

NEWS RELEASE | **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** | August 3, 2020

Initiative to prevent children from entering foster care and to encourage family engagement expands statewide

BISMARCK, N.D. – About 1,600 North Dakota children and youth are in foster care on a given day. To reduce those numbers, the North Dakota Department of Human Services' Children and Family Services Division and its partners have expanded Family Centered Engagement meetings statewide.

This service, which involves meeting collaboratively and engaging with families earlier to support safety, permanency and well-being of their children, is available to families being served in the child welfare system through the 19 human service zones. Children dually involved in both the child welfare and the juvenile justice system are also eligible for the statewide service.

During the pandemic, meetings with families are being held via private teleconference and video conference solutions.

Initially available in Burleigh, Grand Forks, Mercer, McLean, Oliver, Sheridan and Stutsman counties, Family Centered Engagement meetings are part of a larger social service redesign of the child welfare system in North Dakota that focuses on child safety, while shifting more resources to intervene earlier and prevent out-of-home placement when possible.

The approach is showing positive results. At the six-month follow-up, almost 77 percent of children in families who participated remained safely in the home with their parents rather than being removed or placed into foster care.

"The meeting sets the stage for how we partner to support children and families receiving services in the child welfare system. This collaborative approach empowers and engages families," said Tracy Miller, the department's family preservation administrator.

A Family Centered Engagement meeting is led by a trained, neutral facilitator from The Village Family Service Center. Meeting participants may include children, parents, caregivers, extended family members, case workers, services providers, juvenile court staff, teachers and others involved in a child's life. Families leave the meeting with a written action plan that outlines their goals, expectations and a safe plan for their children.

Miller said, North Dakota has a long history of providing engagement and decision-making strategies for families, such as Family Team Decision Making and Family Group Decision Making. Family Centered Engagement was developed with consultants to blend the most effective elements of these earlier models together and began on a limited basis in select North Dakota counties in 2018.

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For more information, contact Jessica Sorenson at The Village Family Service Center in Bismarck at 701-551-2509 or Tracy Miller at the department's Children and Family Services Division at 701-328-2316, toll-free 800-245-3736, 711 (TTY) or tramiller@nd.gov.

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