

## Westmoreland Children First

### Advisory Board

Westmoreland County  
Children's Bureau

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Westmoreland County Overcomes PA's Broken Child Welfare System**

*September 26, 2017—Greensburg, PA*—Westmoreland County child welfare officials today responded to a recent state Auditor General special report that analyzed the children and youth services system in Pennsylvania. Auditor General Eugene DePasquale's "State of the Child" sounded the alarm about "wholesale system breakdowns that actually prevent CYS (children and youth services) caseworkers from protecting our children from abuse and neglect."

Through innovative planning, technology initiatives, training, and staffing changes, the [Westmoreland County Children's Bureau](#) (WCCB) has overcome the state's broken system.

Shara Saveikis, WCCB Director, applauds the report. "This release makes public that the state's child welfare system has created growing problems for us. We've been inundated with unfunded mandates and paperwork demands that severely burden our caseworkers and our resources."

The special report describes unmanageable caseloads that jumped from 12 to 20, to 50 to 75 in the aftermath of the Jerry Sandusky child sex abuse scandal. The report also highlights insufficient training for new intake caseworkers; volumes of paperwork; and the effects of skyrocketing opioid rates.

"Caseworkers began to leave in droves," notes the report, citing a 90 percent caseworker turnover in York County in a 24-month period.

"That has not been the case here," says Saveikis. In Westmoreland County — not one of the 13 focus counties studied for the special report — caseworker turnover rate has actually decreased from 24 percent in 2008 to 7 percent in 2016.

Proactive measures have helped WCCB avoid the crises seen in other counties. The agency increased the number of assessment caseworkers by 25 percent in anticipation of new laws in the wake of the 2015 Sandusky scandal. For 2017/18, the agency secured state approval for five more caseworkers, one more

casework supervisor, and one additional foster care social worker. Caseload sizes have remained at 14 or 15, below the recommended 17 and far below averages across the state.

Further, Saveikis, working with the county commissioners, was able to raise management salaries without affecting the county budget. This has been a major incentive for staff retention, with 100 percent of management remaining over the past year. WCCB and the county commissioners have historically recognized the importance of its caseworkers and as such their salaries have consistently been above state averages.

A high level of staff training also helps WCCB cope with the untenable number of new regulations and demands that has created system failures in other counties. Westmoreland County caseworkers and supervisors have high participation in the Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL) program, which provides graduate level educational opportunities for public child welfare personnel. The majority of WCCB caseworkers have completed experiential-based safety training.

Caseworkers also receive situational and safety training, and participated in motivational interviewing. Moreover, WCCB provides lunch and learn sessions for caseworkers in association with the Westmoreland Bar Association.

In addition, WCCB participated in a county-wide truancy pilot project partnering with the Westmoreland County Court of Common Pleas in an effort to solve a growing truancy problem. The agency also participates in a Children's Roundtable Initiative with the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and partners with the American Bar Association. These programs expedite permanency for children and their families.

To help reduce paperwork, caseworkers received smart phones to better access and enter information while in the field, and voice recognition software is available to cut documentation time. Saveikis co-chairs the state's Staff Retention Committee, which has reviewed and made preliminary recommendations for staff retention and paperwork reduction.

"In spite of the significant increase in the number of children and families that we're serving," Saveikis explains, "Westmoreland County consistently outperforms the state in having the least number of children removed from their parents/guardians and has improved in placement stability, timely reunifications, and in reduced re-entries."

In the last five years, Westmoreland County has shown consistent improvement in federal measures of child safety, permanency, and well-being.

[Westmoreland Children First](#) is the Advisory Board to the Westmoreland County Children's Bureau. Its aim is to understand the critical needs of the children under the Bureau's care, provide financial support through fund-raising, and support WCCB staff and programs.

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