kind of worked with you, like, three or four social workers, and they little got things done.

Where now, it's just this one person working on permanency in adoption with me. And every week, I'm in contact with her. And every week she says, Oh, I need this; oh, I need that. I'm, like,

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Well, three or four months have passed by and I've asked you what else did you need, and you said, Oh, I have everything. And she went down the list, and I said okay, fine. And then she goes down this list again last week and says, Oh, I need this, I need that. And it's been since May, and my home study's still not complete.

And I'm very concerned, and she heard the concern in my voice. And, you know, we're trying to rectify some things because now, the child that I had interest in in Jersey, you know, felt as though I was a match, is waiting. And the child has now had still a birthday still in foster care. So, you know, I was very upset about it.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Well, I know there are folks here listening to what you're saying, and I'm sure you will have contact with them before the hearing's over as to what the difficulties are in your home study issue

or maybe getting it resolved for you so that you can continue to get moving and get this child into your home.

I didn't want to interrupt. So if there's anything else you have to add, please feel free.

MS. MORRIS: No, that was basically my main concern.

And also, there was another issue with my children, once they turned 18. I was never notified that their health insurance was going to end. And within six months, it ended.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Are they in school?

MS. MORRIS: They are in school. I have two in college, and one's still in her last year of high school.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Does that end? I mean, I know myself, I have a 20-year-old in college, and he's still on my health-care plan as long as I provide the semester transcripts that he starts school.

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MS. MORRIS: Right.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: But there's not a similar situation for you?

MS. MORRIS: They were receiving medical assistance based on being special needs to adoption.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Right.

MS. MORRIS: So that's what they were receiving. And, you know, it was not until I went and took 'em to the doctor that I found out, Oh, she doesn't have any insurance. I mean, at that time, of course, I could have put her on my insurance, but just to be at the doctor's office now with this $400 bill...

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Right.

MS. MORRIS: And, you know, she has other medical needs, and we couldn't even go to a specialist.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: What is your medical coverage?

MS. MORRIS: What I have at my particular job, I have Keystone East.

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: That's Independence Blue Cross -- Keystone --

MS. MORRIS: Yes, Pennsylvania Blue Cross.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: All right. Well, actually, after the hearing, if you talk to Sarah, maybe we can figure out a way to have them address that particular issue relative to the break in coverage.

Are your children back on -- since they're in school, are they on your coverage now?

MS. MORRIS: After a long, long journey since June, we finally got the insurance on, like, I would say about three weeks ago.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: So everybody's covered now?

MS. MORRIS: Everybody's covered now.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: All right. Make sure you talk to Sarah after the hearing and we'll see if we can't make an inquiry over at Keystone.

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MS. MORRIS: Okay. Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much and thank you for your testimony.

Charles Williams?

(Witness comes forward.)

MR. WILLIAMS: Good morning, members of City Council, Commissioner Ambrose, Ken Mullner, the Executive Director of the National Adoption Center and other invited guests. My name is Dr. Charles Williams. I am an assistant clinical professor at Drexel University and director of their newly-named Center for the Prevention of School-Aged Violence.

And while I'm in this chamber, I'm reminded of the two City citations I've earned from Council for my work with children in preventing violence, one of which came from Councilwoman Tasco from my citywide "Books, Not Guns" campaign.

I have a bachelor's degree in psychology and my dual master's degree in

group counseling and organizational dynamics from Hahnemann University and my Ph.D. in education and psychology also from Temple University.

My credentials, being what they are, don't make me as qualified to speak about these issues as what I'm about to tell you, which is the fact that I am a former foster care child in Philadelphia.

I was in foster care from 1987 until 1994. In fact, I was an emergency placement, along with my two brothers and my sister, because of abuse and neglect in my home, which centered around substance abuse, which is not uncommon for a lot of children who are placed in the system, not just here in Philadelphia, but across the country.

One of the things that I think is sort of important for all of us who are here, including the members of City Council, the folks who work for the City, foster care parents, and other agencies who care about this issue, and that is

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that even though I was taken from my home because of abuse and neglect and because I was a poor black kid from a struggling neighborhood and family because there were addictions in my family, that I wanted a decent quality of life. I want the same quality of life going back now several years that you would want for your own children.

It's not just enough for me to be out of harm's way, as I speak for many foster care children across the country, of which there are about 500,000 and about (indiscernible) languish in foster care indefinitely. I want a decent education, I want decent medical care, I want to thrive and not just exist.

