

**Government Relations Institute
Elections/Media Projects
Governor's Cabinet on Children and Families
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Overview

The Governor's Cabinet on Children and Families was established by Governor Edward Rendell on September 18, 2003 by executive order. The purpose of the Cabinet is to improve the delivery of services to children and families across systems. The system of care for children in Pennsylvania is complex, often creating challenges for even providers to navigate. Regulations and funding streams can present barriers that impede the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. The Children's Cabinet will identify barriers and seek solutions so that government agencies can better coordinate and streamline services for children and families. The Cabinet is a new initiative, having only met twice at this time.

The creation of this Cabinet has tremendous potential for impacting Children's Services in an unprecedented positive direction. The Cabinet consists of the following members:

- Secretary of Public Welfare, chair
- Secretary of Health
- Secretary of Labor and Industry
- Insurance commissioner
- Director of the Governor's Office of Health Care Reform
- Director of the Governor's Office of Policy or the Director's designee
- Chair of the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission
- Chair of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency
- Governor's Chief of Staff or the Chief of Staff's designee
- Secretary of the Budget or the Secretary's designee

The Cabinet members, chaired by Estelle Richman the Secretary of Public Welfare, have the authority and influence to change the system. Lance Simmens, the executive director of the Cabinet, brings extensive federal public service experience to the position.

The Governor's decision to proceed with the establishment of the Children's Cabinet was most likely influenced by recommendations from the Search Conference on Children's Behavioral Health presented in January 2003. This is significant because a diverse group of stakeholders (families, providers, state & local children serving agencies) were successful in impacting the legislative process. There exists an implied accountability to the goals and objectives recommended by those stakeholders. I am hopeful that information from media coverage about the Children's Cabinet will correlate well with the Search conference report.

Media Coverage

Press Release

On December 30, 2003 a press release announced Pennsylvania's involvement in a Federal project that parallels the goals of the Pa. Governor's Cabinet on Children and Families. Pennsylvania is 1 of 7 states participating in the National Governor's Association's Center for Best Practices. The NGA will seek to assist states in developing new policies and practices to improve service delivery for families and children. Estelle Richman states that Pennsylvania's involvement in the group will facilitate our forward movement in improving outcomes for children and families. Lance Simmens has been designated as Pennsylvania's team leader. Hopefully, the involvement at this Federal level will provide momentum to the Pennsylvania Children's Cabinet. The press release was reported both through PCPA and PCCYF's Monday Morning News. The articles noted the same facts without further commentary.

PCCYF Weekly Digest

Secretary Estelle Richman addressed the County Children and Youth County Administrators the week of December 30, 2003. She said they are working to identify a balance of stakeholders to serve on the Commission and that 'most likely' there will be community based commissions to serve as a conduit to the State Commission.

In February the Children and Youth providers expressed concerns about the Cabinet in the PCCYFS Weekly Digest about the Cabinet. This group supports a legislatively created commission to address children's systems issues. This recommendation comes from the Task Force on Services to Children and Youth which was created in 1999, appointed by the Joint State Government Commission which is a House-Senate research and investigative body. While the goals of better coordination and collaboration between systems is the same, Children & Youth providers believe that a Cabinet created through a Governor's Executive Order risks elimination when the next governor takes office. Secretary Estelle Richman disagreed with this recommendation at the Public Hearing February 2nd at the Capitol. She said that the Children's Cabinet will be successful in resolving the problem of coordinating services to families. The debate related to the significance of a legislatively created versus a governor appointed cabinet.

PCPA Provider News

The February edition provided a summary of Lance Simmons January presentation at the PCPA Children's Committee meeting. An invitation was extended to Mr. Simmens for active involvement by PCPA in support of the work of the Children's Cabinet.

