



## Philadelphia's Child Welfare System Is Failing Children — It Must Be Reformed Now

(April 11, 2025) Children First is heartbroken for the children and families failed by Philadelphia's child welfare system, as revealed in this week's *Philadelphia Inquirer* series on the Philadelphia foster care system. The *Inquirer's* reporting found that the city, the sole entity required to keep these children safe, is failing them. In our estimation, the city's child welfare system is functioning at an unacceptable level that requires urgent reform.

More than a decade ago, Philadelphia rolled out a sweeping child welfare system reform coined Improving Outcomes for Children (IOC), which delegated the delivery of child welfare services to Community Umbrella Agencies (CUAs). IOC was created in response to the horrific death of Danieal Kelly. Its central premise was that getting services closer to the ground and outside of the government delivery system would keep children safer. Unfortunately, these dramatic reforms appear to have done little to address the systemic risk to children who encounter the City's child welfare system.

It is urgent and without dispute that more must be done to protect the most vulnerable children and promote their well-being. The Mayor and Council must work together and start a process that ambitiously reforms its child welfare system— from policies to practices — and implement bold changes that prioritize three essential goals: family preservation, child safety, and child well-being.

While the City made marked progress in the last few years reducing the number of children entering foster care, the *Inquirer's* reporting exposed the alarming fact that Philadelphia has more children in foster care than all of New Jersey. That simple fact can be addressed by new strategies that reduce the number of families who are under the surveillance of the child welfare system because they are poor or have poverty-related struggles.

For families that have deeper needs beyond the hardship of poverty, the CUAs are supposed to help them stabilize and exit the system. If that is happening in ways that help children, there is no way to tell because the data is not available to back up this case. But it appears very clear that too many children continue to be in harm's way.

As the Mayor enters her second year, it is time to reevaluate the basic tenets of IOC and its CUA model. Close it down or make it work; the status quo is simply not acceptable.

To guide that review, the Mayor should begin with restoring public accountability for the IOC reforms that eroded in the last few years. When two years' worth of CUA scorecards were released in March 2025, they featured a vague "bell" rating system that lacked detail.

Meanwhile, Child Welfare Oversight Board meetings — a vital forum for public accountability — have been suspended. Without regular data and oversight, systemic problems remain hidden until uncovered by the media.

To inform the Mayor’s review of efficacy of the CUA model and related aspects of the IOC reforms, the Child Welfare Oversight Board should be reconstituted and expanded to include strong representation from parents and young people impacted by the system. Their expertise was likely the missing ingredient in creating the CUA system that thus far has failed to demonstrate it is doing a better job meeting the needs of the most at-risk children compared to the publicly managed services in place before the model was created.

City Council has a role in advancing these reforms as well. It must more assiduously exercise its appropriate oversight role of the agency responsible for nearly \$1 billion in services for the children who need their attention the most. For too long, the Council has demonstrated only cursory review of the city’s child welfare budget, posing few questions that help Council fully assess whether children will be better off because of the funds they appropriate to the agency. Given the disappointing results of the CUA experiment, it is Council’s obligation to conduct its own assessment. Doing so will immediately require Council to build its expertise with respect to federal and state requirements and resources intended to keep children safe and provide support to their families.

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