



Parent to Parent: A Guide to Navigating Philadelphia's Child Welfare System

Part 1

“You Gotta Decide What’s Most Important Right from the Beginning” *DHS Investigations and CUA Services – How Does a Case Start?*

What is DHS?

Every county in Pennsylvania has a child welfare agency and the Department of Human Services (DHS) is that agency in Philadelphia. DHS’ role is to “provide and promote safety, permanency and well-being for children and youth at risk of abuse, neglect and delinquency.” DHS does this through their investigations of child abuse and neglect and also offers help to families through various programs including home visits, parenting classes, therapy and sometimes financial assistance.



One parent explained how it is to work with DHS. She says, “I understand, to an extent, that they’re looking out for the best interests of the child... You have to show them that’s what you’re doing, too.”

When and Why Does DHS Get Involved?

Tanisha and her husband brought their infant, Terrell, into the hospital because something seemed wrong. Doctors found that Terrell had a severe injury that needed immediate care. The hospital contacted DHS. Tanisha’s son, Terrell did well in the hospital. However, because Terrell hadn’t learned to talk yet, he could not tell DHS how his injury had happened. Tanisha, her husband, family, and babysitter told the investigator that they did not know how Terrell had gotten injured. Because DHS did not know who had hurt Terrell, they decided that until they could determine that Terrell would be safe with his parents, he would have to be placed.



DHS usually gets involved with a family when someone makes a report to the child abuse hotline about possible abuse or neglect. The person who makes this call could be a “mandated reporter” like a doctor, child care worker, or a teacher. Reports can also be made by anyone else, including a neighbor, family member or anyone. Once the report has been made, DHS does a thorough investigation and makes several decisions, including whether the report is true, whether the child is currently safe at their home and if the family needs assistance to safely care for the child.



What Might Happen if DHS Investigates?

During the investigation, DHS will often ask to see the child and, depending on the child's age, will ask to speak with the child privately. They will also speak with you, and may speak with other people who are involved with your child and family, such as, family members, doctors, and teachers. They will also look at the living arrangement for the child, including where they sleep and who watches them. During the investigation, the most important thing DHS is looking for is that your child is safe.

After the investigation, DHS has to make a decision about what to do with the information collected.

Here are some (but not all) of the possible outcomes of a DHS investigation:

- DHS may investigate and determine that everything is okay and close the investigation without services or court involvement.
- DHS may have concerns and ask your family to accept help or services.
- DHS may be concerned about your child's immediate safety and discuss a *safety plan* with you. A *safety plan* is a voluntary agreement between you and DHS. This safety plan may include you or your child moving out of the home temporarily, someone else moving in, or any number of other possible arrangements to ensure that your child is safe while DHS works with your family. A safety plan is meant to be temporary. You do not have to sign a safety plan if you do not agree with it. If you change your mind about a safety plan that you signed, you can revoke it (take back your agreement).
- If DHS believes that your child is not safe and that a Safety Plan alone cannot resolve the issue, they may take you to court. At this point, DHS will decide whether to remove your child and have an emergency hearing ("Shelter care hearing") within 72 hours, or to leave the child in your custody and have a hearing about your case within 30 days. There is more information about hearings in another pamphlet titled "*The Court Process*."



Linda says that she struggled with addiction and DHS got involved when her daughter was born due to a positive drug screen. When DHS did an investigation in Linda's case, they talked with her, her treatment program and her boyfriend. DHS found that Linda had a long history of problems related to drug use. Because of this and other issues, DHS felt that Linda was not able to provide safe care for Kayla at that time. DHS asked a judge to place Kayla in a foster home.

Important term you may hear: "*Indicated*" as perpetrator:

After the investigation DHS may decide to "indicate" you or someone else as a perpetrator of child abuse. This is separate from the decision of whether or not your child is safe and whether or not your child should be removed from your care. If DHS indicates you or someone else as a perpetrator of child abuse,



whoever is indicated should receive a letter from Pennsylvania’s Department of Human Services in Harrisburg telling them that there is a strictly enforced 90-day deadline to appeal that decision. (Decisions from before Dec. 31st, 2014 may have a shorter deadline, or in some cases the deadline may be waived.) If you get that letter, you should consider appealing and discuss it with your lawyer. Having an indicated report of abuse on your record can prevent you from getting certain jobs in the future, especially in the areas of child care, health care, and nursing care.

