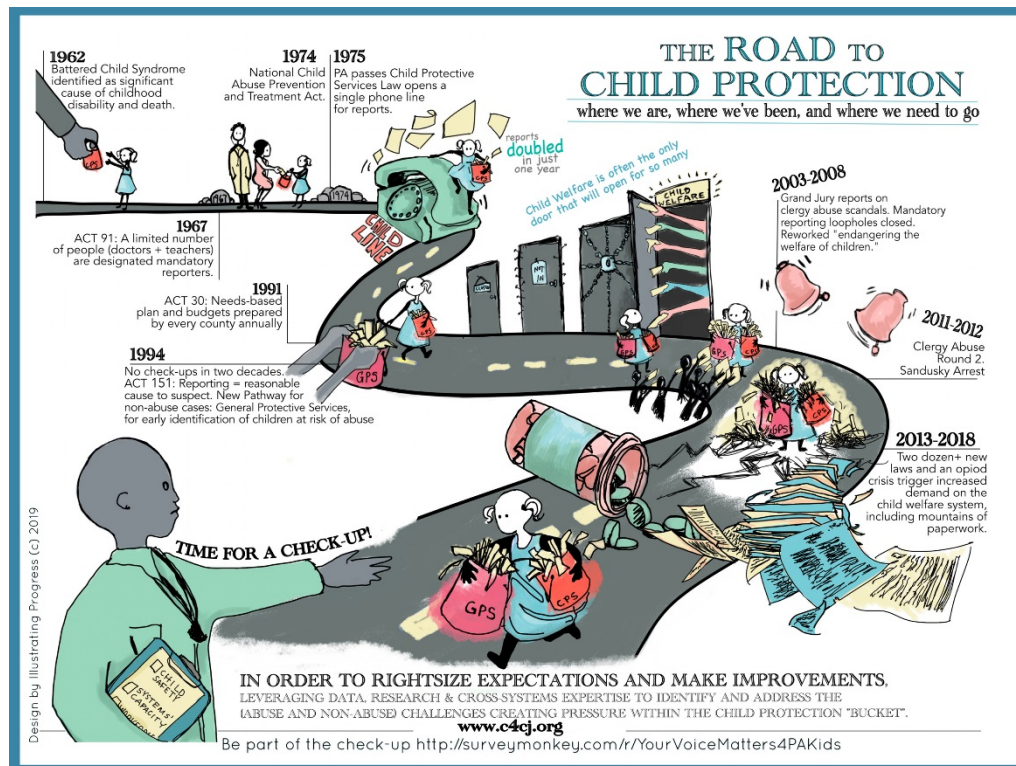


To promote the physical and emotional wellbeing of Pennsylvania's children, it's time for a Child Protection Check-Up!



In 2019, Congress is expected to reauthorize the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) - 45 years after an initial *road map* was offered to states about how best to protect children.

Pennsylvania's own Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) was initially enacted in 1975 and has undergone major amendments in 1994 and between 2013 and 2015. Analysis by Pennsylvania's Joint State Government Commission (JSGC) released in 1979 [identified a fundamental challenge](#) that remains with us, namely:

"[How to achieve] the widest possible detection and reporting of child abuse while protecting family privacy."

The 1979 JSGC analysis also noted the disproportionate number of reports of suspected abuse compared to the number that ultimately are substantiated as child abuse. Frustratingly, many of the JSGC findings are still as true today as they were 40 years ago:

- A "large majority" of children referred to child protection agencies "have not been neglected or injured to a sufficient degree to be substantiated as abused under the law" and yet so many of these children are in need of "social services."
- Child protection is often seen as an "isolated" duty of one system, even though the needs of at-risk children and families presenting are multi-faceted.
- Too often the response to at-risk children and families is over-determined by a "complex, overlapping and sometimes conflicting array of laws and regulations."

