

**New Jersey
Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel**



**Annual Report
June 2007**

New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel Members

Chairperson

Keeva Kase, M.Div.
CASA of New Jersey, Inc.

Vice-Chairperson

Kathleen Roe, MA
Parents Anonymous of NJ, Inc.

Shyra Bland, MS
CASA of Camden County, Inc.

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Association for the Children of New Jersey

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Office of the Law Guardian, Office of the Public Defender

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Foster and Adoptive Family Services/NJ Foster Care Scholars Program

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Legal Services of New Jersey

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Somerset County Youth Services

Barbara Price
New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women

Jackie Ramirez, MCC
Parents Anonymous of NJ, Inc.

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N.J. Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect

Robert Sabreen
Division of Youth and Family Services, Department of Children and Families

Sharon Surette, MSW, LSW
N.J. Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect

NJCWCRP Coordinator
Michele Safrin, MSW
Department of Children and Families

MISSION

The mission of the New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel (NJCWCRP) is to improve the safety, well being and permanency of NJ children by examining the practices, policies and procedures of State and local agencies, and to evaluate the extent to which they are effectively meeting their child protection responsibilities.

The mission is accomplished through building a constituency for child welfare and soliciting public comment to assess the impact of the policies and practices of the State child welfare system upon children and families. The Panel shall issue an annual report of its findings and recommendations to the State for improvements in the NJ child welfare system.

Membership Composition

The NJCWCRP's membership is sensitive to cultural, ethnic and economic diversity and strives to broadly represent the community at-large, which includes concerned citizens and experts in child protection and prevention, advocacy, foster care, the court system, and children services. While receiving financial and administrative support from the Department of Children and Families (DCF); the NJCWCRP operates independently of DCF, maintains autonomy in selecting membership and leadership, determining investigative direction, and monitoring DCF without interference.

The NJCWCRP encourages individuals who are dedicated to improving New Jersey's child protection system to apply by calling 609-777-4536.



The New Jersey Comprehensive Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CCAPTA), the federal Child Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), and its subsequent amendments require that each State establish a minimum of three Citizen Review Panels to evaluate the extent to which the State is effectively fulfilling its child protection responsibilities. The NJCWCRP serves as one of New Jersey's three Citizen Review Panels. Operational since 1999 under the auspices of the NJ Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, the Panel became independent in 2006.

Both the Federal and State laws mandate that the Citizen Review Panels be composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the community, as well as members with expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. Currently, the membership includes representatives from Parents Anonymous, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), NJ Coalition for Battered Women, NJ Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), Foster and Adoptive Family Services (New Jersey Foster Care Scholars Program), Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), Somerset County Youth Services, Department of Children and Families (DCF), Department of Law and Public Safety (Law Guardians Office), the Office of the Public Defender, the NJ Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, and a concerned parent citizen.

Each year the NJCWCRP identifies elements of the child protection system that may impede the delivery of necessary services for the children and families served by the DCF and its agencies. Our aim is to ultimately affect positive outcomes for those children and families.

Through survey, public testimony, and individual and collaborative research by panel members, the NJCWCRP has focused on child abuse reporting and screening policies and procedures, the needs of children in foster home placement, the educational needs of children under DYFS supervision, adolescents exiting state supported living arrangements, and kinship care (relatives caring for children).



ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Facilitating Collaboration

Department of Children and Families and Department of Education

On April 30, 2007, the NJCWCRP hosted a roundtable discussion between the Commissioners of New Jersey's Department of Children and Families and Department of Education, their respective administrative staff, and key community stakeholders. The roundtable discussion was the culmination of the NJCWCRP's work since 2004 regarding the interface between the education and child welfare systems. The NJCWCRP concluded that communication and collaboration between DCF and DOE must be improved to ensure the expeditious sharing of information that will ultimately lead to better educational and emotional outcomes for children under DYFS supervision with an emphasis on those placed in out-of-home care. The NJCWCRP was also concerned with the impact multiple out-of-home placements have on the foster children's academic performance and their behavior and emotional health. This includes, but is not limited to, missing educational records, delay in school registration, training for education staff on child abuse reporting policy and procedures, and the need for educational advocacy.

