

Allegheny County Council

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Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, June 15, 2016

4:00 PM

Conference Room 1

Committee on Budget and Finance

Mike Finnerty, Chair

Members; Sam DeMarco, Nick Futules, Paul Klein, Ed Kress, Bob Macey, Chuck Martoni, Sue Means, John Palmiere

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:03.

Invited Guests:

William McKain, CPA, County Manager or Designee

Mary Soroka, County Budget Director or Designee

Marc Cherna, Human Services Executive Director or Designee

Mr. McKain was present from the Office of the County Manager.

Ms. Soroka was present from the Department of Budget and Finance.

Mr. Cherna was present from the Department of Human Services.

Mr. Smith was present from Children, Youth and Family Services.

Mr. Barker and Mr. Szymanski were present from the Office of County Council.

II. Roll Call

Members Present: 3 - Finnerty, Paul Klein and Sue Means

Members Absent: 6 - Nick Futules, Sam DeMarco, Ed Kress, Bob Macey, Chuck Martoni and John Palmiere

III. Approval of Minutes

[9696-16](#)

Motion to approve the minutes from the Budget and Finance Committee Meeting held on June 8, 2016.

**A motion was made by Klein, seconded by Means, that this matter be Passed.
The motion carried by a unanimous vote.**

IV. Agenda Items**Discussion Topic****Presentation of the Children, Youth, & Families Advisory Council.**

At the request of the Chair, Mr. Cherna and Mr. Smith came to the table.

Mr. Smith provided a brief overview of the CYF office and its activities, noting that there are seven regional offices with roughly 300 case workers serving about 1700 families per year. Mr. Smith indicated that the office's primary function is to ensure the safety of children who are at-risk for abuse and/or neglect, and that the office received something on the order of 18,000 calls last year, which constituted a dramatic increase in call volume in the wake of new regulations regarding abuse of children. Mr. Smith noted that the office's budget is approximately \$210 million within the context of the protection of children, and that about \$40 million of this comes from the County, with the remainder coming from the Commonwealth and federal governments.

Mr. Smith indicated that the office currently has about 148 contracts with local nonprofits

that provide services to the relevant populations, and that these account for about 80% of the office's budget, with the rest going to staffing and other administrative expenses.

In response to a question from the Chair, Mr. Smith described the circumstances under which the courts may become involved in a given case and noted that the objective is to support families in an effort to keep children with their immediate or extended families to the extent possible, rather than placing them in residential group home or similar settings, in which outcomes tend to be less favorable. Mr. Smith indicated that about half of the 1300 children placed outside their homes are placed with extended family members, with another 17% are in traditional foster home settings and the others in other settings.

In response to a question from Ms. Means, Mr. Smith noted that the significant increase in call volume has only resulted in about a 16% increase in cases, but also indicated that the office has had to increase staffing levels and seek additional funding to accommodate the change.

Mr. Cherna discussed the importance of local matching funding to leverage proportionally more state and/or federal funding.

In response to a question from Ms. Means, Mr. Smith noted that the most vulnerable children tend to be the ones under 5, and that often the situation that results in harm arises from poor interface between the child and his or her caregiver(s). Mr. Smith indicated that there are 26 family support centers that are specifically geared towards helping develop a bond between parent and child, and that parenting skills are undoubtedly important and something that is increasingly becoming an area of focus for the office. Mr. Cherna noted that these efforts can take the form of getting new parents assistance through the WIC program, Medicaid assistance if appropriate, and the like.

Mr. Cherna discussed the office's home visiting program that runs in cooperation with the Health Department and which is specifically set up to attempt to give new parents a better idea of how to be involved with their children. Mr. Smith added that, once a child reaches school age, there are more contacts in a given day and more sets of eyes to see if something may not be ideal.

In response to a question from the Chair, Mr. Cherna discussed contract accountability, performance and fiscal audit requirements, and other measures that are geared toward ensuring performance by the agencies with whom the office contracts for services.

In response to a question from the Chair, Mr. Cherna noted that calls to the office and the courts are the triggers that initiate the office's involvement.

In response to questions from Mr. Klein, Mr. Smith discussed the stresses that are born by individuals who do this type of work, particularly as caseworkers, and indicated that supporting staff members is often of critical importance. Mr. Smith and Mr. Cherna discussed the importance of managing the caseworkers' caseloads, and indicated that there are a number of important variables that have to be managed in order to continue providing services at a high level. Mr. Cherna noted that one of the most important things is the assumption of ownership of the process of providing safe environments for children by the community. Mr. Cherna also suggested that the effectiveness and stability of the County's operations perhaps are its greatest strengths, because revamping programs of this nature is very difficult to do seamlessly.

Mr. Smith and Mr. Cherna described the need to remain cognizant of shifts in patterns of

child safety issues, both in terms of what is happening and where it is happening, in order to proactively prevent problems from arising rather than attempting to react to problems once they have become significant.

In response to a question from Ms. Means, Mr. Cherna discussed the importance of taking remedial action in proportion to the circumstances of a given case. Mr. Cherna also described how confidentiality and other considerations do sometimes prevent the office from saying much - if anything - publicly, and that the media and public therefore on occasion are only made aware of certain facts in cases, and that this can rapidly lead to a distorted view of what happened.

At the Chair's request, Mr. Cherna discussed the activities of the CYF Advisory Council, noting that the most important activity is signing off on the office's needs based plan prior to submission to the Commonwealth. Mr. Smith noted that the Council is enthusiastic and possessed of a tremendous amount of experience, and that they do very well in using that experience to provide relevant advice, where appropriate. Mr. Smith also highlighted the Council members' willingness to volunteer their assistance to the office.

In response to a question from the Chair, Mr. Cherna noted that the existence of the Advisory Council is required by Commonwealth law, but that the composition of the Council is established under its bylaws.

Ms. Means and Mr. Cherna discussed the increase in judicial resources for family court matters.

V. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4:48.