



## Advocates Welcome Recommendation to Create Ombudsman for Children

**September 14<sup>th</sup>** – Today advocates for Pennsylvania’s abused and neglected children applaud the recommendation of Pennsylvania Auditor General Eugene DePasquale urging creation of “an independent child protection ombudsman, who would review complaints and recommend systems improvement.”

The recommendation was included in *State of the Child: A look at the strengths and challenges of Pennsylvania’s child-welfare system and the safety of at-risk children*. Today’s recommendation represents the second time, DePasquale has called for creation of this independent office.

Pennsylvania’s child welfare system includes 67 county-level agencies, four regional offices and the state-level Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) housed within the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. In 2016, approximately \$1.8 billion in local, state and federal funds were spent on child welfare services with state dollars representing \$1 billion of that overall spending.

*“While federal and state laws provide the framework for how child welfare services are to be delivered, by and large, critical decisions affecting a child’s safety and connection to a stable family can be quite random varying dramatically from caseworker to caseworker and county-to county,”* said **Cathleen Palm, Founder of the Center for Children’s Justice**. *“Pennsylvania’s child welfare structure too rarely lends itself to transparency or accountability undercutting the identification of systemic issues that impact, not just one child, but also the collective community of children.”*

To be effective a Pennsylvania ombudsman office for children must operate with:

1. Independence
2. Meaningful enforcement powers
3. Impartiality in conducting inquiries and investigations
4. Confidentiality
5. Accountability, Outreach and Reporting, including to the public

In state fiscal year 2016-2017, Pennsylvania projects that approximately 200,000 children will receive in-home child welfare services, 43,000 children will be the subject of a child abuse report and more than 40,000 children will be in foster care or another type of out-of-home placement (e.g., group home or institutional).

*“Each day child welfare agencies make decisions that impact the safety, health, custody and permanency of children and youth,”* said **Frank Cervone, Executive Director of the Support Center for Child Advocates**. *“Often these decisions benefit a child, but too often concerns arise and when they do the abused child or members of the community do not have an independent place to raise concerns about services that were or were not provided to them.”*

Legislation seeking to create an independent ombudsman for children was first introduced in Pennsylvania in 2000. In 2008, Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services convened a working group charged with finding a path forward to create a state-level child protection ombudsman. In 2010, the Harrisburg Patriot News editorial board referenced the "horrible" Kids-for-Cash scandal in advocating for the creation of a children's ombudsman office.

*"Despite well-documented shortcomings in some of the publicly funded systems intended to protect children, state policy makers have yet to seize the momentum to create an independent ombudsman, said **Jennifer Pokempner, Child Welfare Policy Director at Juvenile Law Center**. "Our most vulnerable children deserve an office like this that will be responsive to their needs and help assure system accountability."*

*"So many of the children slipping off-the-radar or experiencing negative outcomes, even after becoming involved with the child welfare system, are children who have already experienced sexual assault, said **Delilah Rumburg, CEO of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape**. "It is on us – advocates and policymakers – to insist that abused children no longer feel that their voices are silenced or that they are denied the opportunity to have their concerns addressed by a neutral party."*

For additional context or comment, please contact:

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