



Nurture and Protect from the Start



Engaging communities and cultivating strategies to strengthen the parent-child bond so infants and toddlers are nurtured, protected and ready to learn.

March 30, 2016

Governor Tom Wolf
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
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President Pro Tempore, Pennsylvania Senate
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Representative Frank Dermody
Democratic Leader, PA House of Representatives
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Dear Governor Tom Wolf and leaders of the Pennsylvania General Assembly:

Daily the undersigned are engaged in diverse work to ensure every child is connected to a safe, stable and supported family. Despite the diversity of our work, we are united in our deep understanding that the foundation for lifelong health, well-being, educational success, and economic opportunity is established within the critical years of early childhood, especially from birth to age three.

We express our gratitude for the role you have played to ensure that Pennsylvania has demonstrated an urgent commitment - across disciplines and political parties - to curb the scourge of overdoses linked to heroin and prescription drugs.

Today we urge your continued bipartisan leadership to immediately establish a time-limited Task Force focused on the impact of this epidemic on children in Pennsylvania. Such a Task Force should be charged with identifying specific strategies to:

1. Prioritize prevention of substance-exposed infants,
2. Improve outcomes for pregnant and parenting women striving to recover from addiction; and

3. Promote the health, safety and permanency of substance-exposed infants and other young children at-risk of child abuse and neglect or placement in foster care due to parental alcohol and drug use.

Between 2010 and 2014, more than 7,500 infants were born onto Medicaid and diagnosed with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) in Pennsylvania. Heroin and prescribed opioids taken during pregnancy can result in NAS.

Federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data reveals that in 2014 more than 1,400 infants in Pennsylvania were removed from home with 56 percent of the infants removed having parental substance abuse as a contributing factor to placement.

We defer to your expertise on whether this Task Force, of critical importance to protecting Pennsylvania's young children, should be created by legislative directive or executive order. Regardless how the Task Force is created, we strongly encourage that it include high level leaders from the General Assembly as well as the Departments of Corrections, Drug and Alcohol Programs, Education, Health, Human Services, the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency, Courts and the PA State Coroners Association. These government leaders should work in partnership with non-government interdisciplinary stakeholders (e.g., behavioral health treatment providers, evidence-based home visiting programs, hospitals, obstetric and pediatric physicians, early intervention providers, victim services) charged with developing short and long-term recommendations.

An immediate focus of this Task Force should be ensuring that Pennsylvania is compliant with the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) related to identifying substance-exposed infants (e.g., those affected by illegal substance abuse **or** withdrawal symptoms resulting from prenatal drug exposure **or** a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) **and** then developing multidisciplinary plans of safe care for these infants. Recently the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) notified members of Congress that HHS has become aware of "concerns that some states' practices may not be in compliance." In response to these concerns, HHS is requiring that "all state child welfare agencies provide full descriptions of their policies, practices and procedures related to their plans of safe care for substance-exposed infants within their 2016 Annual Progress and Service Reports (ASPRs)," which are due in June 2016.

We look forward to your leadership and stand ready to work with you in our shared commitment to protect each and every child in Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

Adelphoi

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Charles Hall (Cumberland County)
Charles E. Kiessling, Jr., RN, BSN, PHRN, CEN (Lycoming County)
Zachary Lysek (Northampton County)
Jeremy R. Reese (Columbia County)
Paul J. Sharum (Huntingdon County)
S. Timothy Warco (Washington County)

Family Service Association of Bucks County

Audrey J Tucker, CEO

HAVIN (Helping All Victims In Need)

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Maternity Care Coalition

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Network of Victim Assistance

Penelope Ettinger, Executive Director

Office of the Victim Advocate

Jennifer Storm, Victim Advocate

Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Rev. Sandra L. Strauss, Director of Advocacy & Ecumenical Outreach

Pennsylvania Shaken Baby Syndrome Prevention Program

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The Center for Children's Justice

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