



**MEMORANDUM  
COUNTY OF ERIE  
DEPT. OF SOCIAL SERVICES**

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**TO:** Erie County Legislature

**FROM:** Carol Dankert-Maurer, Commissioner

**DATE:** June 10, 2014

**RE:** Community Response to Child Protective Services

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Attached, please find communications we have received concerning Child Protective Services in Erie County, as well as letters which have appeared in the Buffalo News.

Communications we have received:

- Francisco M. Vasquez, Child and Family Services
- Carolyne DeFranco, Gateway-Longview
- Anne Ryan, Read to Succeed
- Ellen Kennedy, Western Citizen Review Panel

Letters that have appeared in the Buffalo News:

- Max Donatelli, Baker Victory Services
- Bonnie Glazeer, Child & Adolescent Treatment Services, and Judith G. Olin, Less Gross Anthonie Child Advocacy Center
- James W. Coder, New Directions Youth and Family Services
- Mark R. Foley, Community Services for the Developmentally Disabled
- J. Mark Robinson, et al, Care Management Coalition of Western New York
- Ellen Kennedy, Western Citizen Review Panel
- Deborah Merrifield, Family Help Center



Francisco M. Vasquez, Ph.D., President/CEO    David R. Barrett, Chair, Board of Directors

May 28, 2014

The Honorable Mark Polancarz, Erie County Executive  
Edward A. Rath County Office Building  
95 Franklin Street, 16<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Buffalo, NY 14202

Dear Executive Polancarz:

I suppose an answer to the woes of Child Protective Services (CPS) is to ask for the Erie County Commissioner of the Department of Social Services (DSS), Carol Dankert-Maurer, to resign. It is a convenient answer, but would it be the proper response to a complex and challenging community issue? I do not believe it is. Allow me to explain.

We are all positioned somewhere along a "vulnerability continuum." At one end of this continuum are children and at the other are seniors. It is at these "ends" of the continuum that vulnerability is most pronounced. It is the space between these two boundaries that our society expects independent, reasoned and responsible comportment. It is in this space where the caregivers, the nurturers, the parents, and those that touch the lives of our children and seniors reside. It is in this space that our human capacity to comfort, to love, to offend, and to hurt plays out. It is also a space where the circumstances of life can bring out the best or the worst in us.

In particular, it is the period of childhood, a time when a human being is developing physically and mentally, that requires our special attention and protection. Our expectations target the well-being of the child – physical, mental, and social well-being. Child well-being is a parental responsibility, first and foremost, in our society. It is assumed that the natural bonds of affection will lead parents to act in the best interest of their children. There is a presumption that parents will do so. Yet many children in our community continue to be victims of abuse and neglect at the hands of their parents. Some have even died. What, then, is our obligation to children as a society, as a reasonable, empathetic, and responsible people?

We place a great deal of responsibility and accountability on our child protection system and on its leadership. We know that the system designed to protect children is utterly challenged. How many children "fly under the radar" of the child protection system because adults in their lives don't report the abuse? How many children escape the "sheltering" arms of our justice system because we fail to treat child abuse as the crime that it is? In part how we view the "system" is at the root of the problem – we expect it to be responsive, accountable, efficient, effective, and successful. But it cannot be. The system is built on models of service delivery that rely on imperfect information, untimely demands, insufficient capacity, and human judgment. By way of example, the first job of the protective services worker is to decide whether a child can safely remain at home. These decisions are based on judgment calls in difficult circumstances, some may be reasonable and proper, while others may not always turn

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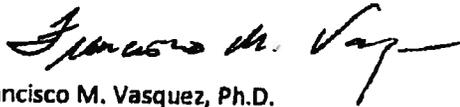
May 28, 2014

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out to have been justified, but no child welfare worker or agency wants to leave children in danger. So the system must change, it must evolve into something that prevents the heartache of losing our children.

