

**Testimony of Gloria M. Guard, President, People's Emergency Center  
Town Hall Meeting of the Philadelphia Child Welfare Review Panel  
Wednesday, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007  
Temple University Student Center Annex, Philadelphia**

**Topic: Child Welfare Programs of the Department of Human Services**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to testify here today. My name is Gloria Guard, president of People's Emergency Center in West Philadelphia. As a member of the Child Welfare Resource Committee of your esteemed panel, I hope my comments help you develop recommendations for strengthening Philadelphia's child welfare system.

Anthropologists tell us that, since the very beginnings of society, even in the most primitive systems, man recognized that we must care for our abandoned and neglected children. It is society's sacred responsibility to protect its unprotected – and yet, we are at this hearing precisely because our safety net is in apparent disrepair. It is critical that we listen and learn with humility and hope. Our children deserve no less.

With its staggering poverty and violence, Philadelphia has more than its share of children who – through no fault of their own – are in harm's way. Fortunately, our child welfare system has formidable resources and compassionate caseworkers committed to shielding these fragile youngsters from abuse and neglect. My own agency, PEC, is primarily a comprehensive housing and social service agency for homeless families. But for more than two decades we also have cared for neglected teen-agers and children under DHS contracts. PEC is a way station for unaccompanied teen-agers. We shelter girls and women 14 to 21 years old – many of whom are young mothers themselves, awaiting Mother-Baby placements. We serve an average of 21 teens per year under this

DHS contract. We also provide services to the homeless children in our care under a separate arrangement with DHS. We do this with quality staff, transparency and under the watchful eye of an active Board of Directors. The three go hand-in-hand – and I believe that our model can be instructive toward improving the level of care citywide.

Allow me to explain.

We know that the panel here today was assembled following a series of published reports in The Philadelphia Inquirer last year. Questions were raised about the deaths of a number of children whose families had come to the attention of DHS. One article examined the Department's common practice of hiring social-welfare contractors to deliver in-home services to families under DHS monitoring. In profiling a particular case, the story questioned whether there is adequate oversight of contractors by DHS and the State. A severely mentally retarded 14-year-old girl died while she and her family were receiving at-home services from a contracting agency's case management staff.

Effectively delivering services to at-risk families is an enormous challenge. Just ask any social worker who has the guts and stamina to do this kind of work day-in-and-day-out. It is so hard to untangle the web of scars and dysfunction that lead families into the child welfare system in the first place. It takes common sense and uncommon tenacity. And yet, there are ways to ensure that even the hardest cases receive quality care. I believe one way is to foster accountability at the top – the Board of Directors of any agency receiving a DHS contract can make a difference.

Stronger DHS oversight of nonprofit boards may very well help stop more child deaths. The substantive involvement of a Board of Directors creates a culture of corporate governance that fosters quality. One way DHS might do this is by including

language in its contracts that requires agencies to report in some detail the activities and role of their Board of Directors. To that end, they might require agencies to produce the following kinds of materials:

- Documentation showing that the Board meets regularly, attendance levels, and that it has a committee structure in place to oversee programs;
- Documentation showing how involved the board has been in agency budgets and audits;
- Documents outlining diversity and turnover on the board;
- Documents that show board directors have term limits and consistently attend regularly scheduled meetings;
- Evidence showing the board routinely reviews program quality, contract and agency program goals, as well as employee professional standards; and
- Evidence of how the Board conducts its annual performance review of the agency executive.

DHS officials might also even consider making annual visits to agency board meetings as part of their oversight toolkit.

I make these recommendations based on two things. First, during the Inquirer investigation, two women listed as members of a contract agency's advisory board reportedly said they had not been asked to serve on any such board. They told the newspaper that their names had been listed without permission. Secondly, the expectation of a working, professional Board of Directors is fundamental to the operation of any non-profit, and was in fact the basis on which the original IRS statutes were

crafted. An active, voluntary board of directors is the primary protection for the public that a non-profit is acting in the general public welfare.

For years now PEC has operated within such a framework, and it has kept us on our toes. A fully engaged Board of Directors also gives us access to some of Philadelphia's brightest minds. Though PEC's governance procedures have long been in existence, they echo what is formally called for in the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania's "Organizational Promising Practices" model. A similar approach by DHS could go a long way toward fostering accountability at the top.

At minimum, such oversight would give DHS a measure of an agency's sophistication and administrative procedures. An organization with an active board with genuine responsibilities will most likely possess a greater capacity for quality. When it comes to Philadelphia's abandoned children, this should be our priority.

Thank you for your time.