



Children in trouble: What's happened to ombudsman's office?

By Patriot-News Editorial Board

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Pennsylvania needs an ombudsman's office to help protect our children.

One of the reforms pushed after the horrible “kids for cash” case in Luzerne County became public was creation of a children’s ombudsman office in Pennsylvania.

The office would handle and investigate complaints related to abuses against children who are involved in government services and the justice system. It also could be the first contact when children are in trouble but not yet involved in the child welfare system.

But a year after the Luzerne County crimes broke nothing has formally happened with the idea. This should change quickly given not only the problems in that county but other issues statewide involving various aspects of child abuse.

The most recent case to stir many questions, and which might have benefited from such an office, is the beating death of Nathaniel Craver, 7, from Dillsburg. Many wonder why York County Children and Youth services briefly removed Nathaniel and his twin sister from their home but then returned them.

A proposal is being discussed by the state public welfare department for an ombudsman and Rep. Scott Petri, R-Bucks County, has introduced legislation, but so far there has been no action on either front.

Meanwhile, other states are moving forward with similar plans. Just last month, Colorado’s governor signed legislation creating the office. This brings to about 30 the number of states with ombudsmen to help children in trouble so they don’t get lost in the system.

One of the big complaints about the case involving the Luzerne County judges, who took kickbacks to send youth to certain juvenile centers, is that parents did not know where to turn for help. They knew something was wrong — especially when some saw their children didn’t even have legal representation in court — but sadly there was no state agency, no state office, no state advocate specifically tasked with looking into these types of complaints.

In this cost-conscious era of state budgeting, the price tag on such an office is still not clear but one proposal is an interesting model to explore. The state would create a public/private partnership. The office would be developed inside state government but contract with a private agency. This would mean no increase in state staff salaries or pension costs.

There are certainly private agencies in Pennsylvania that already are in the forefront of child protection. The Juvenile Law Center in Philadelphia, for example, was the organization that sparked the investigation into the Luzerne County judges, after all, not a state agency or judicial board.

This is an issue that deserves serious attention. Other states have realized they need a children's ombudsman office so abuses do not fall through the cracks. Pennsylvania should follow their lead.

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