

Good morning. I'm Lise Kennedy, a resident of Neversink. I read the report of the Grand Jury and would like to comment on a few of the issues that it raised for me. First, the grand jury absolutely exonerates the CPS unit, although the OCFS report that was released last year did detail many problems with their paperwork. The Grand Jury report described how the incidence of child removals substantially decreased during the last two years, but that was never reported by the Commissioner, either verbally or in the monthly reports for this committee. About a year ago, I asked him privately why the number of children in foster care reported always remained static at around 106, instead of rising and falling as one could reasonably expect, especially since there had been a backlog of legal cases due to the pandemic. He answered me that as children left foster care, others were placed there. On the contrary, the Grand Jury report says that many fewer children were removed from their unsafe homes in the last few years, so the numbers in foster care should have decreased as other foster kids were released from placement. The grand jury report also states that 50% of foster care costs are paid by federal funds. When I asked Mr. Liddle if money was the reason that the number of children in foster care in Sullivan County never seemed to increase or decrease, he absolutely denied it. I suspect that perhaps there was an unofficial cap on the number of children which were allowed to be removed in order not to increase the numbers in foster care. Sullivan County does not have enough foster homes, so as many as half of the kids, last I heard, were placed out of county. I can't think what else other than money, ideology or sheer incompetence could have made our County Attorney's office ignore the gravity of danger facing the children described in the Grand Jury report.

During the last four years, it took a lot of tapdancing to stay employed in upper management positions, but even so, I don't like being lied to by omission in a report that is for the public's information. Children died and many more than those in the Grand jury report were traumatized and damaged, but all the public heard about was the staff shortages and meetings about pillars until Akasha Lovert died 10 months ago. During the last four years, the legislature struggled under the leadership of a group who regarded human services and public health as a joke. Many experienced staff left while our health and human services were terribly depleted, as described in the Grand Jury report which states that the numbers of public health nurses have fallen from 27 to 7. That information is also missing from the monthly reports to this committee, which details vacancies but not turnover or retention rates. The vacancy rate at Public Health is 29% as of today's report. We've heard volumes about the

difficulties of recruiting staff, but retaining staff involves a level of managerial skills that hasn't been cultivated over the last four years.

Of course, Public Health nurses alone can't perform miracles in homes that are so severely disrupted by substance abuse and mental illness. Other programs that are appropriate for these times should be invested in, as the county invested in Public Health's Healthy Families and Community Health Worker programs after the horrific death of Christopher Gardner 20 plus years ago. Neither of those wonderful primary preventive programs are effective for the very heavy lifting required to protect children living in homes with parents who are actively using. That is the task of the CPS unit, and they need our support to do their difficult jobs. In the wake of the preventable death of Akasha, we need to step it up. The drug task force can develop a new subcommittee about Sullivan County having the highest incidence by far of babies born with positive toxicology, but these will be the same people who were already in that pillar for the last 3 years, while struggling to maintain existing services with dwindling staffing and lack of concrete support from above. This committee and legislature must have a real commitment to funding new initiatives and public resources. Thank you.