One of the things that I wanted to highlight is that instead of just reading all of this, 'cause you have copies of it already in the record, my experience is atypical, which I think most of us would agree. Most kids in foster care -- many kids in foster

care -- when you talk about the high school dropout rate, many kids in foster care don't graduate high school, let alone go to college and go on to get a Ph.D. and become a college professor, because of the daunting challenges that they face.

I also would like to point out that I'm very pleased that recently I was invited to join the board of directors of the National Adoption Center. And I strongly feel that at the end of the day, each child languishing in foster care would rather with be with a permanent family, in a stable and loving home

However, given that this is not the case for the overwhelming majority of youth in foster care, we must examine rather closely and as often as we can, without being defensive or pointing fingers, the experiences of youth in foster care and the subsequent impact of those experience.

So what do I mean specifically?

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We have children in foster care who deal with various issues -- mental health, behavioral health. And by the way, I worked with CBH as well once as a clinical systems analyst. I worked in behavioral health for a number of years with children who are in the foster care system, dealing with issues of, you know, depression, anxiety, aggression, anger, those sorts of things.

Our children in foster care deal with many issues related to self-esteem, they deal with issues of aggression, and -- which is sort of stunning to me, the research shows that many children who are taken out of homes because of abuse and neglect are abused and neglected once they're placed in the foster care system. Research supports that, and I have the references here to back that up.

So while child welfare professionals work very hard -- and they should be commended -- at protecting

children and taking them out of harm's way and ensuring that they are provided for, I think that part of the issue here is that we have to understand that -- as I said, my experiences are atypical, and foster care is the less-than-ideal, in many circumstances, living situations for many children.

So we do have to think about permanency, and we do have to think about the quality of life of children who are in foster care. Because many children who are raised in foster care because of abuse and neglect, because they have been exposed to violence, this can lead to things such as pour academic achievement, which I had mentioned earlier, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and low future expectations. It can also lead to high rates of emotional difficulties and mental illness. So the quality of their lives aren't as good as they could be

And Councilman Kenney and, I guess, other folks also on the Council,

you know, asked some really good questions, some difficult questions, which is, you know, once kids have been placed in the foster care system or even when there's permanency, you know, what are the outcomes?

So specifically, how do we address internalizing problems like depression, externalizing problems like aggression? How are they thriving? How are they doing academically? So are they graduating from one grade to the next? Are they going to high school? Is there post-secondary training? Are they going to college?

So, what are the outcomes for youth once they're placed? As I said, it's just not enough for them to be placed, but we want, like every child, to have a very good quality of life to the extent that we can make that possible.

One of the things I'd like to talk about briefly -- and the commissioner mentioned this and it's been

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highlighted in the Raise Me Up campaign, and it's something that we think is very drill -- is mentoring.

Research shows very clearly that the children in the child welfare system specifically and in foster care can benefit from mentoring. In fact, according to the reports supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service, entitled "Mentoring Children in Foster Care," they showed that foster-care youth can benefit immensely from positive role models, and that one of the things that can happen, because kids in foster care have mentors, is that they can work on things such as goal aspirations, which can lead to high academic achievement or college attainment. They can create meaningful and caring relationships with peers, and they can begin to feel safe in their communities.

Also, one of the issues that we have to deal with with kids who are in

foster care, because of issues of abuse and neglect, is delinquency. Mentoring has been demonstrated to address those issues of delinquency and to increase pro-social development and positive behaviors for kids in foster care, including a greater sense of academic competence, a better attitude towards school, reduction in substance abuse, and increased pro-social behaviors and attitudes

Moreover, kids in monitoring programs who are in foster care are more likely to attend college. So once again, going back to their quality-of-life issue.

So we're looking to have certain things happen with youth who are in foster care when they engage in mentoring problems. And that is allowing them to improve self-esteem, work well with peers, respect adults, avoid violent conflict, refuse drug use, improve academic performance, and develop a

better future outlook.

Also, the research suggests, just briefly, that these kinds of services can benefit parents of the kids that are in foster care.

So essentially, without consistent support of trained, helping professionals, some of which can be provided through mentoring, foster care youth will continue to experience greater rates of internalizing problems like depression, externalizing problems like aggression and academic failure, school dropout.

Moreover, if we support foster-care youth, we can deal with their issues of feeling isolated and forgotten by the various systems, tasks (indiscernible) providing for them and ensuring that they have more than just a life, but an abundant life filled with great hope and promise.

