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Dear Chairman Heckler and Members of the Task Force on Child Protection:

Congratulations on your appointment to the Task Force on Child Protection.

The Protect Our Children Committee (POCC) – Pennsylvania’s statewide coalition dedicated to preventing child abuse and achieving targeted child welfare reforms – called last April for the creation of a bicameral and bipartisan supported task force to examine important front-end child protection issues (e.g., how abuse is defined, reported, and investigated, and the pathway to services for children). We renewed the call for such a task force in August and again in November.

Now we are on the cusp of an extraordinary opportunity as the Task Force for Child Protection – created by the Pennsylvania General Assembly in December with support from Governor Tom Corbett – gets to work this week. We view the Task Force and your appointment to it as a significant invitation to prioritize the protection of every Pennsylvania child.

We caution, however, that Pennsylvania has been here before. For more than a decade, community outrage and debate have persisted, triggered by high-profile and shocking Grand Jury reports, Joint State Government Commission and Legislative Budget and Finance Committee studies, as well as hundreds of child-abuse related fatalities and near-fatalities. In the wake of each report, each child’s death, we vowed anew our commitment to better ensure that every Pennsylvania child is safe and connected to nurturing adults.

In many ways we have done better, but in many ways we have not. Laboring under the harsh shadow of the Jerry Sandusky and Penn State University child sexual-abuse scandal, we must all acknowledge legitimate and extensive questions about how and why our institutional, state, and national child protection policies have fallen short, including:

- Insufficient attention to and investment in proven prevention services;
- Placing the burden on children to keep themselves safe from child abuse and victimization;
- Inconsistent and confusing laws about reporting child abuse;
- A reduced capacity to respond to the complex needs of vulnerable children; and
- Inadequate commitment to transparency and accountability.

POCC’s drive to realize this Task Force was linked, in part, to Pennsylvania’s statistical outlier status, both in initiating child abuse investigations (8.0 per 1,000 children versus 40.0 per 1,000 children nationally) and in determining a child to be a victim of child abuse (1.3 per 1,000 children compared to 9.2 per 1,000 nationally).

Our urgency grew with the findings of our 2011 survey of mandated reporters in Pennsylvania: twelve hundred (1,200) professionals responded revealing that nearly 40% of those responding had never, or had not recently, been trained. We knew last spring that Pennsylvania required focused attention to and action on who reports child abuse and how they are trained about what must

be reported (e.g., suspected or known), how such reports are to be made (e.g., to child welfare or law enforcement or both), and penalties for failure to report.

We believe the starting point to intentional and measurable reform starts with a commitment to core principles, including:

1. Preventing child abuse and protecting children is a shared community responsibility; we all play a role.
2. All children have the right to live in a strong family ensuring a safe, nurturing and healthy connection to encouraged and supported caregivers.
3. Pennsylvania's definition of child abuse and the response to reports of child abuse, including a pathway to investigation and services, must be child-centered.
4. Pennsylvanians who work directly with children *must* be required to report child abuse.
5. Pennsylvania reporting laws and strategies *should* invite and encourage anyone to report child abuse.
6. Reporting child abuse – regardless of the type or alleged perpetrator – should be as straightforward as possible with an emphasis on: believing the child who discloses, maintaining the integrity of the report, and discouraging internal investigations.
7. Mandatory reporting requirements must be matched with an expectation of and commitment to high-quality training, making child abuse reporting a regular part of continuing education and licensing requirements for individuals and institutions.
8. A person acting in good faith to report child abuse should be protected from the retaliation of an alleged perpetrator, employer, or institution.
9. Calls about child abuse must be answered, which means continuous quality improvement, including upgraded technology and appropriate staffing to reduce missed calls at ChildLine, the state's child abuse hotline.
10. Multidisciplinary child-focused investigations that promote collaborative fact-finding and seek to minimize a child's trauma must be the rule, not the exception.
11. Reducing a child's exposure to trauma must be a priority throughout court procedures, requiring the opportunity for expert testimony and alternative child testimony options.
12. Decision-making – regarding both the individual child and the policies of government – must be informed by data, driven by research or evidence-based practices, and determined by properly trained and supported professionals.
13. Maintaining a registry of those who have been determined after an investigation to be a perpetrator of child abuse is important to protecting children, but the registry must permit a timely and monitored appeals and expungement process.
14. Incentivize investments, including realignment of existing resources, into research-informed and evidence-based prevention and intervention services, and permit greater flexibility to respond to the individualized needs of the child.
15. Ensure that systems have the capacity to effectively respond to reports and to provide needed interventions.
16. Restore and strengthen public confidence in child protection efforts by requiring significantly more transparency and accountability, including and well beyond the Department of Public Welfare and local children and youth services agencies.

We will continue to add our voices to the important work of the Task Force on Child Protection. We look forward to working with you to realize intentional and tangible strategies which better protect every Pennsylvania child.

Sincerely,

A Child's Place at Mercy – Allegheny County Children's Advocacy Center

Mary Carrasco, MD, MPH, FAAP, Director

A Safe Place

Terri Allison, Executive Director

ACCESS-York/Victim Assistance Center Programs of the YWCA-York

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Joddie Walker, Executive Director

American Academy of Pediatrics - PA Chapter

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Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center

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Children's Coalition of the Lehigh Valley
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Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC
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Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania
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Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research
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Fight Crime: Invest in Kids – Pennsylvania
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Former PA Victim Advocate
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Juvenile Law Center
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Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania
The Rev. Amy Reumann, Director

Lutheran Congregational Services, Inc.
The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Ritter, Executive Director

Maternity Care Coalition
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Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania
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Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center of Montgomery County
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National Association of Social Workers – PA Chapter
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Network of Victim Assistance (Bucks County)
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Pennsylvania Community Providers Association
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Pennsylvania Court Appointed Special Advocates
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Women in Need

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Women Organized Against Rape

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Women's Resources of Monroe County, Inc.

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York County Children's Advocacy Center

Deborah Harrison, Executive Director

York County Cribs for Kids Program

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Your Safe Haven

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