- “Medical evaluations were not obtained by the county agencies for nearly half” of the cases.
- The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (PA DHS) is under-staffed and “lacking in specialization.”
- County caseworkers for protective services “have heavy workloads and relatively high employment turnover rates.”

Over the years, Pennsylvania has had many legislative hearings, state-sponsored initiatives, and new laws. Still, few have been based on any reliable case or county-level data, nor on well-designed research or even consensus strategies such as those advanced by the World Health Organization.¹ While Pennsylvania policymakers (and advocates) have excelled at enacting laws, the Commonwealth and its diverse partners in protecting children have put little stock (or resources) into measuring the consequences (intended and unintended) of such laws.

In the wake of the Sandusky tragedy/scandal, Pennsylvania undertook “a review of laws and procedures relating to the reporting of child abuse and the protection of the health and safety of children” - in part to help restore the public’s confidence “in the ability of the Commonwealth to protect the victims of child abuse.”²

In November 2012, an 11-member Task Force on Child Protection released a comprehensive report and specific recommended legislative changes.³ But the Task Force also underscored that it sought a “process of improvement,” not the enactment of laws “followed by a lapse in attention.”

Following the Task Force’s report, Pennsylvania lawmakers, supported, by two different governors, enacted more than two dozen new laws significantly reworking how child abuse is defined, reported and investigated.⁴

After these far-reaching reforms were enacted, the Commonwealth convened an interdisciplinary Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) Implementation Workgroup - which was prematurely disbanded. Today, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services convenes another interdisciplinary group, the Child Welfare Steering Council, as well as many other stakeholder groups around issue-specific agendas. Despite these endeavors, there is still no independent, interdisciplinary, intentionally focused or supported effort to continuously evaluate the effects of Pennsylvania’s child protection reforms based on comprehensive data and evidence-based research.

In 2012, when the Task Force unveiled its report and recommendations it acknowledged that no one entity alone could be expected to protect children from abuse. The task force recommended a number of ways Pennsylvania could leverage the expertise and energy of individuals and entities outside of government, including suggesting the creation of a Child Protection Policy Academy, which could be “dedicated to harnessing and building collaboration” across entities and disciplines, including the “many academic resources existing in the Commonwealth.”⁵ Such an academy for child protection was projected as a mechanism for conducting research and identifying better approaches for preventing child abuse and for responding effectively when it occurs. Such an academy was also seen as a means to advance “academically sound guidance to those persons making and carrying out child protection policies,” and

¹ http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/inspire/en/

² Senate Resolution 250 and House Resolution 522 introduced in the 2011-2012 Pennsylvania legislative session.

³ <http://www.childprotection.state.pa.us/Resources/press/2012-11-27%20Child%20Protection%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov/about/cpsl/index.htm>

⁵ <http://www.childprotection.state.pa.us/Resources/press/2012-11-27%20Child%20Protection%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>

more generally to serve as an “ongoing vehicle for further improvement of child protection in Pennsylvania.”

The **proposed** Child Protection Check-Up project is built upon several key concepts set forth by the Task Force, and has the following goals:

1. **Leverage and connect the research, scientific knowledge and training resources of Pennsylvania’s robust (and diverse) academic institutions and medical centers.**
Pennsylvania does not have a shortage of expertise or researchers. Our deficits lie in the failure to connect people, ideas and reliable information to meaningfully inform policy and practice.
2. **Cultivate shared learning and collaboration among diverse change agents.** Such learning must function as a conduit for connecting the on-the-ground experience of children, families and practitioners with researchers and policymakers. This will allow policy and practice to be better informed, and more effectively implemented to truly benefit children and families.
3. **Identify, disseminate and advocate for expansion of research, reliable data, and evidence-based tools to promote prevention and improve effective interventions for children and their families.**
4. **Analyze proposed child protection laws, policies and funding priorities to ensure they are:**
 - Supported by strong evidence/research;
 - Anchored within the historical and evolving cross-systems context of child protection; and
 - Vetted for their projected impact and potential unintended consequences - human and fiscal.