It is my hope that my personal testimony, buttressed with the latest

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research, will shed light on some of the challenges facing foster-care youth as well provide some insight into how these challenges may be addressed

Thank you, members of Council.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much for taking the time to come in and discuss with us your experiences and make recommendations for improvement. We appreciate it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Thank you very much.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Well, it is "good afternoon" now.

Mr. Ron Spangler and Pat Albright.

(Witnesses come forward.)

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Good afternoon. Please identify yourself for the record, whoever would like to start first.

MS. ALBRIGHT: I'm Pat Albright.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Pat, would

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you please pull the microphone closer to you. Thank you.

MS. ALBRIGHT: Sure. Good morning. My name is Pat Albright. I am here to represent the Every Mother Is a Working Mother Network. And I have with me Debra Sealy, who's a mother who's a part of our organization, who has had dealings with the DHS system.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And can you yourself for the record.

MR. SPANGLER: Good morning. Ron Spangler, Arbor Education and Training.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And whoever would like to start, please begin.

MS. ALBRIGHT: Good morning, Councilman Kenney and members of City Council and staff. My name is Pat Albright, as I just said. I live in Germantown and I'm a former welfare recipient and a mother of an 18-year-old black or biracial son, who this year started his freshman at Albright College.

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I'm testifying today on behalf of the Every Mother Is a Working Mother Network, which is a grassroots network of mothers, grandmothers, and other caregivers based at the Crossroads Women's Center in Germantown.

We campaign with our sister organization in Los Angeles and other groups to establish that raising children and caring work is work and for the value of this work to be reflected in the right to welfare and other resources and in other social and economic policies.

We are testifying today because since 2006, we have coordinated a group called, DHS, Give Us Back Our Children, a multi-racial volunteer support and action group of mothers, other family members and supporters, including adoptive parents and former social workers, working together to end the unjust removal of children from their families by DHS.

Much of the time, the reason

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children are originally taken have more to do with poverty and racism than with abuse or neglect. Once in the system, the mothers are presumed guilty, treated like criminals, and are in serious danger of losing their children permanently despite many efforts to get them back.

In the past three years, we have learned a great deal about the child welfare system, including that Philadelphia has a much higher rate of child removal than do other large U.S. cities. Philadelphia removes 31.3 children for every thousand impoverished children, as opposed to 14.6 in New York City and 4.4 in Chicago. Compare removals to total child population, and Philadelphia is similarly out of line.

Yet children here are no safer, and perhaps less so. Most studies show children are far better off and safer at home than in foster care. According to the National Coalition of Child Protection Reform, children who have been

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in foster care have twice the rate -- and this was also seen in the video earlier -- have twice the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder of Gulf War veterans, and only 20 percent can be said to be doing well, quote/unquote.

All studies show that preserving the maternal bond is a critical factor in determining the health and well-being of a child.

Our work has exposed how the child welfare system operates on the ground level, how it is actually lived and experienced by those most impacted as opposed to policies and slogans on posters.

This is why we are compelled to testify today, as the voice of mothers whose children have been taken is almost never heard in these policy debates.

What is the context of this issue? It is that the poorest and most vulnerable women and children in Philadelphia are the ones subject to DHS

intervention. The vast majority of children who are removed from their families are children of color, especially African-American. DHS has acknowledged this, consponsoring meetings on the disproportionate placement of African-American and Latino youth, but the problem persists.

Statistics tell the story. In Pennsylvania, in 2000, 49 percent of children in foster care were black, whereas black children make up only 13 percent of the population for the same period. In Pennsylvania, black children were reunified with their families only 58 percent of the time, compared with 72 percent for white children.

We've been trying to find the statistics for Philadelphia, but they are not readily available; perhaps DHS can provide them.

We are concerned about the proposal to improve the process by decreasing wait times. What does this

mean in practical terms? We fear it means the fast-tracking of primarily poor black children into adoption, often with significant financial support and incentives to adoptive families as well as to agencies. Support that is given to mothers would enable them to obtain decent housing, one of the main reasons children are removed.

Already, DHS is spending $35,000 per year per child in foster care. We have pointed out that there are large financial incentives for keeping children in care, but few for reunification.

We fear that decreasing waiting times will result in further limiting the ability of parents to reunify with their children and that there will be more termination of parental rights because they will time out. This is already happening and often, because social workers and other professionals are not doing what they are supposed to do.

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In a typical example, a judge ordered family therapy, pending the approval of a mother's and child's therapist. The DHS worker did nothing to implement the order, despite many calls from the mother and from our organization. She said it was not her job but the therapist's; while the therapist said it was not their job but the worker's. This dragged on for months. And by the time of the next hearing five months later, this therapy had still not been set up.

