

MINUTES
Division of Family Services
Advisory & Advocacy Council Meeting
April 16, 2008

Attendees: PJ Facciolo, Leslie Newman, Julia Pearce, Ellen Levin, Allison McDowell, Sue Dougherty, Mary Lou Edgar, Mike Kersteter, Laura Miles, Carlyse Giddins, Joseph Smack.

Julia called the meeting to order at 10:05 am.

Approval of Minutes from prior meeting – Waived.

Upper Bay Recreation and Respite Program – Mary Lou first reported that Bill Cosby will be speaking at West Chester University next evening. His advance people had called Delaware to ask for two children who had been in the foster care system to appear with him. Two had been identified (one 23 years, one 20 years) to have dinner with the Cos and speak to the education students at WCU.

Mary Lou reported that Upper Bay had established the Recreation and Respite (R&R) Program about 1 ½ years ago. The program is designed to provide 12 children who had been adopted from the foster care system the opportunity to participate in day long free time sessions. These sessions are held two days a month and afford the children the chance to do arts and crafts, games, projects, and other sessions designed to allow for interaction and socialization. The families receive respite time and the children have established friendships and built relationships they have never had before. One recent project involved the study of Medieval history and included a re-enactor. The children have been identified as having the potential to have a disruptive adoption. The children range in age from 6 to 17 years. The cost has been \$30K per year and Upper Bay has looked for more funding opportunities through the Dave Thomas Foundation to expand the program. Mary Lou reported that the program is held at their facility at the United Cerebral Palsy Center on River Road, Wilmington. This provides the children access to the campsite amenities, such as the swimming pool. The program ends for the summer on June 30. They would like to come back in September. Upper Bay may ask for support letters to keep this program alive. Mary Lou invited Council members to attend a session. They meet every first and third Saturday from 9am – 4pm. If you are interested in attending, please contact Mary Lou at (302) 368-8417.

DFS Update – Carlyse had good news and bad news to share. The good news; DFS has very talented staff working with kids. The bad news; economic issues are impacting the DFS budget. Carlyse reported that DFS is committed to doing its part to support the administration in the efforts to right the economic ship. In February, we received word on our first cuts for Fiscal Year 2008, a \$462,710 reduction. We looked at reducing the number of youth in care by 18 or so kids. We reduced travel and ancillary spending,

reduced legal support by 20K, fleet, printing, etc. Administrative travel ceased, the capital budget was reduced by 10K, and the managing criteria for transportation and diagnostic services have been examined. The Court sometimes orders a psychiatric evaluation versus a behavioral evaluation. One costs much more. Leslie inquired how we could reduce the number of kids in care. Carlyse responded that part of the solution is working with our partners and examining the length of care before reunification with families. By emphasizing APPLA reviews and consistently searching for relatives able to except placement, we should be able to meet our target.

FY09 is more of a challenge. We need to trim 944K and eliminate a \$4.4 million budget. In FY08, the Office of Management and Budget allotted \$1.8 million in deficit reduction. That goes away in FY09. In total, we are looking at a \$5.4 million reduction. The Department needs to reduce the budget by \$10.7 million - \$18 million with the deficits. Our plan was submitted to OMB on April 4 – to date, we had not received a response. We are negotiating for a lesser reduction and are optimistic we will have some relief. Carlyse has shared our reduction plans with staff, CPAC, at the Labor/Management meeting, the Family Court judges, and is scheduled to meet with the Family Court Commissioners on April 17. Carlyse stressed this must be a system buy in to succeed. The public needs to be involved as well. We have to manage public expectations. Safety will remain our paramount concern. Resources will be targeted to serve the 0-12 age range. We have to examine the role of government in family functions. We need more parent accountability. Some children are coming into care by way of dependency through the criminal door. Some are remanded to care due to a parent's refusal to be involved. The parents are rarely punished for their neglect. The system is sanctioning abandonment in many cases. We should support families to support kids. What can DFS offer to a kid coming into care at age 17.5 years old? If there is a question of safety, no doubt we would take them into care. While we file child support petitions, the children oftentimes return home before the order can begin. Many of these parents are too poor to meet the requirements to begin with. The Adoption and Safe Families Act was designed to reduce the number of kids in care. This has not happened. DFS is examining how to reduce this number by lowering the number of teens who enter care through the hotline. Incidences of physical and sexual abuse of teens will be accepted. The proposed change would no longer accept parent/child conflicts.