Public Presentations

PCPA Children's Committee

On January 20, 2004 Lance Simmons was invited to PCPA's Children's Committee to present the purpose of the Children's Cabinet. He explained that the Executive Order gives the Cabinet lots of latitude with significant flexibility to address Children's Issues. Including the Secretary of the Budget will insure that the Cabinet will impact the State Budget as it relates to Children's System needs. Enacting this Order early in his administration is an indication of Governor Rendell's commitment. Mr. Simmons' goal is to design a process that allows maximum input at the local level. He wants to know what is working at the local level so that the process can be emulated at the State level. A meeting this same day was convening to establish the structure of the Commission. The membership of the State level Commission will be through nomination by the Cabinet members. Mr. Simmons hopes to balance this political appointment through involvement at the local level with 6 regional commissions. Karen Snyder, former Secretary, recommended that PCPA's Children's Committee be involved by identifying issues and finding solutions. There was no indication at this time from Mr. Simmons that he would commit to this type of relationship with PCPA.

Mr. Simmens again attended the Children's Committee Meeting in March. At this time he stated that most of the issues of priority identified by the Cabinet have been involving the relationship between the Department of Public Welfare and the Department of Education. PCPA members were able to identify other area that cross into the physical health, juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Later in the meeting Stan Mrozowski, the Director of the OMHSAS Children's Bureau reported that 35 names have been sent to the Governor for appointment to the Commission with an anticipated start date this spring.

Interview with Lance Simmens

When I began this project I first contacted Kris Erikson, Children's Policy Specialist at the time for PCPA. He offered to introduce me to Lance Simmens through email. Chris believed that Mr. Simmens would be open to correspondence about the Children's Cabinet. I have had email contact though MR Simmens did not forward me written information. I was present for Mr. Simmens presentation at the January PCPA Children's Committee and I interviewed him today.

Critical Analysis

Factual Elements

The Children's Cabinet agenda and structure is in the process of development. It has met 3 times since its formation in September. This appears to be a slow process since no action has yet been taken to address Children's System's issues. The potential to positively impact the system is significant.

The media coverage has been minimal. Aside from the initial press release I was only able to locate references in professional newsletters. Information has been consistent.

Mr. Simmens, the Executive Director has embraced the value of PCPA's Children's Committee as demonstrated by his consistent attendance at meetings. I believe he extended himself to meet with me because of my connection with PCPA.

The "Spin"

Mr. Simmons, the Executive Director of the Children's Cabinet admittedly does not have any background or knowledge of Children Serving Systems. He says that his expertise lies in facilitating complex processes used to identify problems and find solutions. I believe that many leaders have this skill and that a person with a foundation of experience in a Children Serving System would more likely be successful in the role as facilitator. This background would certainly enhance an initial perception of credibility.

The State Commission is to be created through nomination. I have concerns that the resulting composition may be based more on political relationships than composed of people who have the knowledge and skills to make sound recommendations.

Initial focus will be on the relationship between the Department of Education and Department of Public Welfare. The Cabinet may evolve as a vehicle through which Governor Rendell pushes his Education Initiatives.

The Cabinet was struggling to develop an inventory of child & family related structures while CASSP already has such an inventory. This seems to indicate inefficiencies or lack of knowledge of the system

This is a Governor appointed Committee that can disappear or change dramatically whenever a new governor takes office. Therefore, these efforts have a time-limit. The Committee will need to be efficient and move rapidly to influence change.

Addendum

On April 14, 2004, Governor Rendell announced the membership of the statewide commission that will support the work of the Children's Cabinet. Members include Joe DeVizia, president of Children's Service Center in Wilkes-Barre, a provider active in PCPA. George Kimes, Executive Director of PCPA was also appointed the week of April 10th. The work of the commission is to identify barriers that impede the delivery of efficient and effective children's services and will recommend solutions. Movement has been slow but finally the players are now in place. I hope that the potential to better the system is realized.

References

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I received assistance via email from Kris Ericson and then from Connell O'Brien, Children's Policy Specialists, PCPA.

I interviewed and exchanged many emails with Lance Simmens, Executive Director of the Children's Cabinet.