

Challenges

Ongoing Challenges for Ohio's Child Welfare System

Disproportionality

Although research indicates children of color are not at a greater risk for abuse and neglect, minority children are overrepresented in foster care and have far more disparate outcomes. Children of color tend to have lengthened stays in custody, limited services while in foster care, are less likely to be reunified with families, and wait longer for permanent, loving homes.

Nationally, African American children are four times more likely, and American Indian children 3.5 times more likely,

than white children to be in state protective custody. Ohio has not fared much better. The PCSAO factbook shows that 40% of all children in custody are African American, yet only 15% of Ohio's children are African American. National data show that while Ohio compares well to other large states for most child protection indicators, our performance regarding reducing racial disparities is not as encouraging.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services (ODYS) has demonstrated leadership in embracing similar challenges.

Through the *Disproportionate Minority Contact Leadership Academy*, teams from thirteen counties examined key decision making points with a view toward racial disproportionality – from the first law enforcement referral to institutional stay, and even transfers to the adult judicial system. Local teams then chose certain decision points to strategize how to impact the reduction of racial disparities. It is time for Ohio's child welfare leadership to follow suit with a process to track and impact similar disparities in our system.

Montgomery County Youth Breaks Cycle of Abuse and Overcomes Obstacles

PCSAO Rising Up and Moving On Award Winner: *Deven*

Before entering foster care, Deven had to care for his sisters, maintain the household, do the grocery shopping, and later endure the wrath of adults. During this time, he also experienced severe headaches which were dismissed by his parents as an attempt to seek attention. In July of 2006, Deven was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer that attacks the sinus cavities. For over a year, he underwent radiation treatments and chemo therapy.



Deven receives his Rising Up and Moving On Award from State Representative Tracy Heard.

Although Deven missed a lot of school while undergoing treatment for the cancer, he was determined to maintain his class work through home instruction. Upon returning to school, he immediately made the honor roll and maintained a 3.5 GPA through his senior year. Despite numerous challenges, Deven has overcome. He is a cancer survivor and the first to graduate from high school and attend college in his family.

Deven has proven that no obstacles are too high when you persevere and set your mind and body to accomplish your goals!

“Although research indicates children of color are not at a greater risk for abuse and neglect, minority children are overrepresented in foster care...”

A report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) cites that poverty, bias and difficulties in finding permanent families are key factors in contributing to the higher proportion of minority children who are in foster care.

PCSAO recommends the following to help address this disparity:

- *Utilize Ohio's new statewide SACWIS system* – ODJFS should build on ODYS' work to regularly provide communities with data and outcomes related to minority children involved with our systems.
- *Ensure that minority families have access to needed services to strengthen their family before a child is brought into care* – Ohio's ten county Alternative Response pilot program, and the seventeen county ProtectOhio Family Team Meetings are excellent strategies upon which to build.
- *Offer additional supports to relative caregivers* – We know familial ties are strengths of the African American community, one that improves outcomes for our children needing a temporary or permanent family when their own parent(s) cannot provide one.

Preventing Teen and Unintended Pregnancies

It is critical that the most precious of all decisions, bringing a child into the world, is welcomed by willing and prepared parents. Thus, prevention of teen and unintended pregnancies is an important strategy for Ohio.

PCSAO is dedicated to this topic for multiple reasons: unintended pregnancies often result in births to single women who are not yet prepared to raise a child; children born to young single parents suffer a higher poverty rate than children in two parent homes; teen parents are less likely to complete high school or further their education and training, leading to lower earning capacity in the workforce; the stresses of raising children at a young age are tough (one-third of families with open child welfare cases had children born to teens); and finally, foster youth are much more likely to become pregnant as teens.

Thus, PCSAO advocates a multi-pronged strategy for teens and young adults:

- *Provide comprehensive sex education statewide* – Promote a message of abstinence and delay; empower youth with scientific information about sex, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases; and empower youth with relationship, communication and negotiation strategies.
- *Implement Family Planning Services as part of Ohio's Medicaid program* – With the cost saving experiences of twenty-six other states, and a 90% federal reimbursement rate, PCSAO is pleased this was endorsed by the Governor's Anti-Poverty Task Force and is being pursued by the state.
- *Access and Equity* – Ensure access to emergency contraception for victims of sexual assault and address contraceptive equity in all health plans.