



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES

COMMISSIONER
H. L. Whitman, Jr.

July 5, 2016

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Office of the Governor
P. O. Box 12428
Austin, Texas 78711-2428

Dear Governor Abbott:

It is a distinct honor and privilege to report to you on my first two months as Commissioner of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). At our first meeting, you made it abundantly clear that your focus - and, therefore, my charge - is to improve the Texas child welfare system and Child Protective Services (CPS). There are positive efforts under way to protect children, and I see an agency desperate to do great work.

But more must be done, and quickly. Here is my 10-point plan for CPS:

- 1) The core mission of CPS is to do whatever it takes to protect Texas children from abuse and neglect. That mission must be carried out without failure, and with a new culture of accountability in the entire organization. CPS front-line caseworkers must have the training and resources to respond quickly and do what is necessary to protect our children. Their supervisors must ensure cases are handled correctly, and *their* managers must have complete command of the children on their watch. When a child is injured or killed, we must dissect that case and learn from it - but also make employees accountable.
- 2) The ten CPS regional directors must re-apply for their jobs. The CPS regional director must be a top leader, administrator, teacher/trainer, and primary local representative with elected officials, the judiciary, and stakeholders. The agency's performance will improve - and Texas children will be safer - once we ensure the right people are in these key jobs and they are held accountable for the performance within their regions.
- 3) We lack adequate high-quality capacity in the foster care system, particularly for high-needs children. Many children suffer from trauma and mental illness, emotional/behavior health problems, or are medically fragile from what they have experienced. Our system must be strengthened to take special care of these children who through no fault of their own are now

the state's responsibility. We must engage all providers, judges, and community partners to help, and we must lead the effort with creativity and innovation.

- 4) CPS Transformation, the overhaul launched in 2014, should continue because it improves the ability of our caseworkers to succeed in protecting children, and frees workers to spend more time with families. An example of this is the CPS Practice Model and Structured Decision-Making. These tools give the worker the ability to assess a family situation and make the best decision. And because survey after survey has shown caseworkers are frustrated by their working conditions and work environment, we must continue to work hard through the Transformation process to ensure that local managers treat employees with dignity and respect.
- 5) CPS needs a sharper focus on the critical first few hours when a worker gets an assignment, reviews it, and first visits a home. In partnership with the Texas Department of Public Safety, we will develop a team of information analysts to gather information about the household for a caseworker. A CPS investigator responding to a new report will now have up-to-date information about the criminal history of any household member; this will help the investigator in the decision-making process. This program is being piloted now in Williamson County.
- 6) The role of CPS Special Investigators (SI) is under review to ensure we take full advantage of their law enforcement background and much-needed skillset to improve CPS investigations. Our investigators lack forensic training so I will ensure all 146 SIs get top-notch forensic training by September 1. They will then be given the specific assignment to train all CPS investigative caseworkers in their regions.
- 7) We must bring Texas' vibrant faith-based community - we must bring God - into the child welfare tent. Frankly, we need the help. While there have been some faith-based efforts under way at CPS, we must ramp up those efforts, particularly in the areas of prevention, foster care, and adoption.
- 8) The many thousands of children who are in state conservatorship deserve the highest quality of care. To that end, I am ramping up the state's investment in performance-based outcomes for foster care. We must rejuvenate and aggressively expand our Foster Care Redesign program. Results from our current contract are impressive: placements are more stable; brothers and sisters are staying together; and the provider network is at an all-time high in both quality and quantity. I will expand to the next catchment area while informing all providers that the state must have performance-based contracting.
- 9) Texas children are at risk due to the cruel tenacity of human traffickers, and I can assure you that battling this scourge will continue to be one of this agency's top priorities. CPS has a

The Honorable Greg Abbott
July 5, 2016
Page 3

specialized intake protocol for trafficking reports, workers are trained to recognize the signs of human trafficking, and trafficking victims receive special services. We will maintain our sharp focus and continue to work with other organizations on this important issue.

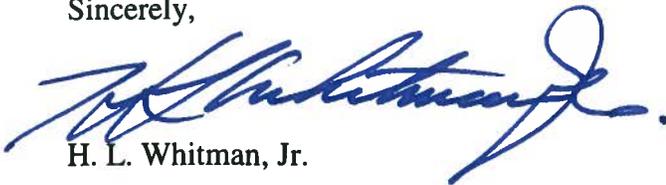
- 10) The single best way to protect a young child from abuse or neglect is to provide young parents with the tools and resources to build a safe, healthy household - and avoid CPS involvement. Prevention is key, and our Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) programs must be expanded and strengthened. PEI programs are community-based and targeted to families most at risk. These programs are taking hold in communities and we are working hard to divert families from the child welfare system.

The issues I am bringing to you today are challenging, and we have much work to do, but with your support and that of the Texas Legislature we can begin to make CPS what it should be: the protector of Texas children.

And while I have great respect for the DFPS workforce, the era of business as usual at this agency has ended. Those who do not share our vision for children first no longer have a place here. You have tasked me with an awesome job and I will work hard to deliver on your expectations.

While this is a start, in the coming months I will be offering more specific details and progress reports as we approach the kickoff of the 85th Legislature.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "H. L. Whitman, Jr.", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

H. L. Whitman, Jr.