The judge reissued the order, but another five months had passed on the ticking clock, not only straining the bond between mother and young child, but also pushing against the time limit for permanency.

We fully support timely decisions regarding the lives of children. And, in fact, we are shocked at how cavalierly DHS and the court makes decisions that keep families apart for

months and years. How they decide that an hour of time in a windowless office is all that is necessary for a child and mother each week.

But if the appropriate resources are not made available, pushing for shorter time limits will only increase the problem and result in more children being permanently separated from their families.

One of these resources is housing. Thirty percent of foster children would be home right now if their parents had decent housing.

Adequate, competent, and accessible legal help is another desperately needed resource. Most mothers cannot afford private attorneys and must rely on court-appointed lawyers who vary greatly in quality and commitment to their client.

There are a few notable exceptions, but most court-appointed lawyers will not return calls or meet

with clients before hearings and often treat their clients with a contempt that is shocking.

Councilmembers, are you aware that, in Philadelphia, a court-appointed lawyer in Family Court make $500 per year for representing their client, regardless of how much or how little work they do? In the second year of a case, that figure drops to $250 per year; and in the third, to $125 per year.

It's no wonder that many mothers lose their children because of poor legal representation.

We are pleased that Commissioner Ambrose shares these concerns, and we look forward to working with her to address them.

We urge you to oppose any measures which would result in more children being permanently separated needlessly from their families.

Poverty is not a crime, poverty is not neglect and should not be punished

by taking children away from their families.

We urge you to support the practical measures and resources that would make a real difference in enabling families to stay together. These include housing, financial support, child care, family-centered addict treatment, support for people with mental and physical disabilities, and legal help, among others. This also includes removing any financial incentives for agencies to keep children in care.

Other cities and states have made changes that have greatly reduced the number of children removed from their families, including in Pittsburgh and Chicago. Philadelphia can do the same.

Please do the right thing for our kids.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much for your testimony.

Please identify yourself for the record.

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MS. SEALY: My name is Debra Sealy. I have two children. One is 17, and he's home, under supervision of DHS. I have a daughter that's 8 years old, and she's with DHS but PLC.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: What is PLC? I'm sorry.

MS. SEALY: Permanent legal custody.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Okay.

MS. SEALY: And she's been in foster care for, like, three years.

And when the court date do come up, they postpone some of the results because they said they couldn't get the statements from the doctor on time, and it just prolong until it got to PLC.

I'm asking for support of decent housing. Um, you know, let's see. And, um, well, I'm getting medical treatment and I'm just about overcoming that. But it's just -- it's poor service with DHS, you know. It's like -- it's like they saying that I shouldn't get my

child back, but I've been a good mother to my child. I'm always there, feeding her, making sure that she have clothes, you know, making sure that she went to school. But it still wasn't enough, you know. And the aim is probably just, you know, the other people getting they satisfaction of seeing a parent get hurt.

But, um, you know, as the lord said, don't worry 'cause he had to overcome the world.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you for your testimony, and I wish you best wishes in your efforts to reunify your family stabilize and get back to a regular life. Best wishes.

MS. SEALY: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Happy holidays.

Please identify yourself for the record.

MR. SPANGLER: Good afternoon. Ron Spangler, Arbor Education and Training.

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COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please proceed.

MR. SPANGLER: I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Councilman Kenney and the members of City Council for this opportunity.

My name is Ron Spangler. I'm representing Arbor Education and Training and Rest Care. Rest Care supports many young adults and children through services such as therapeutic foster care, highly secure placements, sexual offender programs, and academic and vocational development.

Through our Arbor Education and Training services, we provide life-changing programs that help prepare young adults, ages 4 through 21, to obtain either meaningful or gainful employment or pursuit of post-secondary education.

I worked in the field of workforce development, continuing education, and community and economic development. Prior to joining Arbor, I

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was vice president for workforce and continuing education at ETI International. Previously, I worked as vice president at (indiscernible) Technology and Training. I've also served as deputy executive director of the Mayor's Commission for Literacy and director at the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. I've worked on several Philadelphia (indiscernible) projects to strengthen economic development.

Arbor Education and Training has a clear vision for providing services to youth, to strengthen youth employability by availing community resources while imparting an understanding of the responsibilities associated with becoming a healthy adult and a contributing member of society.

