

What More Could I Have Done?

By Max Bucey, PCSAO Executive Director

Recently I had the opportunity to review the submissions to the *My Voice, My Life, My Future* Art and Writing Contest, which was an opportunity for youth in foster care to express through writing and art their experiences in the child welfare system. After voting for who I thought should win, (they all were winners), I began to think about the heart-wrenching experiences these young people were exposing to the world. One wrote of "people watching as I cry, scream and shout." Another said, "my heart is locked, I hope someone will find the key." Then another painfully explained, "Me and my sisters were separated. That was the hardest experience I'd ever faced." Many expressed the feeling of being "all alone."

This certainly wasn't the first time I have been exposed to the feelings of helplessness that many in the child welfare system feel. Maybe it was these words combined with pictures painted or drawn showing both despair and hope that forced me to look deeper at my own experiences during 36 years of working in child welfare as a caseworker, supervisor, and director. I had to ask myself: What did I do as a Director in Athens County to ensure that all children had an opportunity for a permanent, safe, loving family? Did I work hard enough to assure the agency had the resources to help families? Did the staff have manageable caseloads with quality supervision and training?

I am very proud of the agency's accomplishments in many areas: especially in adoption, child sexual abuse treatment, and juvenile justice; we were on the cutting edge. When I retired more than seven years ago, I did so with the feeling I had contributed to improving the lives of children and families. However, since returning to child welfare with PCSAO, I see that I could have done so much more. I wish my agency could have gotten involved in the Council on Accreditation and emphasized continuous quality improvement. I ask myself, did we do all we could to assure that all staff took advantage of all training opportunities? Even though we had the first foster parent association in the state, did we do enough to empower foster parents as true partners with the agency? Our adoption program, recognized by the White House, was certainly a pacesetter, but could we have done more?

I list these accomplishments not to brag, but to express a complex feeling. Even when you know you have done a good job, you know you could do more. We can never rest on our laurels. One of the greatest pitfalls in child welfare is complacency. When you think you have it all figured out, the parade has passed you by. Whether you are a child welfare director, a caseworker, a policy maker, or an advocate, there are always newer and better ways to help children and families. The next time you are feeling pretty good about where you are and your accomplishments, listen to a kid. Read some of their thoughts or look at their art. I think it will challenge you to take another look at yourself and challenge you to do more. We all are doing a great job, and still, we need to do better.