



New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect

SUBCOMMITTEE ON RACE, POVERTY AND NEGLECT

Katie Stoehr, Chair

June 20, 2023

9:30 A.M. – 10:30 A.M.

Virtual Meeting

Minutes

In Attendance:

Larry Brasch
Mary Coogan
Natasha Johnson
Nydia Monagas
Sonia Moticha
Kaitlin Mulcahy
Patricia Risch
Katie Stoehr

NJ Department of Human Services
Advocates for Children of New Jersey
NJ Department of Human Services
NJ Children's Alliance
NJ Department of Education
Montclair State University
NJ Department of Human Services
NJ Department of Children and Families

Staff:

Daniel Yale

NJ Department of Children and Families

"In compliance with Chapter 231 of the Public Laws of 1975, notice of this meeting was given by way of notice filed with the Secretary of State, the Trenton Times and the Newark Star Ledger and posted at the Department of State, 125 West State St., 1st Floor, Trenton, New Jersey."

**Please note the meeting is being recorded for the transcription of minutes. Please be sure to state your name prior to making comments, motions and seconding votes.*

Welcome and Introductions

Katie Stoehr welcomed members and each member provided a brief introduction.

Define Scope of Committee's Work

Katie spoke about the history of poverty and neglect being conflated in this country over the past 150 years. There is a lot of emerging research that seeks to separate the two and look at how adjustments in certain public policies can reduce the chance that a family might end up being in an interaction with the child protection system.

Last year, DCF launched a conversation they called the "Four Branch Institute" in an effort to engage legislators, members of the executive branch, members of the judicial branch, and people with lived experience. This conversation was meant to look at the history of child welfare in the country and NJ, evaluate data, and ask questions about race, poverty, and neglect as a group. At the end of that process of examination, there were several ideas that the group felt the state should act on.



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Katie explained that she put together a list of issues to discuss, but this list is really meant for members to edit together as a group. As a starting point, perhaps they can say that the Committee is convened to examine ways in which the current operation of the child welfare system inappropriately conflates poverty and neglect.

Something else to consider is what the action steps will be. Is the Committee going to generate recommendations or a report? What is the action item that will propel change? One thought is to have a clear working definition of what we perceive the child welfare system to include. Each member will have a different vantage point. Katie explained that, from her vantage point, the way in which the child protection system becomes engaged with a family begins with the person who picks up the phone and calls the child abuse hotline. A majority of the time, this is a law enforcement officer, medical professional, or teacher or guidance counselor. Those reporters are a large component of the child welfare system. Other parts of the child welfare system are DCF and its contracted providers, the legal system, and funders – state legislature, federal legislature, federal executive branch, etc.

The following are the ideas that came out of the Four Branch Institute:

- Continue to discuss race, racism and poverty
 - Possible action step: create a set of principles for the state's child welfare system that we want to request that all stakeholders embrace
- The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) is a piece of federal legislation from the 1990's that was enacted around the same time as the Temporary Assistance For Needy Families (TANF) was created. What ASFA says is that a child cannot live its whole life in foster care. If a child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months, the state must take steps to terminate the parent's legal rights to the child (with some exceptions). This is challenge with this law is around addiction. People don't overcome long-term addiction in the space of 15 months. There is a lot of talk nationally about adjusting this law. There is a state statute that mirrors the federal law that frames how this has to be carried out in NJ. The Four Branch Institute discussed reform at both the national and state level.
- Legal representation – federally, not every parent that is brought before a family court has an attorney. In NJ, parents are represented by attorneys through the Office of the Public Defender. The question is when should legal representation be provided? Generally, attorneys are only assigned if a family is brought into court by the state. There is a pilot in NJ about assigning attorneys before a court action – at the onset of the investigation or at some other point in the trajectory. Would that change outcomes?
- The way in which cash benefits, subsidies, or housing changes during the period in which a child is temporarily in foster care. It can create a double bind for a parent if they lose support and can't be reunited with their children due to the loss of support.
- Are we doing enough outside of the child protection system to provide opportunities to support families who encounter a struggle? What are we doing? Are we making the best use of what we have? Is there an opportunity for better coordination? Is anything missing?



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Natasha participated in the Four Branch meetings and felt that everyone was in their own space and didn't really understand how all of these things connect. Natasha suggested that the first thing they should do is begin dispelling false information about what exists and doesn't exist. The second is making recommendations about better messaging around what does currently exist. Additionally, the committee should dig into the system that currently exists, putting race in the forefront, and address the stereotypes of people living in poverty and the ignorance/assumptions about what they do and do not do because they are living in poverty. Larry added that it is important to identify poverty as the root cause, not lack of parenting skill necessarily. It is poverty and economic need that drives people to do what they do or to cope with a lack of economic standing and engagement with the rest of the world. Sonia discussed providing recommendations for training so that educators have the information that they need to ensure that certain populations aren't targeted unjustly. Nydia stressed the importance of getting a solid foundation of understanding of what supports currently exist. Nydia also recommended looking into what innovative programs are being developed in other states and how we can learn from them. Katie spoke about a comprehensive catalog of programs and resources that are available in NJ that was created by DCF in consultation with other state agencies. While there may be information that needs to be added, it will be a good starting point to begin to discuss what is available. Katie will send this information to the members. The information can also be sent to other groups that may be able to add information that is missing, e.g. judges, attorneys, teachers, etc.

The committee discussed the following education that can be provided upstream:

- Information and referral
- Case management
- Legal representation
- Financial literacy
- Dispelling myths
- Messaging to stakeholders
- What are other states and jurisdictions doing

Katie also discussed that people are not aware that they do not have to allow DCF caseworkers into their home and how the process might be carried out if people were aware. There is currently a bill before the NY state legislature that would require caseworkers to explain rights to parents at the onset of an investigation. In addition, Katie suggested that other public policies like bail reform may have contributed to declines in foster care placement. When looking at statistics regarding incarcerated parents, law enforcement is separating children from their parents more often than DCF. Separations due to incarceration are as damaging to families as child welfare separations but we don't have a large public system established to automatically support those families. Parental incarceration is an ACE so perhaps it is something that needs to be examined more closely.

The committee discussed changing the name of the committee to include race. Members felt that the committee should be as explicit as possible about the intersection of race with poverty and neglect. The



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first recommendation of the committee is to change the name to the NJTFCAN Subcommittee on Race, Poverty, and Neglect. The committee also decided to make adjustments to their introductory statement to include the criminal justice system, mental health, and substance dependence treatment.

Membership

The following recommendations were made regarding other individuals or groups that should be represented on this committee:

- People with lived experience
- Department of Community Affairs
- Public Housing Authority
- County Human Services Director
- County Welfare Agency?
- Legal Services of NJ/Regional legal services/individual involved with poverty law
- Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Executive Director
- Medical/NJAAP/Emergency Room Doctors
- County Police Chief Association
- Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC)
- DCPD

Katie will send the list to members prior to the next meeting so members can discuss specific recommendations regarding who from these groups should be invited to join. Nydia will reach out to the County Police Chief Association for a member recommendation. Katie will reach out to the AOC, DCPD, the DCF Office of Family Voice (or Powerful Families, Powerful Communities), and CASA. Katie will also discuss the legal services category with Mary Coogan. Initial outreach will consist of determining if people are interested and move to a more formal application process at a later time.

Meeting Times and Frequency

The committee decided to meet again at the end of July. Ongoing meeting frequency will be determined at a future meeting.

Announcements & Closure