The NJCWCRP's objective was the development of an action plan that would improve inter-systems communication regarding child abuse/neglect reporting and response procedures for both Departments; developing a standardized training curriculum for school personnel; and promoting academic success of children under DYFS supervision in out-of-home care by raising awareness of the children's emotional and educational needs.

As a result of the NJCWCRP's Roundtable, DCF Commissioner Kevin Ryan and DOE Commissioner Lucille Davy endorsed the creation of a work group for the purpose of developing a Memorandum of Understanding between DOE and DCF. The work group comprises individuals from:

- DCF's Office of Education
- NJ Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel
- NJ Child Fatality and Near Fatality Review Board
- DOE's Office of Program Support Services
- Division of Child Behavioral Health Services
- Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships
- Division of Youth and Family Services
- Court Appointed Special Advocates of New Jersey
- Association for Children of New Jersey
- NJ Principals and Supervisors Association
- Statewide Parent Advocacy Network
- Legal Services of New Jersey
- Child Advocacy and Special Education Clinics at Rutgers Law School

The Memorandum of Understanding that will standardize schools' child abuse and neglect training and reporting; establish efficient feedback loops between local school districts and local DYFS offices; emphasize the use of existing assets to increase communication between DOE/DCF; and formalize and personalize relationships between DOE/DCF and between the Departments and local level.

RECOMMENDATION & FUTURE DIRECTION

The Department of Education and the Department of Children and Families will develop, implement, and support a Memorandum of Understanding within 12-18 months to address the concerns identified in the DOE/DCF Roundtable.

Future Direction

Aging-Out Services

- Approximately 20,000 adolescents nationwide leave resource home care each year at 18 years of age without permanent families or economic support (Child Welfare League of America).
- Adolescents leaving foster care have significant difficulties transitioning into independent living. These adolescents typically have high rates of homelessness (approximately 30% of the United States' homeless adults have a history of foster care placement), poverty, poor educational outcomes and early parenthood, as well as increased rates of delinquent behavior, incarceration and being victims of crime and physical assault (Child Welfare League of America).



To assist youth leaving state supported living arrangements in achieving self-sufficiency, the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was enacted to provide State and local governments with funding to create and/or expand programs of education, training, employment, and medical and financial support. DYFS serves approximately 300 youth every year who are aging out of the child welfare system. In April 2007, approximately 1788 (excluding those under Kinship Legal Guardianship) NJ youth between the ages of 16 and 21 living in an out of home placement supported by DYFS.

The Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel will continue to examine gaps in aging-out services for adolescents under DYFS supervision. The Panel will begin to explore the services available to the adolescents with behavioral and mental health needs served by the Division of Child Behavioral Health Services (DCBHS).

FUTURE DIRECTION

Legal Guardianship

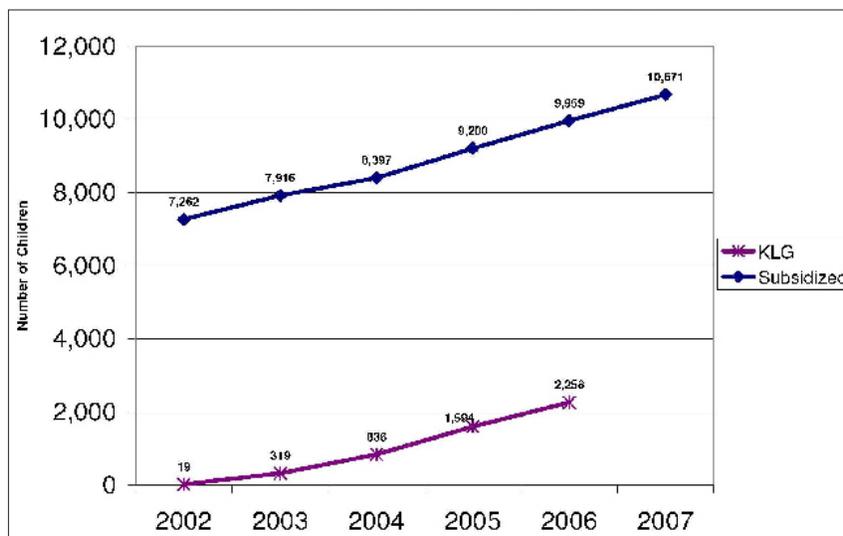
- Nationwide, over 6 million children are living with a relative as their caregiver, approximately four and a half million of these with grandparents (Child Welfare League of America).

