

**Washington County Children  
and Youth Services**

*A Parent's Handbook*



**Information About  
Rights and Responsibilities**

# Important Contact Information

## Your Caseworker

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

## Your Caseworker's Supervisor

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

## Other Important Team Members

**Name**

**Phone**

Name	Phone

## Washington County Children & Youth Services

Courthouse Square

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Washington, PA 15301

(724) 228-6884

Toll Free: 1 (888) 619-9906

## **Washington County Children and Youth Services Mission Statement**

Washington County Children and Youth Services is committed to the well-being of children and families. By empowering and engaging families and the community, safety and permanency can be achieved and all members can thrive.



It is the responsibility of the Agency to ensure that children have a safe, permanent home to grow. The Agency respectfully engages families by utilizing evidence-based interventions and community-based services to support families in safely caring for their children. If children are unable to remain safely at home, the Agency will provide a safe, temporary home for the children while assisting the parent(s)/guardian(s) to make the necessary changes to ensure a child(ren) safety, permanency, and well-being.

## **About this Booklet**

This booklet is provided to all families who are involved with Washington County Children and Youth Services (WCCYS). This booklet will assist you in navigating the child welfare system. It will provide you information regarding your rights as well as your responsibilities as you work with WCCYS. This book will also outline WCCYS's responsibilities in assisting your family to overcome life challenges you may be experiencing which initiated child welfare involvement.

If you have a question or concern throughout your involvement with the Agency, please talk with your WCCYS caseworker or your caseworker's supervisor. At any time throughout your involvement with WCCYS you may seek legal counsel. Please keep in mind that every family is different and some of the information contained in this book, such as "out-of-home" placement of children and involvement with the Court, may not necessarily pertain to your family or situation.

## **Why WCCYS is Involved with Your Family**

Washington County Children and Youth Services is the county government agency, set up by state law, with the duty of protecting children from abuse and neglect. For each report received, the Agency gathers additional information to determine if the report requires an

investigation by a WCCYS caseworker. An investigation occurs when a child is noted to be unsafe or at risk of harm.

### **What happens during an Investigation?**

When a family is accepted for assessment, a caseworker will complete an investigation to determine the facts of the report, assess the safety and well-being of your children, and decide if your family requires additional supports and services from WCCYS so you can maintain the safety and well-being of your children in your home.

The caseworker will need to walk through your home and talk with you and your child(ren). In addition, the caseworker will interview other individuals who may have information regarding the report. When appropriate, the caseworker will take photographs of any notable injuries to your child(ren) as well as the home environment. These photographs will be maintained in a case file along with any educational, physical, and/or behavioral health records provided. Therefore, you will be asked to sign a release of information form so your caseworker can receive up to date progress with all of the supports and services your family already receives.

The Agency has no more than 60 days to gather all of the necessary information and determine whether or not the allegations of abuse or neglect to your child(ren) is valid. In addition, a determination will be made if your family would require services only the Agency could provide to

maintain the safety and well-being of your children. If the allegations are determined to be invalid, your caseworker may suggest community resources to assist you with basic needs rather than the Agency and the case would close.

### **When Your Family is “Accepted for Services”**

If your family is Accepted for Services, you and your team: including your caseworker, service providers, and any additional supports you identify will develop a plan together that will highlight your strengths, identify challenges or problem areas and what needs to happen to solve the problems. This plan is called a Family Service Plan (FSP). The FSP is like a “roadmap” and will be the guide for you and your family throughout your involvement with the agency. Oftentimes the FSP is developed during a Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) meeting or a Family Team Conference (FTC). During these meetings, a trained facilitator works with you, your children, your supports, your caseworker, and service providers to identify an action plan for goals to be accomplished.

The FSP is required by law. It must be signed by you, children over the age of 14, your caseworker, and your caseworker’s supervisor. When you sign the plan, it means you are in agreement with the goals and action steps as outlined. If you do not agree with the plan, you do not have to sign it. Your caseworker will provide you with your rights to appeal the plan if you are not in agreement.

