



No More Danieals

WHAT SOME EXPERTS SAY ABOUT FIXING THE PROBLEM
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WHAT CAN be done to reduce the chances of another Danieal Kelly case? We asked some interested parties - and here's what they had to say:

Chad Lassiter, president, Black Men at Penn School of Social Work:

We need committed, compassionate workers who will go to any length to protect our most vulnerable population. That entails ongoing training to help prevent burnout. We have lots of workers working in DHS for extended periods of time who don't have the interest of young families at heart - and there are times when the old guard is threatened by a new infusion of energy. DHS will only be healed through a gradual progression. All change is from the ground up.

Frank P. Cervone, executive director, Support Center for Child Advocates:

For years, DHS has been an agency that does not routinely correct itself. In every professional and personal endeavor, the commitment to quality requires comfort with the uncomfortable: the hard question, the challenging standard, the critical eye. The Philadelphia child-welfare system needs the tools and the willingness to evaluate itself, including outcomes data that we can all understand and an attitude that improvement and growth are essential to mission. We also need external accountability, such as a children's ombudsman with subpoena power.

Phil Goldsmith, former city managing director:

What Mayor Nutter's doing is right - cultural change to the extent that it can be done has to be done by the mayor. This is coming early in his administration, but cultural change can take four to five years. If he can stay invested in it and committed to it long-term, that's an essential ingredient. Some issues are union-related, and require District Council 47 to be on board, to be done in a cooperative spirit. I don't think we can lose sight of the fact . . . that you have an issue of morale now. You're dealing with an agency that deals with the worse cases of neglect, of society's problems.

SaraKay Smullens, private-practice clinical social worker, family therapist and writer:

People who don't feel for these families can't do the work of helping them. I'm not sure you can teach compassion, so the people who work there have to really, really understand the pain and torment of the families they are working with. And they need enormous support from supervisory staff that comes with the pain and exhaustion of doing this kind of work. Spending millions on outside agencies doesn't provide it either. The people who do this work have to be supported or they will absolutely burn out.

Blondell Reynolds Brown, city councilwoman, co-chair of 2007 Commission on Children's Behavioral Health:

As a working mother and former teacher, I know the child's first teacher is their parent or caretaker. We need to remember that, when parents and caretakers do their job, DHS has less to do. Accountability has to be made clear to professionals in this business. It's the toughest of jobs, but that doesn't exempt them from being accountable. Therefore, training becomes extremely important.

Debra Wolfe, executive director, Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania:

The culture change is critical. Breaking that down, there needs to be an overriding systemic change. I was pleased to see the new commissioner is looking at it as a systematic failure, not just blaming individuals. Another key factor is the casework-supervision level. Frequently, that's the most important but overlooked area in the system. Supervisors need the training, the skills and the tools to do their job - to utilize technology. FedEx can tell you where a package is at every moment. Child welfare can't tell you where a child is. They are the most important packages that we have.