I am convinced that the efforts by Commissioner Dankert-Maurer to correct the shortcomings of this unreservedly complicated child protection system will ultimately result in a more responsive and accountable system. She has asked for the tools in an attempt to "right the wrongs" – direct access to police and vital medical records, redefining the presumption of neglect, making it a felony crime for endangering the welfare of a child, and real-time access to calls made to the state's registry among others - and resources to do so. Her focus is on reforming the system. We do not want to see another child victimized by the system; we do not want to see another child die. Our patience is taxed. Admittedly, the pressure for Commissioner Dankert-Maurer to deliver is high. It should be. But what is a call for her to resign now but another exasperated response to an imperfect and complex system? She must be given an opportunity to fix it.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Francisco M. Vasquez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Francisco M. Vasquez, Ph.D.  
President and CEO



# Gateway-Longview

*servicing children, youth and families since 1890*

June 2, 2014

Dear County Executive Poloncarz:

I have seen time and again what is happening now in Erie County after a high profile case of child abuse: the suggested removal of the person in charge. This will not fix the problem. In fact, scapegoating the leadership or the front line caseworkers will in no way enhance the safety of children, but will more likely only disrupt any potential progress toward improving child safety. Blaming only leads to increased challenges recruiting and maintaining competent and committed staff.

I have worked over 25 years in the child welfare system in Erie County and in a number of other agencies in other counties and States. Tragic incidents of the loss or severe abuse of a child, unfortunately, is nothing new. But on a few occasions the response of all stakeholders to the misfortune has turned tragedy into effective reform because the response was not who to blame but more about what can we all do better to protect our children.

First, we recognized the deficiencies in the child welfare system: extremely high case loads, the excessive paperwork demands which often take precedence over face to face visits, and of course the lack of foster home to name a few. Correcting these deficiencies meant internal changes like recruiting and training competent staff, implementing electronic record keeping tools to increase efficiency and transparency with performance outcomes. However, there was a strong community commitment to improve as well. Concerted efforts were made among all stakeholders—police, schools, medical personal, to increase collaboration and communication among all professionals working with children and families. In addition, multiple initiatives were implemented to educate the public at large about identifying and reporting neglect and abuse. This is especially important because it is most often the neighbors and extended family members that have the most intimate view of what is happening in a family. All these improvements require financial resources and therefore the commitment of our legislators to partner with us. In counties where we worked in partnership with our whole community, we made progress and in the long run, the investment has led to significant improvements in the child welfare system.

Carol Dankert-Mauerer needs our full support to reform Erie County's child welfare system. She understands the problems and has the experience and leadership to bring us together to make positive change, which cannot take place in a culture of blame and finger-pointing.

As the Executive Director of Gateway-Longview, I intend to do all I can to support Ms. Dankert-Mauerer in her mission to protect and nurture the children in our care, and I urge our legislators to support all of us in this very critical responsibility.

Sincerely,

Carolyne DeFranco, LCSW-R  
Executive Director of Gateway-Longview



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Williamsville, NY 14221  
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Relating to the Upper New York Conference of the United Methodist Church

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June 3, 2014

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The Honorable Lynne Dixon  
Chair, Health and Human Services Committee  
Erie County Legislature  
25 Delaware Avenue  
Buffalo, New York 14202

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Dear Legislator Dixon:

Secretary  
Rev. Richard Stenhouse  
Executive Director  
Bethel Head Start

Please accept this statement on behalf of Read to Succeed Buffalo in support of keeping our most at risk children safe and healthy through increased staffing for case workers at the Erie County Child Protective Services Department (CPS).

Vito Borrello  
President, EPIC

However, I want to preface this support with an acknowledgment that CPS should be a family's last system of crisis intervention. The first line of defense must come from a community wide response to the challenges of poverty, isolation and lack of preventive services that can provide a family the tools necessary to avoiding CPS intervention.

Anne Botticelli  
Asst. Superintendent for  
Curriculum and Instruction  
West Seneca Central Schools

Collectively we must provide services that support children and families at risk including early screening and identification of substance abuse or neglect, and evidence-based training to prepare child care, Head Start and preschool teachers appropriately to support and to identify at risk children.

Hon. Betty Calvo-Torres  
City Court Judge - Buffalo

Joseph (Jerry) Castiglia  
Retired - Vice Chairman,  
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One program that is showing great promise is the Family Help Center's Children's Center for Success. It is the first of its kind to embrace a trauma informed model of care that works very effectively with children with challenging behavior, sometimes the result of chronic high stress experienced by the child and family. It's also great at building the self-confidence and social skills of any child. Every child care staff member is trained in Teacher-Child Interaction Training (TCIT) which is a companion to the evidenced based Parent-Child Interactive Therapy (PCIT). These approaches result in quick, positive turnarounds in a child's behavior, taking on behaviors from disruptive to withdrawn. The outcomes are children with the skills to succeed socially and get along with others. In addition to offering quality care from a core of experienced staff, parents can also tap the Program's Site Coordinator and Family Advocate to help them access and coordinate all their families' social, emotional, physical and educational needs, reducing stress that can often lead to poor child parent relationships.