The FSP will be reviewed minimally every six months; however, certain circumstances require the Agency to review the FSP sooner. You have the right to request a review of your FSP at any time, particularly if you are experiencing barriers in achieving your identified goals. You will be provided with a copy of your FSP. It is important that you talk with your caseworker about your progress. It is also important that you notify your caseworker of any life changes such as moving to a new address, changing telephone numbers, or getting a new household member.

### **Appeals to the Department of Human Services**

The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Hearings and Appeals is responsible for reviewing certain decisions made by the agency. You have the right to appeal the following:

- **Accept for Services Decision**
- **Family Service Plan:** Your appeal must be submitted within 15 calendar days of receiving your written plan.
- **ChildLine Determinations:** You may appeal a “founded” or “substantiated” ChildLine determination if you are not in agreement that you abused a child.

Please talk with your caseworker or your attorney for additional information on how to appeal.

## **Services**

WCCYS strives to keep families together. Most families involved with WCCYS continue to live together. When a child is safe and living at home, the caseworker's job is to assist in providing the services necessary to preserve your family and prevent your child(ren) from being placed outside your home. The services you will receive depends on your family needs, what you request, and what a Judge may order. You may be asked to attend the following types of services in order to assess your needs further:

- Psychological Evaluations
- Interactional Evaluations
- Psychiatric Evaluations
- Parenting Evaluation and/or parenting classes
- Therapy or Counseling
- Drug and Alcohol Assessment and/or treatment

## **How Does My Case Get Closed?**

There are several factors that are taken into consideration prior to a case being closed. Positive progress with the goals listed on your Family Service Plan, continued demonstration of stability, lowering the risk and assuring safe permanency of your child(ren) without further WCCYS intervention lead to a successful case closure.

If you choose not to participate in services as outlined in your FSP and your child(ren) safety and well-being

declines or the risk increases, the Agency may file a petition in Juvenile Court to compel your participation and/or request your child(ren) be removed from your care if their safety is being jeopardized.

### **Out-of-Home Placement**

Washington County Children and Youth Services make every effort to keep children safely at home; however, sometimes it is determined that the children are unsafe remaining at home; therefore, recommendations are made to the Court for permission to remove a child from their parent(s) care.

You have an important role in helping Washington County Children and Youth Services decide where to place your child. Whenever possible, the Agency will place your child with a family member or friend who knows your child well and whom your child trusts. When children are placed with a family member or friend, this is known as a “kinship placement.” It is important that you provide your caseworker with the names, address and phone numbers of family/friends who may be willing to care for your child.

Sometimes it is not possible to place your child with a family/friend, in which case your child(ren) will live with a foster family or other more structured placement setting. The Agency always tries to place siblings together and will make every effort to try and keep them in their same school setting close to your home.

Whether or not your child is placed in a kinship placement, in a traditional foster home or other structured setting it is important to discuss any health and educational needs, medication, allergies, strengths, fears, and/or routines that may help to encourage a smoother transition for your child. Working in partnership with your child's foster parent/kinship caregiver is important. Having clear communication and advocating for your child as a united front is key to helping your child adjust to their new placement setting.

When your child(ren) enters out-of-home placement, a **Child Permanency Plan (CPP)** is developed. Similar to the Family Service Plan, the CPP lists your court ordered services, provides you with information regarding your child's placement location, educational, medical and mental health information, as well as the agreed upon visitation plan. The CPP will provide you with all the necessary information that you, as well as the Agency, is responsible for addressing so that your child(ren) can safely return to your care.

It is important, that you inform your caseworker, should you not understand something being asked of you or if you have any barriers that would prevent you from successfully being able to meet the goals. You will be asked to sign releases of information forms for all services addressed in the CPP so that your caseworker can speak with provider(s) to learn about your progress.

The CPP will be reviewed minimally every six months; however, certain circumstances require the Agency to

review the CPP sooner. You have the right to request a review of your child's CPP at any time, particularly if you are experiencing barriers in achieving your identified goals. You will be provided with a copy of the CPP.

