February 9, 2015

The Honorable Tom Wolf
Governor, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Harrisburg, PA 17120

The Honorable Joseph Scarnati President Pro Tempore, PA Senate
Senate Box 203025
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3025

The Honorable Jake Corman
Majority Leader, PA Senate
Senate Box 203034
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3034

The Honorable Jay Costa
Minority Leader, PA Senate
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The Honorable Mike Turzai
Speaker of the PA House of Representatives
PO Box 202028
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2028

The Honorable Dave Reed
Majority Leader, PA House of Representatives
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Harrisburg, PA 17120-2062

The Honorable Frank Dermody
Minority Leader, PA House of Representatives
PO Box 202033
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2033

Dear Governor Wolf and Leaders of the Pennsylvania General Assembly:

Over the last several years, our Commonwealth, informed and supported by diverse stakeholders, took intentional steps forward to better protect Pennsylvania’s infants, children and youth from child abuse and neglect.

The pursuit to restore a distinct focus on child safety and well-being in PA’s policies and practices resulted, in part, from our original call to action in April 2011. Interdisciplinary professionals and advocates had grown quite concerned that existing state policies and practices were undercutting a child’s safety and pathways to healing and justice. Therefore, we urged creation of a Task Force envisioned to secure objective study and recommendations about how best to define, report, investigate and treat child abuse and neglect in Pennsylvania.
A central underpinning of the General Assembly’s welcome decision to create the Task Force on Child Protection in 2011 was the commitment to restore “public confidence” in how our state fulfills its responsibility to protect our children.

In many ways, the public’s confidence was bolstered by an unprecedented bipartisan commitment and actionable agenda to intentionally rewrite state laws prioritizing child safety; while working to balance the important role parents play as a child’s first protector and teacher.

Today, however, two immediate challenges may well serve to once again erode the public’s confidence:

1. **ChildLine’s ability to retain staff and effectively respond to increased child abuse reports**
   
The public, particularly those legally mandated to report suspected child abuse, must be assured that ChildLine has the capacity to respond in an informed, timely and consistent way.

   Before we issued the call for a Task Force in April 2011, we reviewed mandatory reporting trends in 2010. Our review was triggered by the fact that ChildLine was experiencing an abandoned and deflected call rate of nearly 9 percent in 2010.¹ This focus on mandated reporting policies and practices, which included a survey completed by 1,400 Pennsylvanians, provided sufficient evidence that ChildLine was under pressure.

   When the Task Force on Child Protection issued its report in November 2012, it indicated that, “ChildLine staffing levels and retention issues” required further examination and action. The Task Force also signaled support for the ChildLine workforce writing, “The Task Force applauds the level of care and commitment on the part of the employees who staff the ChildLine centralized reporting system.”

   As the chart below demonstrates, PA was experiencing an uptick in child abuse reports to the hotline, well before the highly-publicized arrest and later conviction of Gerald Sandusky. In the wake of those events, reports to ChildLine again increased, which then had a ripple effect on county children and youth agencies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Total Calls Received At ChildLine</th>
<th>Total Calls Answered At ChildLine²</th>
<th>Child Protective Services Reports (CPS)</th>
<th>General Protective Services Referrals (GPS)</th>
<th>Law Enforcement Only Reports (LEO)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>164,911</td>
<td>158,131</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>148,204</td>
<td>142,084</td>
<td>26,944</td>
<td>41,386</td>
<td>5,233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>145,794</td>
<td>138,541</td>
<td>26,664</td>
<td>39,328</td>
<td>4,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>140,348</td>
<td>128,111</td>
<td>26,215</td>
<td>38,780</td>
<td>3,885</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The Department of Human Services (DHS) defined an “abandoned call” as a call that “is terminated by the caller after the hotline phone rings the caller is provided the complete hotline answering message and is waiting to be answered by a hotline worker. This includes callers waiting in the queue as a result of high call volume.” A “deflected call” is a call where the caller did not get into the queue “instead the caller gets a busy signal so they have to call back.”