On October 11, 2001, the Kinship Legal Guardianship Act, N.J.S.A. 3B:12A-1 et seq. and 30:4C-84 et seq., was enacted to create a permanent placement option (when adoption has been ruled out) for children who lived with a caregiver, for at least 12 consecutive months, because of parental incapacity which prevents the parent from providing care and support for the child. In January 2002, state funds were used to establish the DYFS Legal Guardianship Subsidy Program to assist relatives (includes family friends) of children placed by DYFS who have obtained legal guardianship through the Kinship Legal Guardianship (KLG) Act. The Kinship Legal Guardian has almost the same rights, responsibilities and authority as a birth parent.

The NJCWCRP determined that caregivers awarded Kinship Legal Guardianship of children in their care prior to July 2004 receive a lesser subsidy amount than those caregivers who obtained that legal status after July 2004. In addition, the NJCWCRP is concerned that children living with kinship legal guardians receiving DYFS subsidy may not be eligible for aging out services provided to children in resource home placement.

- As of January 2007, 10,379 children were in out of home placement in NJ and of that number, 36% (3,709) were in Kinship placement. 2,557 children receive kinship subsidy.

Total Number of Subsidized Adoptions and Kinship Legal Guardianship



The Child Welfare Review Panel will continue to examine the issue of inequities of the KLG program related to subsidy as well as the loss of any other services for children resulting from kinship legal guardianship being awarded.

Maintaining Family Connections through Visitation

In accordance with N.J.A.C. 10:122D-1.1, DYFS is required to ensure that each child placed in a resource family home approved by DYFS has the opportunity for consistent visitation with his or her parent(s), siblings and interested relatives. Visitation promotes identity, maintains or establishes family connections and provides the agency with the opportunity to assess the parents' and other relatives' motivation and ability to resume or assume care giving responsibilities.

The NJCWCRP will continue to pursue the previously identified need for the expansion of visitation services for children removed from their birth families due to high risk situations. The panel is especially concerned with the frequency and duration of visits.

State Central Registry (SCR)

In 2004, the Panel raised concerns about the quality and effectiveness of the centralized child abuse and neglect screening system that was implemented in July 2004 under the auspices of the Department of Human Services. Among the concerns was frequent administrative turnover, difficulty reporters were having when attempting to report suspected child abuse or neglect, and whether appropriate actions (including coding and time frames for response) were being taken.

The Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel will continue to monitor the policies and practices of the State Central Registry that have occurred since the establishment of the Department of Children and Families in July 2006. This monitoring will be especially important in light of revised practices required to implement the Differential Response Initiative.

Public Outreach

As required by Federal and state statute, the Panel will continue efforts to gain public input in identifying areas of the child protection system to examine. Strategies that may be utilized include public testimony, surveys, and increased distribution of the NJCWCRP Annual Report.



NJCWCRP Meeting Dates 2007-2008

September 5, 2007
October 3, 2007
November 7, 2007
December 5, 2007
January 2, 2008

February 6, 2008
March 5, 2008
April 2, 2008
May 7, 2008
June 4, 2008

September 3, 2008
October 1, 2008
November 5, 2008
December 3, 2008

New Jersey Capital Complex
Statehouse Annex
Trenton, NJ

For further information please refer to: <http://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/commissions/citizens/index.html>