## **The Courts**

Parents go to court for many reasons. If you are involved with Children and Youth Services and you are having to go to Family/Juvenile Court, the child welfare agency expressed concerns regarding the care and safety of your child and is requesting the court to intervene.

You have the right and are encouraged to be represented by an attorney at each Court hearing. If you do not have an attorney already, the Southwestern PA Legal Aide Services will determine if you qualify, based on set financial guidelines, for free legal representation by calling (724) 225-6170. It is your important that you arrange for an attorney as soon as you learn your first Court date. You should talk to your attorney and update them on your progress regularly so they can effectively represent you in court.

The Court will be making decisions about your family; therefore, it is important that you attend all court hearings. If you are physically unable to attend a court hearing in person you still have the right to participate and should discuss your options with your attorney.

Your child(ren) will be appointed a Guardian Ad Litem (G.A.L.) to represent the best interest of your child. Separate counsel may also be appointed to represent your child's wishes.

In certain situations, the Court will appoint a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to advocate for the best interest of your child(ren). CASA's talk with you, your child, family members and other person's involved in your child's life. CASA's will visit with your child on a monthly basis and prepare a report to the court of their recommendations.

**Types of Court Hearings:**

Shelter Care Hearing: When the court granted the Agency an emergency order to remove your child(ren) from your home, an emergency shelter care hearing must be heard within 72 hours of your child's removal to determine whether your child(ren) can be returned home or should remain in another setting until a full hearing is arranged.

Adjudication and Disposition Hearing (Dependency): The Agency files a request (petition) for court action stating the facts of the case. The Judge will examine the facts as presented by the agency, including the testimony of any witnesses. It is important for you to talk with your attorney prior to the hearing and present your facts and/or witnesses as well. This hearing must occur within 10 day of the petition if your child is in out-of-home placement. If your child is not in WCCYS custody, this hearing should be held within 45 days.

Permanency Review Hearing: After the Court finds your child to be “dependent”, the court will schedule hearings minimally every three months to review the following:

- **Progress** made toward correcting the conditions that occurred which required out-of-home placement of your child. The court will review the services in which you are participating, if additional services are necessary, and what needs to be accomplished before your child can return to your home.
- **Permanency Goal**: The Court will determine if the current goal is appropriate and decide if a new permanency goal needs to be set. \*see permanency section for more information
- **Reasonable Efforts**: The Court will determine if the Agency is making all efforts to help your family achieve safe permanency
- **Safety of your child**: The Court will always assess the safety of your child by listening to evidence presented by all parties regarding your child’s safety.

### **Maintaining Family Time (Visitation)**

Family Time (visitation) is a right for both you and your child. Maintaining your connection to your child is essential for your child’s well-being. There are numerous benefits to you maintaining family time with your child (ren):

- Supports parent-child attachment

- Eases the pain of separation for all
- Maintains and strengthens family relationships
- Reassures your child that you are alright and helps them to eliminate self-blame for their placement
- Provides opportunities for you to learn and try new skills
- Supports your child's adjustment to their foster home
- Enables you to be active and stay current with your child's development, educational and medical needs, church and community activities
- Provides opportunities for you to assess how your child is doing, and share information about how to meet their child's needs

The Family Time-Visitation plan will be developed with you, the kinship caregiver or foster parent, the Agency and the Court. The plan will outline parameters of the visit such as location, frequency, and if supervision during the visit is required. It is important that you discuss the plan with your attorney.

Unless restricted by the Court's order, Family Time will occur minimally every other week; however, the frequency and location of the visits should be agreed upon when developing the CPP. The visits can take place in various community settings, a home (yours or the caregivers), a provider's or the Agency office.

You are encouraged to bring games, activities and even food to your visits. It is important to take the time during your visit to put all of those new techniques that you have been learning into action. Take the time to read to your

child, play a game and teach them something new. Model for them good sportsmanship and how to follow rules. Have them help clean up before moving to a new activity. Explain to them what you are doing and why. Take time to praise them on their listening skills.

