

JOINT HEARING ON CONSOLIDATION

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Like many here today, I come with more questions than answers. As an organization that provides a broad range of services to a cross disability community throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania, we want to support the idea of fiscally responsible government. We want to see a budget that is balanced and services that meet people's needs. We welcome the breakdown of silos and channels that separate people and unfairly divide resources. We recognize the need for innovation and strategies that will help us move forward during uncertain times when needs are growing and budgets are shrinking.

In some ways, consolidation of the proposed departments seems to make a kind of sense. Many people who depend on services do so across more than one system at a time. Therefore, it makes sense that systems and values align more closely to treat individuals as whole beings. From the beginning, this administration has shown a real commitment to making changes geared toward a positive impact on our Commonwealth and its future. The road to those changes has been far from smooth, but stakeholders have always had some measure of input in the process. This cooperative experience is a refreshing change from the attitudes of previous times.

However, the proposed plan as it is currently understood raises some serious concerns. We are at a time of tremendous change at some many levels. Now more than ever, trepidation seems to be part of standard operating procedure in the service delivery system. This is even more true for consumers whose quality of life and community freedom is directly tied to the services the state is able to provide to them. As this testimony is being written, a proposed organizational chart has yet to be released.

This is a serious barrier to the ability of any agency to offer constructive comments on possible changes. That being the circumstance, what follows is not nearly as focused as it would be if this process were more open.

Consolidation and streamlining of administrative functions seems to be a very commonsense approach to eliminating duplications and potential waste within systems. Most service providers would agree that simplifying licensure and accreditation processes would serve everyone. Surely, making it more straightforward to comply with necessary regulations will result in agencies having more staff time to devote to needed services rather than assuring compliance on paper. Combining these four departments to reduce silos in service provision seems on its surface to be very reasonable. However, there are many devils in these details. We believe that any change which results in a reduction of resources for direct consumer service or support must be left behind in favor of cost savings in some other aspect of state spending. This is not a time when our most vulnerable citizens can afford to have less support. You will hear from many about how various programs will suffer if funding streams are changed. This is no different in the disability services arena. We cannot afford to lose support for treatment during the opiate epidemic because people with disabilities live in addiction crisis. We cannot afford to lose support for services to the elderly because people with disabilities live well into older ages. We cannot afford to lose support for children and youth services, because sadly, children with disabilities are more likely to be abused and neglected than their non disabled peers. We cannot afford to lose support for Home and Community Based Services because they are often the only thing that guarantee people with disabilities remain free citizens of our communities rather than being unfairly segregated and institutions. Simply put, we cannot afford any cutbacks that will be seen or felt by individuals who have support needs, no matter what those specific needs are. I sit before you today as part of a united front of citizens from every walk of life, age, socioeconomic background, education level, race, and ZIP Code. I am one voice speaks for many. Do not place the citizens of our

Commonwealth any closer to harm's way in the name of innovation or fiscal responsibility.

As you look for ways to consolidate, look for opportunities to cross train staff to learn about various systems and how they interact. On a day-to-day basis, I hear from consumers who have significant disabilities that are struggling to get drug treatment because inpatient treatment centers cannot adequately provide for their personal care needs. This is a place where consolidation makes sense. All too frequently, I encounter people who are frustrated by systems that divide them according to their ages and their incomes and their insurance sources. These are places where the breakdown of silos must occur. Change is necessary and some of it can be accomplished by consolidating the administrative functions of several departments and eliminating access barriers across systems. However, these changes must be focused on better services to people. Current funding streams that are working like the lottery fund must be permitted to continue with no decreases in funding or interruption of services to those who currently benefit.

I understand the sense of urgency in the implementation of plans like this one. In times of deficit, there is a need to make wrenching choices. Broad-based support for plan such as this will happen when you can demonstrate that those wrenching choices will not target those who are most vulnerable or the essential functions of the agencies that support them.

This administration has already shown vision and leadership in moving towards the implementation of managed care for Home and Community Based Services. Departmental consolidation is another one of those changes that could be visionary if stakeholder input in the process is as extensive and appreciated. My sincere recommendation to you is that you take enough time in considering this consolidation process to allow for greater input from consumers once enough information about this plan has been released.

We sincerely hope that as consolidation moves forward, the needed expertise across departments is not lost to staffing cuts. Be sure to consider knowledge base, experience, and consumer rapport as valued assets when considering where a particular employee fits in a new scheme of things. Many individual employees have worked very hard to put Pennsylvania's services for the elderly and those with disabilities in a place of strength. Don't punish their service with disregard because their salaries don't fit into new financial schemes. Just as consumers' needs must be carefully considered, staff skills must be prized during this process.

This plan has gotten a lot of press. However, that press is largely conjecture and speculation. Before these decisions move forward, the agencies involved must know more, advocates must know more, the consumers must know more, We are living through a time of significant upheaval where the majority of citizens feel disenfranchised by the government. Do not let this process contribute to that feeling. You will innovate more successfully with a greater amount of input from stakeholders. As is so often said in disability circles, I will say here in the overall services sector "Nothing About Us Without Us"