

**NEWS from the North Dakota Department of Human Services  
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**Normalcy and Collaboration: Keys to Success for Foster Care Youth**  
*Gov. Dalrymple proclaims May as Children's Foster Care Month*

BISMARCK, N.D. – Playing sports, driving a car, or having a cellphone are typical teenager activities that help them develop interests, skills, and long-lasting relationships. But some youth in foster care do not always get to participate in these everyday activities or have the same opportunities and freedoms that their peers do.

One former foster youth, Chris Rickabaugh, now 21, credits his foster parents and other child welfare professionals who worked together to meet his needs and helped him lead a normal teenage life.

A three-sport athlete excelling in high school football, basketball, and track, Rickabaugh said, "As long as I did not take advantage of my privileges, I was able to be a normal teen – go to school, do my sports, and drive home."

The cornerstone of the collaborative effort involving youth in foster care is quarterly child and family team meetings. These meetings involve birth and foster parents, family members, county caseworkers, independent living coordinators, school personnel, therapists, and other professionals who provide support to the foster youth. Foster youths who are 14 years of age and older are encouraged to lead their own meetings and invite additional members, like friends, to be a part of their care team.

"Having the meeting once every three months and hearing 'Good job: Keep it up.' It was nice and positive," said Rickabaugh. "It helped me think about the future and plan ahead."

As part of a child and family team meeting, a youth creates a detailed plan that outlines his or her independent living goals that will help the youth transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency.

Rickabaugh's independent living coordinator from PATH Inc., Stephanie Caspers, said, "I like to turn it over to the youth and let them speak about their independent living experience and what their needs are. It is very empowering to be a part of your own plan."

The North Dakota Department of Human Services contracts with PATH Inc. to assist foster youth, like Rickabaugh, with independent living planning and services.

Dean Sturn, foster care administrator with the North Dakota Department of Human Services, said in addition to the collaboration between individuals involved in a foster youth's life, there are also other programs that can help them transition to adulthood including the 18+ Continued Foster Care Program, Chafee Independent Living program, and Education and Training Voucher program.

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One other major support that Rickabaugh is thankful for is health care coverage through Medicaid. Provisions of the Affordable Care Act made Medicaid coverage available to youth who age-out of North Dakota foster care until they reach age 26.

Rickabaugh did not let the label of being a foster youth stop him from achieving great things. He was selected by the Department of Human Services to represent the state's foster youth in Washington D.C. He was able to assist foster youth nationwide by participating in an effort to raise awareness and momentum for legislative action that would best support the needs of children and youth in foster care. He also has been an active member of the North Dakota Youth Leadership Board for the past five years.

As a way to give back to the many people who have helped him, Rickabaugh plans to continue to advocate for foster youth by participating in various public speaking engagements.

"I can't thank my foster parents enough and everybody in the child welfare system for their hard work and dedication. I respect them so much because they were able to help me turn my life around," said Rickabaugh.

Sturn said there are about 1,386 children and youth living in about 755 licensed family foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, and approved tribal foster homes.

The Department of Human Services licenses all family foster care homes and group care facilities to maintain a standard of safety and well-being for the children in care.

Individuals interested in becoming licensed to provide foster care to children and youth in their home should contact their local county social services office. Contact information is online at [www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/countysocialserv/](http://www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/countysocialserv/). People can also call PATH Inc. at 877-766-PATH or [www.pathinc.org](http://www.pathinc.org).

Information is also available at [www.nd.gov/dhs/services/childfamily/fostercare/](http://www.nd.gov/dhs/services/childfamily/fostercare/) or by calling 701-328-2316, toll-free 800-245-3736 or Relay ND TTY 800-366-6888.

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