Unless restricted by Court order, you have the right to be notified and attend all of your child (ren) medical appointments, school meetings, school activities and other important events in their lives. It is important that you maintain contact with your caseworker and provide any changes in your phone number and/or address so you can be notified of important events regarding your child.

### **Permanency Goal**

Assuring that your child (ren) have permanent connections, secure attachments, and a forever home is the responsibility of everyone involved. Children achieve permanency by:

- **Staying Home:** Children achieve safe permanency while remaining in the home with their family's while supports and services are in place to address family needs.
- **Going Home:** When children are placed in out-of-home care, timely, robust supports and services must be in place to reduce the risk of harm and achieve safe reunification
- **Finding Home:** When efforts to reunify a child with their family are unsuccessful, despite supports and

services provided, the Agency must work diligently to locate a forever family to provide safe permanency through Adoption or Permanent Legal Custody.

In 1997 a law called The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed. ASFA requires that if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months and cannot safely return home, the Agency must recommend to the court an alternative permanent plan other than reunification. Although there are 5 recognized permanency goals, WCCYS strives for all children and youth to achieve legal permanency through Return Home (Reunification), Adoption, or Permanent Legal Custodianship. To ensure children achieve permanency in the required timeframes, concurrent planning is necessary. WCCYS must try to reunify your child with you, this is “Plan A”. At the same time that we are working together to achieve reunification, we must also create a “back-up plan” or a “Plan B”, this is called concurrent planning.

If the Judge decides that your child cannot safely return home, the second option the Judge must consider is Adoption. If the court decides adoption is the best permanency plan for your child, a Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) hearing will be scheduled.

If return home and adoption have been ruled out, the Judge will consider Permanent Legal Custodianship (PLC). The Judge will order for your child to remain in the permanent legal custody of a caregiver until your child reaches adulthood. Your parental rights would not be

terminated; however, the PLC caregiver will make all educational and medical decisions regarding your child.

Now that you know a little about permanency planning for your child, it is important that you:

- ✓ Realize that you are part of a team that will work together to help address the problems that lead to the placement of your child
- ✓ Talk with your caseworker often about your progress in meeting the goals of your case plan
- ✓ Tell your caseworker if you don't understand something and ask for it to be explained in a different way
- ✓ Tell your caseworker if you need help getting access to the services needed to work on your case plan
- ✓ Go to and actively participate in all visits with your child
- ✓ Share information about your child with the relative caregiver or foster family
- ✓ Stay involved with your child's school, medical providers, and other professionals working with them
- ✓ Meet with your attorney regularly to share information about your case and ensure this information gets shared with the judge
- ✓ Attend all court hearings and meetings
- ✓ Ask family members and others who care about you and your child to help, to attend family group

meetings and to consider being a caregiver for your child.

## **Who is on my Team that will Help Me**

The main person that will assist you from WCCYS is your caseworker. Your caseworker will be visiting your home, talking with your family, assisting you in developing your case plan, connecting you with supports and services, and answering questions you may have throughout your involvement with the agency.

Other individuals may join your team at various points throughout your involvement and depending on the individual circumstances of your case. These individuals include: Attorneys, Judge/Hearing Officer, CASA worker, Service Providers, and Foster/Kinship Caregivers. Each of these individuals share your common goal, to act in the best interest of your child!



## **Your Child's Rights**

All children involved with WCCYS have the right to:

- Be protected from abuse and neglect
- Be treated fairly and equally, whatever their gender identity, race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, disability, medical concern, or sexual orientation and be addressed by the gender pronouns they prefer
- Have basic needs met (food, clothing, shelter, health/vision/dental care, therapeutic services and education)
- Participate in “normal” childhood activities
- To have space to store clothing and belongings
- To report abuse, neglect, exploitation, or violation of my personal rights without fear of punishment or coercion
- To have their rights explained to them in an age and developmentally appropriate way
- To participate in meetings and court hearings (if age and developmentally appropriate)
- To attend school
- To be placed with siblings when possible
- To have regular and frequent contact with parents and siblings
- To speak privately to their caseworker, attorney, CASA, Guardian ad Litem