Vincent D. Clark  
VP of Development and  
Communications  
Buffalo Urban League

Kathleen Dust  
VP, Education and Staff  
Development  
EduKids, Inc.

Thomas Lunt  
Trustee, The Margaret L.  
Wendt Foundation

Wendy L. Montante  
Community Volunteer

Michael Noah  
VP Business Banking, Senior  
Relationship Manager  
First Niagara Bank

Unfortunately, the need for CPS services will always exist, no matter how thorough a support system, and I congratulate the county executive and his DSS team for already having taken steps to improve services and accountability, while reducing caseloads. But, at the same time we urge the County Legislature to go further in the support and adoption of evidence-based practices that have been proven to help children and their families avoid child protection system altogether.

Dr. Ayindé Rudolph  
Principal  
Westminster Community  
Charter School

Former Member:  
Gordon Gross  
Partner, Gross, Shuman,  
Brizdle & Gilfillan, P.C.  
(Development - Chair

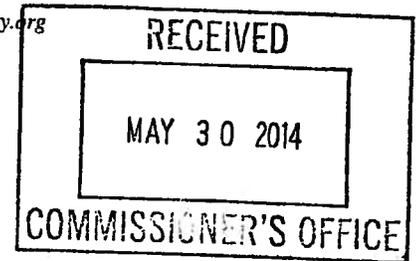
Anne Ryan  
Executive Director

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# *New York State Citizen Review Panels*

Administered by Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy  
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May 28, 2014

Commissioner Carol Dankert-Maurer  
Erie County Department of Social Services  
95 Franklin Street  
Buffalo, NY 14202

Dear Commissioner Dankert-Maurer:

Thank you and your staff for attending the meeting of the Western New York Citizen Review Panel for Child Protective Services on Friday, May 9, 2014 to provide us with an update on the many changes in practice in Erie County. We were impressed with how much you have accomplished to date and the many challenges that still remain.

Panel members are very supportive of these activities and are interested in further changes that lead to improved practices and more positive outcomes for children and families. Please reach out to us in the future with any other updates as you continue along the path of reforming practice and with any concerns you identify along the way. We are committed to publically advancing a community approach to child protection.

Again, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with us.

Sincerely,

Ellen Kennedy  
Chair, Western Citizen Review Panel

## Opinion

### **Letter: CPS employees have tough, thankless job**

Updated: June 9, 2014, 03:58 PM Published: June 10, 2014, 12:01 AM

#### **CPS employees have tough, thankless job**

Erie County Child Protective Services, under the leadership of Commissioner Carol Dankert-Maurer, is currently under the community microscope due to recent child deaths. Being involved in the child welfare system for many years, my view is that CPS workers are in a thankless job and one inherent with multiple risks; risks physically, emotionally and uncertainty career-wise.

In my experience, the vast majority are knowledgeable, dedicated and selfless protectors of our community's most vulnerable children: our eyes and ears behind the closed doors. While they are, in my opinion, first responders, who have to respond to calls of a serious nature, they are not given even close to the societal status of police officers or firefighters, even though they, too, risk violence or serious threats to self. As they are charged with investigating whether children are safe, they have many regulations to abide by, oft times with limited information.

Given all these complexities, I do support Dankert-Maurer's comprehensive efforts to reform this system to meet the challenges of our changing society. I also salute the brave CPS caseworkers who are in the field doing their best for our community's children.

Max Donatelli

Hamburg

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# Opinion

Another Voice / Child Protective Services

## **Another Voice: Legislature should hire new workers to ease crushing case loads**

Updated: June 6, 2014, 04:12 PM Published: June 9, 2014, 12:01 AM

By Bonnie L. Glazer and Judith G. Olin

Our community is in crisis due to the unprecedented number of recent child abuse fatalities. Erie County Commissioner Carol Dankert-Maurer and Deputy County Executive Richard Tobe gave a persuasive presentation at a recent Erie County legislative hearing.

Dankert-Maurer and Tobe asked the Legislature for additional funding to hire 37 new Child Protective Services workers to assist with what everyone agrees are case loads well above the 15-per-worker recommended by the state. The commissioner explained that a recent audit of CPS resulted in a great deal of extra work for CPS workers.

