

**NEWS from the North Dakota Department of Human Services
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N.D. Department of Human Services Executive Director Carol K. Olson Retires

BISMARCK, N.D. – The N.D. Department of Human Services Executive Director Carol K. Olson has left an indelible mark on state government – especially the executive branch. Olson is retiring from public service on Friday, Aug. 17, 2012.

She retires as the longest serving state human services agency executive in the country. During her career she also earned the distinction of being the first female chief of staff for a North Dakota governor (1993–1997) and the first female to lead and manage the state’s largest agency (1997–present).

“Carol’s contributions as a public servant and leader in the area of human services are greatly appreciated,” said Governor Jack Dalrymple. “During the past 15 years, she has reshaped the provision of human services to effectively meet the needs of North Dakotans in a responsible way.”

Olson said working in public service in the Department of Human Services has been the most gratifying part of her career because of her passion for people. The agency, she said, serves about one in five North Dakotans – many are the state’s most vulnerable residents.

“Human Services is first and foremost about meeting the needs of people. Most of the Department’s resources are tied to health care services and related financing and policy,” Olson said. “The remaining 40 percent of our work is everything else: other services for people with disabilities, the elderly, low-income pregnant women, and low-income children, many of whom are deprived of the support of one parent.”

Olson said she is proud of strides the Department and state have made in shifting services for people with disabilities from institutions to community settings.

“We have maintained the safety net, while shifting the emphasis on serving people with disabilities in their homes and communities. This is important for people’s quality of life, and this work needs to continue,” Olson said.

During her tenure, the average daily patient census at the State Hospital’s traditional services area decreased by half, as different levels of care and supportive services in the community were developed, bolstered by contracts with local service providers including hospitals. The number of residents at the State Developmental Center also fell by one third, and the Department continues to work with stakeholders on its Transition Task Force to help more residents move to community living. To date, the Department’s Money Follows the Person grant, which involves the Centers for Independent Living and other partners, has helped 112 Medicaid-eligible individuals move from institutions, including nursing homes, to the community.

Under Olson’s leadership the Department implemented evidence-based practices that are providing effective treatment and recovery support to people affected by chronic addiction, methamphetamine addiction, and serious mental illness.

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North Dakota's welfare caseload has fallen 56 percent since Olson's appointment in 1997 due in part to economic growth and efforts to craft a program that rewards work and assists with job searches, work readiness, training, and education to help families become more self-sufficient. North Dakota's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program has one of the highest work participation rates in the country. In May, 1,677 low-income North Dakota families with children received TANF.

Olson credits staff for achieving federal performance bonuses and recognition. For example, she said, North Dakota's Child Support Enforcement Program has evolved into the second best program in the country based on federal performance measures and industry recognition. The division also received national and regional awards for collaborating with TANF, Job Service N.D., and the courts to create the Parental Responsibility Initiative for the Development of Employment (PRIDE) program. PRIDE addresses the unemployment and under-employment of non-custodial parents who are behind in court-ordered obligations so that they can better support their children.

Last year alone, annual IV-D collections – child support collected on cases where a family receives TANF or Medicaid, or has a child placed in foster care, or applied for services – totaled \$94 million. Nearly 90 percent of child support collections are paid directly to families to promote self-sufficiency and reduce public assistance needs. The remainder goes to other jurisdictions or is retained to offset public assistance costs. During Olson's 15 years at the Department, Child Support has collected \$1.5 billion in court-ordered support for children.

Olson said she is also proud of the support Department staff have provided in disaster recovery efforts. Staff, she said, have not only worked to assure vulnerable clients were safe and receiving needed supports and services, staff also represented the state on federal preliminary damage assessment teams, and helped support the sheltering and mass care for people evacuated due to disasters. In addition, staff provided mental health services and other support to state residents whose homes, property, and livelihoods were impacted by natural disasters, and helped affected service providers with costs associated with interruptions in their services to Medicaid clients and other department clients.

Commenting on Department accomplishments and the future, Olson said "There is a terrific management team in place and the best staff."

Olson has two daughters and four grandchildren. She said she is looking forward to spending more time with them.

The Department of Human Services employs about 2,100 people, many in direct care and treatment-related fields, and has a 2011-2013 budget of \$2.6 billion dollars.

Carol K. Olson's Background

Prior to joining Human Services, Olson served as Schafer's chief of staff from 1993 to 1997 and also managed the health and human services portfolio in the Governor's Office. Schafer appointed Olson executive director of the Department of Human Services July 1, 1997, and she assumed her responsibilities July 15. Governor John Hoeven reappointed Olson the agency's executive director and she has continued to serve in that role in Governor Jack Dalrymple's administration.

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