## **A Parent's Rights**

Just because you are involved with WCCYS does not mean that you lose your rights as a parent, despite if your child remains in your care or not. Every parent who receives services has the right to:

- Be treated with respect and not discriminated against based on race, age, gender, religion, ethnic origin, economic status, or sexual orientation.
- Privacy and confidentiality (within the limits set by the law)
- Receive notification and understand the reason your family is involved with WCCYS
- Receive all Family Service Plans/Child Permanency Plans created throughout the life of your case involvement
- Receive all notices for meetings and Court proceedings
- Receive all Court Orders
- Have your attorney represent you or a spokesperson of your choice during any meeting with your caseworker
- Have your attorney review and inspect all records and documents
- Appeal certain determinations made by the Agency to the PA Department of Public Welfare
- Receive services timely

## **A Parent's Rights When your Child is Placed in Out-of-Home care**

If your child is placed in out-of-home care, you have the right to:

- Receive notice of your child's placement location
- Be informed of any changes to your child's placement location
- Attend your child's physical and behavioral health appointments, educational meetings, and community activities (unless limited by court order)
- Spend Family Time-Visitation time with your child as outlined in the CPP or by Court Order
- To have your attorney present for Judicial proceedings and meetings
- Be consulted and make decisions about your child's
  - Religion
  - Education Needs (I.E.P)
  - Hospitalizations and/or medical and surgical treatment
  - Giving photos or information about your child for publication or media purposes

**Rights regarding Safety Plans:** Safety plans are a tool to assist parents or legal guardians to manage and control the immediate threats of harm to their child(ren) and allow the child(ren) to remain in the home or the care of their family or kin, without involvement of the Juvenile Court.

As such when a safety plan is being considered you have the right to:

1. Voluntarily agree to enter into a safety plan
2. Refuse to enter into a safety plan
3. End a safety plan
4. Consult with an attorney regarding whether or not you choose to enter into a safety plan or chose to end a safety plan

### **A Parent's Responsibilities**

As with any parent, you are responsible for:

- Helping to pay your child's care. When your child enters out-of-home placement, you contribute to the cost of the placement.
- Be present in Court for all hearing and follow all Court orders
- Achieve the goals outlined on your FSP/ CPP within a reasonable time as allowed by law
- Identify Family Supports for possible placement options and/or connections
- Remain in contact with your child and attend all appointments and activities that involve your child
- Provide your caseworker with any information about changes in your life, including telephone numbers, address, marital status, your employment, and household status (if someone moves into your home).

## **WCCYS Responsibilities**

- Protect children from abuse and neglect
- Provide for a child's safety, health, and nurturing
- Plan for a permanent home for your child
- Place children with family whenever possible
- Try to keep children in their same school
- Visit with children in their home or placement at least every 30 days
- Be respectful and Courteous
- Continuously assess your family's needs
- Meet with you in your home
- Plan for appropriate services that will assist your family
- Arrange for regular visits with your child
- Involve you in all planning regarding your family
- Obey all court orders and report the facts to the court
- Protect your family's confidentiality
- Report all concerns of child abuse

## **Index**

Important Contact Information	2
Mission of WCCYS	3
About this Booklet	4
Why WCCYS is Involved with Your Family	4
What Happens During an Investigation	5
When Your Family Is Accepted for Services	6
Appeal of WCCYS Determinations	7
Services/Family Service Plan	8
How Does My Case Get Closed	8
Out-of-Home Placement	9
Child Permanency Plan	10
The Courts	11
Types of Hearings	12
Maintaining Family Time/Visitation	13
Permanency Goal	15
Concurrent Planning	16
Who is Part of Your Team	18
Your Child's Rights	19
A Parent's Rights	20
A Parent's Rights When Your Child is Placed	21
A Parent's Responsibilities	22
WCCYS Responsibilities	23

A Special Thank You to the Washington County Children and Youth Services Caseworker III's for your time and dedication in the development of this handbook.



This book is intended for educational and informational purposes only. Nothing contained in this book shall be considered legal advice for specific cases.