With more time spent per case, and the constant flow of new cases – about 1,000 per month – CPS workers are buried. Imagine your workload doubling and tripling in the course of several months; even with manageable case loads, CPS work is some of the most difficult, stressful work out there. The toll this has taken on the workers is enormous, and morale is suffering greatly.

We all agree that accountability is crucial; notwithstanding, we need to give extra praise and kudos to these warriors, and not point fingers at them for a community problem that is way larger than CPS. Of the 37 new workers proposed, 12 will be part-time police investigator positions. Using retired law enforcement to assist CPS is a practice that has been successfully used in New York City. Due to their background and training, law officers can bring skills to CPS investigative work that will help enhance the safety of children.

While our economy is improving in Erie County, let us not forget that Buffalo continues to be classified as the fourth-poorest city of its type in the country. Domestic violence continues to be a huge problem, as evidenced by the recent murder/suicide in Alden.

As part of their presentation to the Legislature, Tobe and Dankert-Maurer requested \$400,000 in additional funding for preventive services that are provided to high-risk families by private human services agencies. We all know the old adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This is especially true in this arena. High-risk families benefit greatly from services such as subsidized day care, in-home wrap services, parenting classes and more that will help support families with challenges to provide appropriate care and support for their children.

This is a crisis not just for the Department of Social Services, but for every one of us who calls Erie County home. The ball is now in the court of the Erie County Legislature. Call your legislator today and ask him or her to support the proposal to add 37 new workers and \$400,000 in preventive services to help prevent future cases of child abuse and neglect.

Bonnie L. Glazer is president of Child & Adolescent Treatment Services. Judith G. Olin is director of the Lee Gross Anthonie Child Advocacy Center.

Tuesday June 10, 2014

[The Buffalo News.com \(/\)](http://TheBuffaloNews.com/)

# Opinion

## **Letter: Provide CPS with resources it needs to protect children**

Updated: June 6, 2014, 03:55 PM Published: June 9, 2014, 12:01 AM

### **Provide CPS with resources it needs to protect children**

The abuse, maltreatment and deaths of children at the hands of parents and caregivers is abhorrent in a civilized society. These heinous acts must stop. They will only stop, however, with a focused, inclusive, vigilant effort that is communitywide. We are all stakeholders in making sure these acts do not continue. Recent tragedies underscore the urgency for corrective steps to prevent future occurrences.

The Erie County Department of Social Services is charged with the task of investigation and response to alleged instances. Serious questions have been raised and it is right that the department is held to the highest standard. It is my belief as a professional in the field of child welfare for over 30 years that DSS is capable of achieving that standard and protecting our vulnerable children. Having worked with Commissioner Carol Dankert-Maurer for many years, I am reassured that there is no more compassionate, dedicated and focused individual leading that effort.

The only way to achieve success for any endeavor is in having adequate resources to meet the task. I believe the department is under-resourced and therefore unable to be as effective as possible. The plan proposed by the commissioner will address the issues the department is facing. I urge the Legislature and county executive to support that plan and move us closer to a community that guarantees all of our children will be protected and cherished.

James W. Coder

CEO, New Directions Youth and Family Services, East Aurora

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# Opinion

## Letter: Social Services chief working to fix system

Updated: June 3, 2014, 04:48 PM Published: June 4, 2014, 12:01 AM

### Social Services chief working to fix system

It's very disappointing to read that some members of the Erie County Legislature have expressed their desire to remove Social Services Commissioner Carol Dankert-Maurer. While the entire community mourns the loss of another child to the gruesome acts of his own parent, it's been clear to those closest to our protective services programs that the commissioner's efforts to repair that system are just beginning to show progress.

Human services professionals know that intervention is essential, and is now being implemented by Child Protective Services far faster and more intensively than ever, but the preventive measures needed to stop familial abuse before it happens are well beyond any one individual's control. In the most recent cases, shortcomings in mental health services and a paucity of effective parenting training make the department's efforts even more difficult.

While the commissioner has now fulfilled the county's end of the bargain, our entire community must rally to take all of the steps needed to protect our most vulnerable citizens. Can we truly hold any one person responsible for the failings of all of us?

Mark R. Foley

President and CEO, Community

Services for the Developmentally

Disabled, Buffalo

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# Opinion

Another Voice / Child protection

## **Another Voice: New child protection laws will help the professionals and children in Erie County**

Updated: June 3, 2014, 12:22 PM Published: June 3, 2014, 12:01 AM

By J. Mark Robinson

This has been an extremely tough time for everyone in Erie County and Western New York. There is absolutely nothing more disheartening or senseless than having to come to grips with and accept the senseless loss of a child due to someone's abuse or neglect.

