



A Salute to Child Protective Specialists in New York City

By Mary L. Pulido 06/03/2018

An amazing event is occurring in New York City. The Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services, David Hansell, is holding a Citywide Week of Appreciation for Child Protective Specialists — the 2,000 plus women and men who are front-line first responders when children are reported abused or neglected. In my opinion, this is long overdue and MUCH needed. As the leader of the first child protection agency in the world, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, I salute these dedicated workers who give their all to ensuring the safety and well-being of children.

Child Protective Specialists (CPS) respond directly to reports of child abuse and/or neglect. Using investigatory and social work skills, they engage and partner with families and community resources to ensure the safety and well-being of children throughout New York City. In 2017, they investigated over 60,000 reports of alleged child abuse and neglect. I hope that the general public can appreciate how challenging this work can be, and how crucial it is to preventing further harm to innocent children.

Responding to the cases that are reported, CPS staff have non-stop demands. The investigations can be very complicated, time-sensitive, anxiety provoking and at times downright dangerous. Workers have told me of violent threats against them when they attempted to remove a child. I know of cases in which staff have been attacked by dogs in the household they were visiting, shot at by family members, pushed down flights of stairs, threatened with knives and stalked. They are doing their work with the vision and mission to protect children. The perils of their job rarely make the news, but it comes with the territory and often, they need to go back to these homes and neighborhoods to complete their work. I know there are days when they feel like they've had enough, but thankfully, most hang in there.

The stress level that Child Protective Service workers endure is daunting. The impact of exposure to others' pain and suffering must be acknowledged. Staff may experience secondary traumatic stress symptoms too. For those of us involved in child protection, we probably understood in general the personal fortitude needed and risks involved when we signed on. But, more often than not, we didn't realize how deeply we could be impacted by bearing constant witness to the intense suffering of children. It takes a very strong and determined professional to do this work day in and day out.

My agency supports these courageous workers with crisis debriefing sessions following critical incidents that occur on the job. I've met hundreds of them over the course of my career and each time I leave their office, I am so thankful that they are there to protect our city's most vulnerable children, day in and day out.

CPS staff care deeply about the children and families that are on their caseload. I have the privilege of hearing about many of the "prideful moments" of child protective specialists from New York City in the debriefing sessions and other trainings provided by The NYSPCC. Children being reunited with their parents after a removal for neglect, a mother finally entering a substance abuse program, a letter written by a grateful grandmother following the kinship placement of her grandson, a failure-to-thrive baby reaching developmental milestones, an adolescent showing up at a CPS office to say "thank you" to the worker for "being there" and a domestic violence survivor sending a card to a worker letting him know that she had the

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strength to leave her abusive partner, are just a few of the countless examples. One that really stayed with me was about a little girl who held a CPS workers hand during a removal and whispered how she wanted the CPS to make sure that she took her when she left the home.

Child Protective Specialists are depended upon to protect children at risk — that is the mission. The public tends to hold them accountable when child abuse and neglect occurs. However, it's important to realize that the parents and guardians of children who are abused and neglected are often struggling themselves. Risk factors include mental illness, histories of their own childhood trauma, unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, crime-ridden neighborhoods, poverty and substandard housing — this certainly doesn't excuse harming children, but it clarifies why no single government agency acting alone can address all of these issues. Ideally, a trauma-informed, collaborative, care-coordinated response that includes medical/mental health, substance abuse treatment, child protective services, education, law enforcement and housing services should be involved. Communities, neighbors and families could further strengthen this safety net for children at risk. Everyone must be involved in protecting children. These concerns are echoed in the recently released 2016 Final Report of the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities.

We need and rely on the Child Protective Specialist workers who do this job, day in and day out. But, let's all make a pledge to get involved too. Learn the signs and symptoms of child abuse and neglect and how to make a report. You may save a child's life.

For more information on keeping children safe, visit NYSPPCC.org

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