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# The Legal Intelligencer

## Pennsylvania Pioneer of Family Welfare Policy to Retire After 3 Decades of Service

*“It’s hard to get it right when it comes to people and what they need,” said Frank Cervone, executive director of the Support Center for Child Advocates. “We never get it entirely right; we never get it done.”*

by Aleeza Furman, Litigation Reporter



### ***What You Need to Know***

- *Frank Cervone, executive director of the Support Center for Child Advocates, is set to retire after 33 years with the agency.*
- *Cervone is recognized as a leader in the development of child welfare policy and practices.*
- *Cervone said effectively advocating for children on a systemic level requires an understanding how to gauge success.*

The same month Frank Cervone got his start in the Support Center for Child Advocates, the organization helped spark a major legal battle against the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare and other related agencies.

Cervone said that what followed was 11 years of litigation to improve the child welfare system. The federal class action, filed by the ACLU and Drinker Biddle & Reath, sought to remedy the state’s failure to provide for abused and neglected children.

The result of the case, *Baby Neal v. Casey*, was a mixed success, Cervone said, but so are most efforts to affect positive systemic change.

Figuring out how to gauge the impact of good intentions has been a cornerstone of Cervone’s SCCA career, which is set to come to a close with his retirement at the end of June.

“Data and outcomes matter. Otherwise, we’re just making it up,” he said. “In human services, we’re attracted to the latest good idea. Somebody cooks up an idea, and then we launch it and try it and we look back 10 years later and say, ‘Wow, look at the damage we did.’”

### **‘Caseload is a Proxy for Quality’**

Cervone is retiring after 33 years with the SCCA, the last 31 of which he served as the organization’s executive director. He is the longest-serving of the five executive directors to lead the center since its 1977 inception.

According to a statement from Jeffrey Sotland, president of the center’s board of directors, the SCCA grew under Cervone’s leadership to be the largest pro bono legal services program for children in the

country.

“Frank has been a local and national leader in advancing policy and practices for children and families for decades. He has been a driving force helping to shape policy related to juvenile court procedural rules,” Sotland said.

Cervone said that the child welfare system was broken when he joined as counsel in 1990. “They literally didn’t know where their kids were housed or who was caring for them,” he said.

According to Cervone, the class action that marked his early career helped to change that.

Among the other shortcomings of the child welfare system in the ’90s was a lack of standards for legal representation, Cervone said. To address the issue, he served as a member of a drafting team that developed the first-ever national standards of practice for representing children. He later co-led the National Children’s Law Network and created the first national database of outcomes in children’s law practice.

Part of developing that database was determining how to measure something as complex and subjective as a child’s well-being.

“You’re always looking for proxies for what success looks like at the macro level,” Cervone said. “In our work, caseload is a proxy for quality.”

Cervone said the number of cases workers handle at a given time reflects the level of care they can provide to each child.

By that metric, the SCCA has made significant progress in recent years. According to Cervone, SCCA’s full-time workers are now each responsible for about 50 children, compared to the over 100-children-per-worker ratio the center had when he first joined. He said the organization has some of the lowest caseload ratios of any advocacy agency in the United States.

Still, he said, the numbers are not as low as they could be. The SCCA still faces the resource constraints that plague so many public interest agencies, both in terms of funds and the pro bono work necessary to keep the center’s volunteer-driven model functioning, Cervone said.

### **The Next Leader**

“It’s hard to get it right when it comes to people and what they need,” Cervone said. “We never get it entirely right; we never get it done.”

The task of “getting it right” next falls to Lisa Rayford Barrimond, who is set to serve as interim executive director as the agency searches for a permanent replacement. Barrimond has been the office’s managing attorney since 2021, but her history with the center extends back to an internship in 1998.

She said Cervone has always been at the forefront of child advocacy work, developing policy change, serving on court rules committees, and writing articles. “I don’t think that really there’s anyone who can touch Frank’s legacy in child welfare,” Barrimond said.

As for the next leader of the SCCA, Barrimond said the agency needs someone who is not only qualified but excited to take on the role.

Cervone said the face of the agency is evolving and becoming more diverse. “The leadership team is refreshed and new, and, you know, that’s what organizations like ours have to do. You have to stay vital,” he said, joking that the SCCA spent a little too much time keeping him around.

Cervone added: “It’s time to embrace the future of it all.”