



CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT

Fostering a better way for Connecticut's children

Children In Placement
Connecticut, Inc.
300 Whalley Avenue
New Haven, Connecticut
06511-3142

T: 203 784-0344
F: 203 784-0347
E: clpah@sbcglobal.net

My name is John Kelley. I am the Staff Attorney and Director of Program Development for Children In Placement; a member of the Executive Committee of The Governor's Task Force on Justice for Abused Children; and a Commissioner on the Commission on Child Protection. I have also worked as a legal services attorney on child protection issues; and served as the Principal Attorney for the New Haven Region of the Department of Children and Families. In these various positions I have had the opportunity to work with children with behavioral and mental health issues. The most important aspect of their condition in the vast majority of cases is the need to recognize that their condition is primarily caused by societal and environmental stress – not chemical imbalances.

These children have been through significant trauma. Each child will react to trauma differently. While many bureaucracies want to regulate and standardize all systems, including mental health delivery, the child protection system must recognize, understand and treat each child on an individual basis. Not only is the current approach extremely harmful to children, but it is extremely costly and ultimately harmful to society overall. For many children suffering behavioral or mental health issues, they have the best advocates in the world – their parents. They know their children, learn about their needs, and are ferocious in protecting them and advocating for them. However, the children in the child protection system may survive without parental advocacy, but suffer from the lack of parents to advocate for them, and from a system that is overwhelmed with hurt children.

I believe the Department of Children and Families tries to help these children, but it is doing so in a system where often the choices are the lesser of the evils. I believe the only way to help these children in this overburdened system is to provide them with strong advocates. These advocates can be Children In Placement Guardians Ad Litem and Monitors who, because of their small caseloads, can focus on the individual needs of children; and Attorneys who have demonstrated a commitment to serving our most vulnerable children. However, advocates must have appropriate services to advocate for, and it seems that we have been extremely shortsighted in support of our mental health system.

I thank you for this opportunity to be here today, and I hope that this is the first of many opportunities I will have to work toward a mental health system that doesn't blame its victims.

Regards, John Kelley

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