Serving low-income, at-risk youth since the early 1980s, Arbor's innovative programs are renowned for establishing best practices. In 1997

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and, again, in 2002 and 2003, one of Arbor's youth programs received the National Promising and Effective Practices Network Award for effective practices in youth employment and development. Arbor was recognized for helping organizations in the field improve and for dispelling the myth that nothing works in youth programming. The (indiscernible) major programs that have demonstrated exemplary performance, model definition, and relations with its collaborative partners.

Foster youth transitioning to independent living are heavily concentrated in America's large cities. If their transitions are not successful, these young people will become unemployed, homeless, or find themselves lacking in educational skills and certifications, all issues that the city will have to address.

Fortunately, city governments can play a variety of leadership roles in

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promoting and helping achieve successful transitions to independence and adulthood for foster youth. Indeed, cities and their elected officials and appointed officials can and are showing such leadership by convening partners, assembling the necessary human and financial capital, and establishing vision, goals, and accountability systems.

It's our concern for young adult that prompts our testimony today regarding solutions and recommendations. Our expertise in foster and transitional care includes the Achieving Independence Center, Passports to Success in New York City, and collaboration with the Department of Labor and the Casey Family Programs and the Bridge in Pittsburgh.

We have developed and implemented services to help young people in foster care achieve their goals of self-sufficiency. Going forward, we want to continue that commitment and

relationship to ensure that most, if not all, youth and those other young Philadelphians are successfully enrolled or re-enrolled in post-secondary education, training, vocational school, or high school this is fall. These students needs significant support to be successful in school, with adequate wraparound services.

I witnessed firsthand the dramatic impact in youths' lives that are connected to these centers. In numerous instances, except for our staff, these youth did not have the support systems they need at the time of transition. When the appropriate tools are made available, future success is achievable.

Of the 496,000 youth in foster care across the nation, each year, about 20,000 reach an age when they are emancipated from the child welfare system and must live independently on their own. In the City of Philadelphia, youth are preparing to leave the child welfare

system each year.

As adults, we remember the challenges that we encountered when we struck out on our own, even with family and supportive networks. Youth who have exited foster care without an opportunity to develop self-sufficiency skills and support often encounter unemployment, homelessness, or become dependent on public assistance.

The outlook for foster youth who have aged out is often grim:

One in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after leaving the system;

Over one-fifth will become homeless at sometime after the age of 18;

Approximately 58 percent will earn a high school degree compared with 87 percent of a national comparison group of non-foster youth;

Of youth who age out of foster care and are over the age of 25, less than 3 percent earn a college degree,

compared to 28 percent of the general population.

Youth who age out of foster care at age 18 often face unemployment or end in up a series of low-wage, unsteady jobs.

Pennsylvania is the fifth top jurisdiction for the number of children in out-of-home care. To improve outcomes for youth leaving in foster care, a new vision and proactive strategy is required that recognizes that key stakeholders cannot do this work in isolation of each other.

With guidance and support from local service agencies and visionary leadership people, like you can help build brighter futures. Agendas to retain youth in foster care to the age of 21, working in collaboration with the National Job Core Centers as part of the Older Youth Initiative, and re-engaging disenfranchised children to complete their education can yield substantial

dividends.

The advantages of post-secondary education are well-documented. Young adult with a bachelor's degree earn significantly more than those with less education. It's projected that foster youth with a bachelor's degree, on average, would earn $481,000 more than a foster youth who only has a high school diploma.

Even if the young adults who begin college do not obtain their bachelor's degree, they also stand to benefit from the education they complete. Completing any college increases lifetime earnings by $129,000. Yet, so often, when college opportunity knocks, it goes unanswered.

A study conducted by Northwestern University Center for Labor Market Studies demonstrates that adults with more than a high school diploma contribute $2,125 in taxes, while those were a bachelor's degree pay $13,630.

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Conversely, individuals with less than 12 years of education required $5,300 annually in supportive services.

In this time of is a shrinking budgets and other priorities, how do we improve outcomes for children in foster care? Next year, if we only increase the post-secondary graduation rate to 5 percent for an associate's degree, we will recognize an additional $129 million in increased lifetime earnings for foster youth transitioning to independent level. These increases in lifetime earnings translate to taxable income.

Jim Collins, the author of Good to Great, states that the question Why try for greatness? would seem almost tautological. If you're doing something you care that much about and you believe in its purpose deeply enough, then it is impossible to imagine not trying to make it great; it's just a given.