After the investigation, if DHS thinks your family needs services, you may be assigned to a Community Umbrella Agency, sometimes referred to as a CUA.

What is a Community Umbrella Agency or “CUA”?

A CUA is an agency that is hired by DHS to do work with families in a specific area of Philadelphia. The city of Philadelphia is divided into 10 CUA districts (listed below). If your case is transferred to a CUA, the CUA will provide all of the main case management services to help you stabilize your family or reunite with your child.

The 10 CUAs and their regions include:

- North Philadelphia - **NorthEast Treatment Centers (NET)**
- Kensington/Juniata Park – **Asociación de Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM)**
- Lower Northeast - **Turning Points for Children**
- Far Northeast - **Catholic Social Services**
- Logan/Olney - **Wordsworth**
- Northwest Philadelphia/Roxborough- **Tabor Northern Community Partners**
- Hunting Park - **NorthEast Treatment Centers (NET)**
- South Philadelphia - **Bethanna**
- Southwest Philadelphia - **Turning Points for Children**
- Mantua/Parkside/Overbrook/Wynnefield - **Wordsworth**

What Happens if DHS or CUA Takes my Child?

DHS can remove a child from home if they believe the child may be at risk of harm. If a child is removed, there will be a hearing at Family Court at 1501 Arch Street within 72 hours. This is called a “Shelter Care” hearing. There is more information about hearings in another pamphlet titled “*The Court Process.*”



The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)

Once your child is placed in out-of-home care, the clock starts ticking and you have a limited amount of time to work on reuniting with your child. This is because of a federal law called the *Adoption and Safe Families Act* (ASFA).

ASFA states that a *Permanency hearing* must be held to decide on the long-term goal for the child no later than **12 months** after foster care placement. To keep reunification as the goal, you have to make serious progress toward your goals before this hearing happens. Make sure you know how much time you have to make progress toward your goals.

ASFA states that in most cases when a child has been in foster care for **15 of the last 22 months**, DHS/CUA can move to terminate parental rights. Though 12-15 months may sound like a long time, it will go by fast!

If DHS Removes a Child, Where Will the Child Go?

When a child is removed from a parent’s custody, this is often called “removal” or being “placed.” Where the child goes to live is often called a “placement.” Whenever possible, DHS should try to find a “kinship placement” with a relative or family friend.

Tip: Even if you do not want your child to be removed from your care, you should be prepared to give DHS, CUA and your lawyer the names and contact information for relatives and family friends who would be good placement options for your child. Relatives and kin may be able to get “kinship care” payments to help them financially take care of your kids. Even if your child is not placed with kin at first, do not stop identifying relatives and kin, either for placement, visitation or support. The judge will ask at every hearing if a kinship placement has been looked for and/or found.



Tanisha explained, “The social worker let us know that he would have to be placed, which devastated me all over again, thinking about putting him with strangers. Luckily the social worker we had said that being placed with my mother [was an option].”

What Can I Do to Make Placement Less Scary for my Child?

For a child, being placed outside the home can be scary. You can help your child’s anxiety by being calm during the transition and by communicating right away with DHS, CUA and the foster parent right away about your child’s needs, preferences and anything else that you think would make this change less traumatic for your child.



The following list is just to get you started (some of the questions may not apply to your child or you may think of other questions that aren't here):

- What makes your child happy/sad/angry/upset?
- When your child is sad/upset/angry, what helps calm your child?
- Is your child afraid of anything?
- Does your child have a special toy, blanket, or piece of clothing?
- Does your child have any special needs (developmental, physical, emotional, cognitive)?
- Does your child have any medical issues? Do they have a primary doctor? Does your child have any allergies?

As a parent, having your child removed can also be really scary and it also may make you feel some anger and resentment towards this person who is caring for your child. Remember this foster parent is a person who was called on short notice to step in to try to help your family and they are not responsible for the investigation or the removal. You should communicate with them enough to tell them important information about your child and to suggest ways to help your child deal with this difficult time.



Darroll, whose daughter Alexis was placed in foster care, told us, “If you knew me as a father, you’d understand how hard it was not to be with my child.”