² Each year a percentage of the calls to ChildLine are abandoned or deflected, which is why there is a difference between the number of calls received versus those that are answered. For instance, in December 2014 the A&D rate was approximately 7.5 percent. The annual average in 2014 was just over 4 percent.
Today, with more than twenty new state child protection laws in effect, the pressure on ChildLine and county agencies is again mounting.

We welcome the February 3rd decision by DHS to fill 6 outstanding vacancies restoring the existing caseworker complement to 38. Also promising is the related DHS decision to hire 10 additional caseworkers. Still we would offer this caution: ChildLine has routinely struggled to retain caseworkers and then fill vacant positions resulting from staff turnover. Also, we believe the challenges currently impacting ChildLine extend beyond the staffing composition (e.g., newly implemented technology).

Still we are requesting immediate and ongoing evaluation/auditing of workforce issues (e.g., training, staff retention, utilization of overtime) and new technology being utilized to ensure it is enabling, not hindering the reporting process for mandated reporters, and that reports of child abuse or a crime against a child are being shared in real time with entities (e.g., law enforcement and county children and youth agencies).

2. **Comprehensive criminal and child abuse background checks for volunteers may lead to unintended consequences**

   We believe that regularly updated and comprehensive background checks are a tool to enhance child protection.

   We also have promoted the need to examine whether additional volunteer populations, beyond those currently exempted in the law, should have the fees waived for such checks (e.g., low-income parents and grandparents critical to their child’s education unable to afford the fees now associated with volunteering).

   There is some expected, yet growing, anxiety about the criminal and child abuse background checks requirements enacted last October. In Act 153 of 2014, the General Assembly rightly charged DHS, the Department of Education and the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) to determine what should exclude a person from working or volunteering with a child. Still we believe this charge is too limited. Additionally, these agencies should be directed to meaningfully engage diverse stakeholders to identify and address unintended consequences that may be emerging.

   Finally, we renew our call that a percentage of background check fees charged to the public to work or volunteer with children be invested in evidence-based primary child abuse prevention strategies advanced by PA’s Children’s Trust Fund.

As we have through the years, we remain willing to be among the partners that further our shared responsibility to protect children and keep them connected to protective and supported families.
Sincerely

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Alice Paul House (Indiana County)
Audia J Boyles, Executive Director

American Academy of Pediatrics – PA Chapter
Susan Kressly, MD, FAAP, President
Suzanne Yunghans, Executive Director

CASA Youth Advocates, Inc.
Anne Shenberger, Executive Director

Centre Co. Women's Resource Center
Anne K. Ard, Executive Director

Children's Alliance Center of Berks County
Melissa B. Haydt, Executive Director

Clinton County Women's Center
Debra Zinck, Executive Director

Columbia County Family Center
Allison Williams, Executive Director

Columbia County Victim Services
Frances Fraley, Victim Witness Coordinator

Community Prevention Partnership of Berks County
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Court Appointed Special Advocates of Philadelphia
Wendy Graham, Executive Director

Crawford County CASA, Inc.
Cindy Knight, Executive Director

Crime Victims Alliance of Pennsylvania
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Crime Victim Center of Erie
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Maternity Care Coalition
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Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Peg Dierkers, Executive Director

Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape
Delilah Rumburg, CEO

Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Rev. Sandra L. Strauss, Director of Policy

Pennsylvania Court Appointed Special Advocates
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Pennsylvania EMS for Children Program
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Pennsylvania Head Start Association
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Pennsylvania Psychological Association
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Pennsylvania Social Services Union, Local 668, SEIU
Tom Herman, President
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Pittsburgh Action Against Rape
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Prevent Child Abuse Pennsylvania
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Protect PA Kids PAC
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Samaritan Counseling Center
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Sexual Assault Resource and Counseling Center of Lebanon and Schuylkill Counties
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Sullivan County Victim Services
Marty Gates, Executive Director

Support Center for Child Advocates
Frank Cervone, Executive Director

Survivors, Inc.
Terri L. Hamrick, Executive Director

The Center for Children’s Justice
Cathleen Palm, Founder

The Crime Victims Center of Chester County, Inc.
Peggy Gusz, Executive Director

Turning Point Women's Counseling & Advocacy Center
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Victims Resource Center
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