Indeed, the real question is not Why greatness? but what work makes me

feel compelled to try to create greatness? If you have to ask the question Why should we try the make it great; isn't success enough? then you're probably in the wrong line of work.

I know that with your support, we'll be able to retool our procedures and revitalize our concepts. Together, we can create a more successful and effective system. By working together, we will make Philadelphia a leader in the nation.

Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much for your testimony and coming in today.

Thank you.

Barbara Clayton, Debra Young, Christina Farrell.

(Witnesses come forward.)

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I just want to thank you 'cause you are the last panel and you waited around this long, and I appreciate your patience. And

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someone's got to go last, and it's you. But thank you in advance of your testimony.

Please identify yourself for the record.and proceed.

MS. CLAYTON: My name is Barbara Clayton.

MS. YOUNG: Debra young.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Please proceed.

Is Christina Farrell here or no? No? Okay.

Whoever would like to go first.

MS. YOUNG: Okay. My name is Debra Young, as I said. Thank you for hearing me today.

My children were taken away from me for protecting them from an abusive father. I never lived with this man, I didn't share a home with him. I went to every court system down Center City to get my kids protection. I called the police, did everything, child therapist. Even went to DHS to get help

for my children. Instead of DHS helping me, they took my kids, okay?

Now, they took their kids and put them with his mother that was also abusive to my kids. DHS knew this; they had the records from my child therapist 'cause my kids were in therapy, but they did nothing to help me and my children. Instead of helping me and my children get away from this abuser, they put my kids right with the abuser.

Right now, my kids are with a abuser who failed the drug test. He was arrested five times for terroristic threats towards me and my children, stalking and harassment. My children are with this man right, now to this day. DHS gave him custody in June.

I've been going through this for two-and-a-half years. I have a organization Justice for Families and Children. I've been to Washington four times to speak about this.

People think DHS is there to

help. And they're supposed to help the families reunify the families; they do not reunify the families, okay? My family -- they've never been to my house in two-and-a-half years; it took a judge for them to come to my house to do a home study.

I have passed every psychological test they gave me, I have passed every drug test they gave me, I have passed everything.

Me and my kids got diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder because of what we've been through, because our family was destroyed and torn apart.

A lot of families in Philadelphia are going through this for no reason. In a one-year period -- it's a known statistic, it's in the Ed Rendell's child abuse report -- in Philadelphia, the Department of Human Services took 8,000 kids away from their families but only investigated 2,073.

That's a whole lot of kids that are taken away from the families without being properly investigated.

If they properly investigated my kids, they would have seen this man has been arrested for terroristic threats, trying to kill me, harassing my children everywhere we went. They did not do the proper job.

I have e-mailed them over 200 times since this has happened in 2007. They ignored me. I have called about the abuse after my kids was taken away from me. I have called them 120 times because of the abuse my kids have gone through.

I have over 200 pages of evidence of the abuse and what DHS has violated mine and my children's constitutional and God-given rights.

I have never beat my children, I don't do drugs, I don't drink. I was a Philadelphia Guardian Angel. I got awarded from the vice president of the United States for my volunteer work. And

this is who they're taking these children away from.

Now, my mother called to get her grandkids. They told her no and as she goes into foster kinship care. Why do our families have to go through kinship foster care, this program, to get their families?

In other words, if you don't go through the kinship program for grandparents, you don't get your family. They would rather put 'em out in foster care with people that don't know your kids.

Now, Pat Albright said some very good points there. When you go to court and you get represented by a court-appointed attorney -- I met my court-appointed attorney two minutes before I went in there and lost my kids. I have no idea why I lost my kids to this day. I met him two minutes before I went in there. He had -- he didn't know nothing about my case. I lost my kids.

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My daughter and son got so upset, they started screaming and ran across the business highway 'cause they have no idea why they were taken away from me until this day.

My case worker never returned my phone calls. In fact, in the courtroom, after court, she told me, excuse my language, to F off.

We're disrespected as parents. We're treated like garbage.

The reunification program, I have no idea what that is. They have never tried to reunify my side kids with me. And thousands of parents are going through this in Philadelphia.

Grandparents, my mother? Forget it, she couldn't get the kids; they wouldn't return the calls. Grandparents, fathers, mothers are losing their kids for no reason except because they get paid to do this.

The incentive bonus for Philadelphia was just awarded $1,273,000

in incentive bonuses to social workers for taking our kids. To this day, parents do not know why they have lost their kids.