Also, while the foster parent is taking care of your child, it will be important to maintain a regular and good relationship with them. It may seem difficult at first, but try to build a relationship with that person and to meet with them face-to-face or talk by phone when and if possible. You can also give them more information on what your child needs, and knowing that you two are working together can make your child feel more at ease.

Thinking About your Family’s Goals and Strengths

The beginning of this process is also a good time to think and talk about your goals. CUA is going to ask you to do things in order to get your child back in your care. Depending on what was said in the initial DHS report, these goals might include drug treatment, mental health counseling, parenting classes, or other things. Try to be as honest as you can with yourself and decide what you want to happen and what you are willing to do to make it happen. Even if you disagree with CUA, it’s important to understand the goals CUA wants you to meet in order to keep your family together or to reunite with your family. Parents often said that remembering what they were fighting for—their children—helped them make it through tough times and setbacks.



Linda says, “You gotta decide what’s most important right from the beginning and be honest with yourself. I was having a hard time with recovery but I had to stay clean to get her back. If they take your baby, it’s really hard not to use, you know? But I was determined to fight for her.”



Now is also a good time to think about your strengths and what you will need to meet your goals. Think about times you had to overcome something difficult or do something that was hard for you. How did you do it? What would help you meet your goals? CUA is supposed to help you to reunify with your child by providing “reasonable efforts.” Is there something CUA, family or someone else can do to help you meet your goals?

Identifying Supports



For Linda, “When [DHS] came out to check our house, they said we would need a support system for when the baby came home...what they meant was family members, anybody who can come out and help us and our baby.”

Many people who contributed to this guide spoke about the importance of having “supports” or a “support network,” and everyone agreed that this process is easier if you don’t feel alone. For some parents, a lot of support came from other family members and friends who wanted to see them succeed. Figure out who you can count on for support and encouragement as you work on your goals.

Tip: Remember, if there is a family member or friend who can safely care for your child during this time, tell DHS as soon as possible and DHS/CUA can place your child with that person instead of in foster care.

Some parents also talked about religious or spiritual supports that were helpful during difficult times. Reaching out to a religious or spiritual community that you are a part of may help when you are feeling upset, sad, or frustrated. There are also support groups for parents going through this process – look in the back of this guide for resources.



“Join support groups... For me understanding that I was not alone and that others were going through this process helped me deal with some things.”

Finally, one support that some parents found very helpful is counseling or therapy. Even parents who did not feel they had a mental health issue said that seeing a counselor, social worker, or therapist gave them a place to work through the difficult feelings that having a child taken away brought up. Check the back of this guide for numbers you can call.



“Remember therapy is an option. Sometimes professional help is necessary and the most healthy step for coping with this traumatic experience.”



Resources

Department of Human Services (DHS)

To get the name and phone number of a **CUA Social Worker or Social Work Supervisor** call: 215-683-4347

Family Court

Court Operations. To find out contact information for your court-appointed lawyer, or when your next court date is: 215-686-4028

Achieving Reunification Center (ARC)

A one-stop center for parents to overcome barriers preventing reunification. ARC offers parenting classes, therapy, vocational programs, housing workshops, credit and budgeting counseling, and more: 267-514-3500

Parenting Classes

Parenting Collaborative/Parent Action Network. There are a variety of different types of parenting classes, including some which are aimed at younger children or at teen children. There is even one special program where you bring your child and learn hands-on parenting skills. To get help finding parenting education and support services: 215-PARENTS (727-3687)

Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Clinical Evaluation Unit (CEU). If you are not already in treatment and drug and alcohol or mental health may be an issue in your case, the court may refer you to the CEU at 1501 Arch St. for an evaluation. The CEU may make a referral for you to a specific program and they may monitor your progress with treatment to report to the court: 215-568-7752

Community Behavioral Health (CBH). To get help finding drug and alcohol abuse services or to find counseling or other mental health programs call CBH at: 888-545-2600

Legal Assistance

Community Legal Services Even if the (CLS) Family Advocacy Unit is not representing the parent, a parent might be able to get advice or other help with other problems that impact their case like public benefits or utilities: 215-981-3765

Philadelphia Legal Aid (for advice about protection from abuse orders (PFAs), child support or custody): 215-981-3800

Women's Law Project (for help with discrimination against women, reproductive rights and family law): 215-928-9801

Education Law Center (for children's education legal issues): 215-238-6970