No one in his right mind would argue that our children are not our most precious assets. They are to be cherished, protected and loved – not harmed or damaged, intentionally or carelessly, by anyone in any way. Yet, it relentlessly continues to happen and each incident hits us just as hard as the one before it.

Fortunately, we share our lives with dedicated, compassionate and highly trained professionals whose top priority is striving to assure the safety of our children and families. There are entire county and state departments and local not-for-profit agencies that are thoroughly committed to providing services to families and children hoping to keep them safe and secure in their increasingly more complex and fragmented lives. There is also a steadily growing team of extremely challenged specialists who are charged with guarding those around us who just might not be in a safe place.

Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz recently said, "The worst days of my administration were on the days of the death of a child." Anyone reading the paper or watching television on any of those days still feels the truth in those words. He added, "We have a system that is stacked against children and stacked against CPS [Child Protective Services] workers."

These tragedies resulted in quick, thorough and decisive reviews of every CPS procedural facet. This analysis was actually embraced through the leadership of Erie County Department of Social Services Commissioner Carol Dankert-Maurer. This intense examination was swiftly followed with solid and practical legislative recommendations by Poloncarz. If implemented, these new laws will improve everyone's accountability and the overall well-being of our children.

We've all heard the saying that it takes a village to raise a child – especially today with our families facing greater stressors than perhaps any other time in our nation's history. It's not the village that is hurting these kids – we're all trying our best to stop it from ever occurring again.

On behalf of those of us who are truly dedicated to our children's safety and well-being, we are proud to share our community with our colleagues at Erie County. Thank you for all you have done, all you are doing and all you are still striving to do.

J. Mark Robinson is executive director and CEO of the Care Management Coalition of Western New York, which is led by Dennis Walczyk, president of the board of directors, Nancy Blaschak, Vito Borrello, LaTosha Bounds, James Coder, Douglas Fabian, Deborah Merrifield and Brenda McDuffie.

## Opinion

### **Letter: Back county proposals to improve child safety**

Updated: May 30, 2014, 04:10 PM Published: June 2, 2014, 12:01 AM

#### **Back county proposals to improve child safety**

In recent months, there has been a great deal of focus on Erie County Child Protective Services resulting from a number of child fatalities. Members of the community – legislators and citizens alike – have expressed a desire to improve the system in hopes of preventing future tragedies.

Recently the Western New York Citizen Review Panel – established through federal legislation for the purpose of assessing whether state and local agencies are effectively carrying out their child protection responsibilities – met with the Erie County commissioner of Social Services. We were pleased to learn that, with the support of the county executive, many steps have been taken to improve services, including measures to reduce the size of caseloads.

Protection of children is a communitywide responsibility, and we urge our local legislators to support measures that have been proposed that would improve the ability of child protection workers to intervene with troubled families and ensure the safety of children.

Ellen Kennedy

Chairwoman, Western New York

Citizen Review Panel

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# Opinion

## **Letter: Community plan needed to help keep children safe**

Updated: May 28, 2014, 02:23 PM Published: May 29, 2014, 12:01 AM

### **Community plan needed to help keep children safe**

In the wake of the most recent horrific child murder by the child's parent, we need to pour on support for our social services leader, Commissioner Carol Dankert-Maurer, and her Child Protection and entire Children's Services team. We, the community, both professional helpers and regular citizens, must stand ready to do whatever it takes to help them keep children safe.

We need a community plan for early, accurate identification of high-risk children and families and an array of gap-closing strategies to wrap around the family when CPS has been called in through the Albany Child Abuse Hotline. Each high-risk family needs a well-coordinated, ongoing support team in place as fast as possible to prevent a family's slide into actual or more serious maltreatment of a child. Everyone on this team needs to know the game plan and when the protection of the child, like a baton in a relay race, has been passed to them.

CPS has become the perceived and de facto "front door" for needed services for at-risk children and families, but in fact, the child and his parents need the help of many systems, such as mental health, plus all our help to provide for what these families need to keep their children safe. They need the eyes and ears and help of the community.

As chairwoman of WECAN (WNY Ending Child Abuse and Neglect), I'd be glad to take your call to lend a hand. Call the Family Help Center's Helpline at 892-2172.

Deborah A. Merrifield

Executive Director

Family Help Center

Buffalo

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