They have gone through psychological evaluations, they have done the drug testing. Everybody has to go through the same thing. Even if you don't do this, you still have to go through this program that you're mortified in. I had to do two years of drug-testing. For what? Their own psychiatrist said I didn't need any drug -- no drug counseling, nothing. I did fine on the evaluations; me and my kids passed with flying colors.

I still, to this day, have supervised visits with my kids, for two-and-a-half years. But I've never beaten my kids or hurt my kids.

My own children wrote letters stating this. Nobody listened to my kids from the beginning. My children told DHS what their father was doing. They never

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listened.

My children are with the abuser who's doing drugs. DHS knew and the judge knew in our first court hearing, and he failed three drug tests; I passed. He got my kids.

Now, this is happening more and more in Philadelphia.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: How old are your children?

MS. YOUNG: My children now are 11 and 12.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I don't know the specific details of the case and this is not the forum to go into them now. But if you want to give your name to my staff person, Sarah, we can certainly try to get an answer as to what's going on.

MS. YOUNG: Okay. My kids are now out of DHS but they're with their father.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: No, I hear what you're saying. And, again, I

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don't -- we don't have the time to go through the specifics of the case, but I think it's probably quite personal. So I want to get an answer -- I need your information so I can get an answer for me from DHS as to what went on.

MS. YOUNG: My point is, you want to try to improve the process of decreasing the wait times in the foster care system, okay? Let the families going through adopting their grandkids without going through the kinship care. Most of these families are good families.

She waited over two years, and she still has not got her grandkids and --

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Let us take a look at what went on.

MS. YOUNG: Okay.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And thank you for coming in. Please identify yourself for the record.

MS. CLAYTON: Barbara Clayton. Good afternoon, Councilman Kenney. And I

do want to thank you.

I am a grandmother and I am here fighting for my grandson. My grandson has been involved with DHS since '06. We came into the picture in '07 because my stepdaughter was estranged from us, and we did not find out about the situation with my grandson until '07.

When we found out about the situation, we attempted to approach DHS to find out how we could work with them to get our grandson out of foster care and bring him home to his family.

It's been a lot of heartbreak, it's been a whole lot of heartbreak. DHS refused to speak with us. I had to go up and ask the governor for assistance. I've written multiple letters to different politicians in the State of Pennsylvania and the City of Philadelphia requesting help for grandparents.

We're looked at like we are the guilty party. I've had home inspections, I've tried to work with DHS. Our working

with DHS, we've requested family group decision-making; it never came about.

Five days prior to our last hearing, they called us and told us they wanted to have a family preservation meeting. They scheduled it five days prior to a hearing where they talked to us about PLC.

Our PLC was talked about from November of '07. It was court-ordered in July of '08. And in September of '09, they terminated my stepdaughter's parental rights. They have now stopped us from having any contact with our grandson.

Our goal back in 2007 was to bring our grandson home. We wanted to take custody of the child, we wanted to adopt him. Now they're placing our grandson up for adoption.

After our hearing in September of '09, we were told by the social worker from DHS, "Oh, Mrs. Clayton, this doesn't stop you from adopting your grandson."

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At 1801 Vine, we went up to Carol Carson's office at the adoption unit to find out that we can't adopt our grandson, so now, he's going to be adopted out. This makes no sense to me.

We have tried to work with DHS. I have no problem with foster care, I have no problem with adoption of children, but I don't understand why families are not considered first. I don't understand why DHS is not forthcoming with the truth and help us.

These adoption agencies that have been here today, they're all talking about -- adoptive parents are talking about the problems that they have getting answers. Just imagine being a family member trying to get answers.

Everyone is not on the same page. Our foster care agency is Children's Choice; I'm not very thrill with them. We've tried to work with them, we've tried to work with DHS. Everyone's not on the same page because

there is no family group decision-making.

And it's sad right now because we haven't had no contact with my grandson since before -- since the termination of rights, I should say. So since September.

I want to know what you told my 5-year-old grandson happened to his grandparents. Did we fall off the face of the earth? did we die? or do we not love you anymore? What kind of traumatic does this do to the child?

When you have families that want to be involved and they're not permitted to be involved and DHS is not forthcoming with the truth, because their goal back in September of 2007 was to terminate my stepdaughter's rights and to put the child up for adoption, and they never changed that goal. They continued that going, even though we asked them to help us and to work with us.

And if they have all these other agencies that they deal with and

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all these different areas, why could they not have pointed us in the direction.