In February, 54 children entered care.

- 22 (41%) were 13 years or older
- 8 entered care via criminal proceedings
- 3 due to parent/child conflicts
- 4 management of mental/behavioral health needs
- 6 abandonment, housing, or disrupted reunification
- 1 physical abuse

As of April 1, 2008 – 104 out of 936 children in foster care were age 17. A full 10.4% of the total. 82 children were 16, 81 were 15, 72 were 14. A large portion of our budget is being spent on this population.

Leslie inquired about DFS' responsibility for children leaving the care of the Division of Youth Rehabilitation Services. Carlyse reported that Department policy 209 provides that youth under 13 will not be kept in a detention facility and will instead be placed in foster care and that children exiting a YRS or CMH placement and are dependent, DFS would lead the placement in foster care. There was an immediate increase in the number of children in paid foster care. DFS went from 725 children to 936 currently. Some of these are teens coming into care late in life without any prior DFS involvement. The state has a problem with sex offenders in foster care. State law requires their placement on the sex offender registry. We have not been successful in finding placements for this population and most are sent out of state. Virginia charges us the cost of the education for these youth, which can run an additional \$400 per day. We have never been funded for this type of placement. Not all of these children are predators and there are larger policy issues that need to be examined on how we label these youth. Foster care should not be the answer, but the public expectation is that we can fix it. Leslie said that it would be beneficial to have respite services available to help keep kids out of foster care. Carlyse said we need more intervention and prevention funding and stop the heavy spending on the back end services. The state needs family crisis therapists in the middle schools to help keep some of the at-risk children from entering care. Julia suggested placing teens in Children and Families First shelter foster homes and provide some kind of respite care. We would need to redesign the system and allow the Family Court a resource without bringing a child into foster care. Leslie said that family preservation works and that Delaware is not doing enough of it. Discussion ensued on options to keep children from coming into care. Leslie asked if we could convene an interdisciplinary group to address this. Carlyse said that she was meeting with Chief Judge Kuhn on April 23 to discuss these issues. Julia said that there is a belief within the Family Court that they are the only agents of change and success for outcomes. We need to engender trust that the other system partners can do it.

Carlyse shared other strategies for reducing the budget. Parent Aides are over-utilized as an extra set of eyes for safety. We are involving the regions in helping to manage the resources smarter. Our changes may lead us to use unit cost services to choose one or another service. We will not use parent aides if the plan does not call for one. We need to tailor the case plan to the family. In the area of adoption supports, we want to manage the med/psych reimbursement and minimize failed adoptions. We are looking at criteria beyond what Medicaid and insurance will pay. In the area of foster care, we have a liberal extended board policy. Criteria for entering the adult system are different than DFS' and we end up extending. Many of the teens in care are often 17-18 years old and in the 9th grade. We have to consider other strategies for education success. If kids come into care at 17 and turn 18 in the 12th grade, we will extend care. Earlier than that, we should work towards a GED or other approach on a case-by-case basis. Ferris has been very successful in achieving success with their students to gain GEDs.

Other Business – Julia shared some statistics from the Child Placement review Board. The major concern is that 73% of 12 year olds in care have a goal of APPLA (Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement). This is too high. We need assisted guardianship legislation (kinship care). Julia has discussed this with Senator Carper's

office and would like to couple with the Office of the Child Advocate to work on this on the federal level.

Drivers Licensing for kids in care – Carlyse reported that Sen. Sorenson is ready to introduce a bill to allow DFS workers to sign for licenses without being held liable. We are working with a major insurance carrier to provide liability coverage for kids.

Meeting adjourned at 12:05 pm.

Next Meeting – July 17, 2008, 10am-Noon, in Room 201 of the DSCYF Administration Building. 1825 Faulkland Road, Wilmington.

Respectfully Submitted,

Joseph D. Smack
Executive Assistant
Division of Family Services