



**Testimony Presented to the Philadelphia City Council
Health and Human Services Committee and Chair, Nina Ahmad
By Donna Cooper, Children First Executive Director
June 6, 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on critical issues facing Philadelphia's child welfare system. I am here today to raise several urgent concerns that have significant implications for the safety and well-being of the children and families the city is entrusted to serve.

While it is commendable that the number of children placed in foster care, and the number of children subject to repeat maltreatment are both trending down, the number of children reaching permanency has declined, as have timely reunifications. In addition, the number of children "aging out" of the system has increased, with more children leaving foster care without a "forever home."

First, I want to bring to your attention a fundamental flaw in the structure of the city's child welfare that undermines the expectations of the staff working in the city and CUAs as well as the prospects of the children they serve. That flaw is the absence of goals, training, measurement, or clarity of outcomes associated with the well-being of children receiving child welfare services. The lack of intentionality around well-being de facto means the city and its contractors are not ensuring these most vulnerable children are healthier, better adjusted, thriving in school, and ready for a stable adulthood as a result of being in the "system."

The city must embrace child well-being indicators and their measurement as core to the function of the child welfare system as child safety and neglect. Otherwise, we are serving only as custodians of the status quo.

Narrow Performance Measures

Specifically, the performance metrics used to evaluate CUAs are too narrow and compliance-focused. The CUA scorecard lacks indicators that measure child and family well-being—leaving us in the dark about whether families are actually better off after system involvement. Are children physically safe, emotionally supported, and educationally stable? We simply don't know.

Child Welfare Caseload Sizes

At an operational level, one of the foundational issues affecting service quality is how we measure caseload sizes, particularly for out-of-home care. Currently, Philadelphia measures

caseloads by the number of families, not the number of children. Philadelphia's Community Umbrella Agencies (CUAs) are funded for a caseload ratio of ten families per caseworker. The current approach fails to reflect the real demands on caseworkers who must manage the needs of multiple children within a single family. At about 2.4 children per family, ten families could mean responsibility for 24 children at a time – children who may be residing with different caregivers, attending different schools, and working with different service providers.

The city's family vs. child counting approach to establishing caseloads puts Philadelphia out of alignment with national best practices. Many jurisdictions calculate caseloads based on the number of children in out-of-home care, and some even add weight for children with complex needs who require additional services and more frequent in-person visits.

Council can use its authority to direct the Department of Human Services to adopt the best practice of tracking caseload size by the number of children being served, including a weighting approach that considers complexity of needs, and we urge it to do so.

Staff Turnover

Philadelphia's Community Umbrella Agencies (CUAs) – both the provider organizations and the staffing thereof – are radically unstable. A 2022 task force study noted an average turnover rate of 45% among the CUAs. Since that time, two organizations, Turning Points for Children (which had four CUAs in the city) and Tabor Services (which operated one CUA) stopped contracting with the city to provide these services. There are now three new entities operating CUAs in those communities.

While recent salary increases are a step in the right direction, compensation alone will not solve the recruitment and retention crisis. The current wages still fall short of attracting and retaining the highly trained professionals this field demands – individuals who must be analytical, compassionate, perceptive, and highly responsive. Sustainable retention requires a comprehensive strategy: manageable workloads, supportive leadership, robust professional development, and the ability and opportunity to build meaningful relationships with families.

Without these components, we will continue to lose experienced staff, which is profoundly destabilizing for families. Repeated turnover forces families to relive their trauma by retelling their stories to new workers, leading to the loss of important case information, and contributing to prolonged stays in foster care for children.

Council must consider ways that it can hold the Department of Human Services accountable for boosting the stability of the system so that most vulnerable children are not subjected to high velocity changes in the caseworkers intended to help them stay safe and have a better future.

Inadequate In-Person Visits

The CUA system was created to address the systemically poor service children received when casework was handled centrally by the City of Philadelphia. The drive to delegate services to local agencies was intended to ensure children and their families had closer contact with their

caseworkers so that more lives would be saved. In our estimation, the overhaul of the system has not made a material difference in that regard. In 2012 there were 10 child fatalities and 11 near fatalities involving Philadelphia children, and nine fatalities and 20 near-fatalities in 2023.

It's clear that the dramatic privatization of child welfare services has not proven to be a better strategy for protecting children from harm, and we are especially troubled by anecdotal reports from youth and service providers that some CUA caseworkers are utilizing text messaging in lieu of mandatory in-person family visits to ensure children are safe. To put it clearly, this practice is unacceptable.

The city has a clear and non-negotiable obligation to physically see every child in its care to ensure their safety and well-being. Anything less compromises our collective duty and puts children at risk. If the city cannot identify a strategy to ensure its contractors are conducting 100% of their family check-in visits, in-person, as required by law and contract, the entire notion of privatized services should be called into question.

Weak Connections with Schools

Another systemic gap lies in the weak connection between the child welfare system and Philadelphia's schools. Although the school district has routinely provided the City with regular reports on student attendance for children on the caseload, we know that information is not making its way to CUA workers.

That means they don't know if their children are attending school or if there is a need for them to help address attendance issues in real time. This disconnect contributes to continued poor educational outcomes for youth in foster care. Stronger collaboration with the School District of Philadelphia is essential to ensure that every public school student on the caseload receives the support they need to succeed academically and emotionally.

Lack of Community Oversight

The Department of Human Services (DHS) has made some progress by publishing quarterly data reports that shed light on key metrics such as family separations and the number of children in congregate care.

While helpful, these reports are not posted consistently and often lack the contextual explanations necessary to understand why trends are changing. We need both greater transparency and broader, more meaningful measures of success.

But we want Council to know that it appears the city is out of compliance with state law that requires county executive officers to appoint an advisory committee to review and make recommendations pertaining to the county's children and youth social service program and the operation of the county agency, including consultation on the development of the County Children and Youth Services Plan and Budget Estimate.

The Administration abruptly ended the regular meetings of Child Welfare Oversight Board,

which had been empaneled by Mayor Kenney in 2018 and established by his predecessor Mayor Nutter. This board offered a critical platform for community members and stakeholders to engage directly with DHS leadership and monitor progress through data and discussion. Since the Board stopped convening in 2024, there has been a serious void in community oversight and public accountability.

Philadelphia needs a consistent, transparent, and inclusive advisory structure—one that not only holds DHS accountable but also values the insights of individuals with lived experience in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. These voices must be central to the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programs moving forward.

Conclusion

In closing, the issues I've outlined today – from how we count caseloads to how we measure success – are not just administrative details. They directly affect the lives of children and families across Philadelphia. We owe it to them to create a system that is humane, responsive, and accountable.