They had us do a psychological evaluation for a bonding with our grandson. Our psychological evaluation was positive. There was an obvious attachment. The child needed us, that we could be a positive influence in his life, and they just disregarded that. They have disregarded the evaluation that was done by the doctor that they sent us to, to have the bonding evaluation done with.

And they've terminated our rights. They've taken us out of our grandson's life.

And I want to know what this five-year-old thinks. And I've asked that of Children's Choice and DHS and have not gotten a response.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Well, I hear you, and I feel for your situation, and I will promise to get at least a briefing from them as to what their

position is on why this situation is what it is.

MS. CLAYTON: Mr. Del Meriweather is here. He had a conversation with my husband back in August and told my husband that that child should have been placed with us because we're blood, okay?

And then you go to court in September and terminate rights and lock us out of his life?

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Well, the earlier testimony from DHS was, in fact -- and I am at the beginning of the hearing somewhat torn either way on the philosophy or the policy of reunification, like how many times -- and I'm not talking about your cases in particular. But how many times do kids get given back and taken away from parents. And that's one issue.

Now this other issue that you're raising here I think is also valid is that why -- if the goal is to reunify

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families, then why are the grandparents in your case cut out?

So I will get answers to both, if I am permitted to have the information. That's the other issue too as to whether or not the information that's available is, in fact, available to me, or is it private? is it court-ordered private? is it, by regulation or by law, private? Similar to medical information.

So I will do whatever I can to get an answer to your particular questions as to why you're in the situations that you're in.

MS. CLAYTON: I'm not here to knock foster care.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: No, I don't think you are.

MS. CLAYTON: And I'm not here to say anything bad about adoption. I just want to know why families are not considered for adoption.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And --

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MS. CLAYTON: And we were told that they would have to have placed our grandson. And DHS will not give us a reason why they will not place him with us.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Well, first of all, the testimony of DHS was that there is -- reunification is their policy -- no, I understand. In your cases, it's not the case. But let me find out, if I'm able to find out, why that's the case and get you an answer.

MS. CLAYTON: And I'm not even saying that they were -- they had reason to remove the child, but why did you not try to find family and why did you not to try to look at us? As the parent cannot take care of the child, consider the grandparent.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: No, I hear what you're saying. I mean, you know, I'm 51. When there were difficulties -- when I was going up in my era, when families in the neighborhood had

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difficulties with usually alcohol at the time, grandmom took the kids. And that's the way it worked.

MS. CLAYTON: Yes.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: And so I got to find out, if I can, what happened in these particular situations so we can get you some answers and maybe get it on a right course if there's a course we can --

MS. CLAYTON: In a way, the length of time is too long. We've been fighting over two years.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: I understand.

MS. CLAYTON: I believe that DHS, what they should have done work was try to work with us within the first six month.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Right.

MS. CLAYTON: To try and find some kind of resolution, not drag it along.

And I really do believe that

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DHS drug their feet on this. And a lot of, I -- to me, my own personal opinion, I think it has to do with money, I really do.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Well --

MS. CLAYTON: I think that there's a lot of incentive for these children to stay in foster care, and I know there's an incentive for this foster mother to become the adoptive mother, because she has three other children in her home, and she's adopting them one by one. So I think there is a lot of incentive there.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Well, let me at least try to get the bottom of your situations. And I do appreciate you coming in and sharing them with us.

And we will certainly -- Sarah is sitting here. We will find out what we can and get back to you.

MS. CLAYTON: Thank you.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: Thank you very much.

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MS. YOUNG: God bless.

COUNCILMAN KENNEY: That will conclude the hearing.

Again, the purpose -- although we've heard a number of personal different stories on a personal level anecdotally, the overall goal of the hearing is to try to accumulate information to try to figure out how we can keep kids safe, keep kids secure, and have a stable environment for children to grow up in.

And in a selfish way -- and this is not the social and personal part of it, but in a selfish way, save the taxpayer millions and millions of dollars in wasted money that could go to education and other issues as opposed to incarceration, court issues, police issues and everything else and substance abuse and homelessness.

So if we can kind of figure out some strategies to do that, I think we should all be working together to try to

make that happen.

So thanks for your time and patience. And happy holidays.

(Proceedings end at 12:45 p.m.)

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C E R T I F I C A T E

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the proceedings of the City of Philadelphia Council Committee joint Committees on PUBLIC Health and Human Services and Legislative Oversight are contained fully and accurately in the stenographic notes taken by me on Tuesday, December 15, 2009, and that this is a true and correct statement of same.

_____

JOSEPHINE CARDILLO
Registered Professional Reporter

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