

NEWS from the North Dakota Department of Human Services
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Individuals honored at child welfare conference

BISMARCK, N.D. – Seven individuals were honored in Bismarck by child welfare professionals, foster parents, and others attending the North Dakota Department of Human Services’ annual Children and Family Services Conference.

“North Dakota’s child welfare system focuses on ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children,” said Paul Ronningen, director of the department’s Children and Family Services Division. “It is challenging work, and each year we seek nominations of exemplary individuals and recognize them for their dedication to making a difference in the lives of others.”

Honorees include:

Linda Ebel, a social worker employed by Stutsman County Social Services in **Jamestown, N.D.**, received the *Outstanding Case Manager* award. Ebel was nominated by colleagues, as well as foster parents and juvenile court officials, for her extraordinary commitment to children and families. The award criteria also requires the recipient to demonstrate leadership, initiative, innovation, and the ability to develop positive relationships with children and families and serve as an effective advocate on behalf of children, teens, and families.

Attorney **Sandra Kuntz** of Mackoff, Kellogg, Kirby & Kloster in **Dickinson, N.D.**, received the *Outstanding Legal Advocate of the Year* award. Kuntz was nominated by county social service staff for her efforts to meet the individual needs of children while working to protect their rights and address their permanency needs. Award recipients must work effectively with the child welfare system toward family reunification or other appropriate permanent planned living arrangements and must demonstrate leadership, commitment, and effective advocacy.

Licensed foster parent **Pamela Carlson** of **Grand Forks, N.D.**, received the *Outstanding Foster-Adopt Parent* award. Local social services staff nominated Carlson who has accepted 26 placements ranging in duration from overnight to several years and who ultimately adopted one of the children in her care. Nominators said Carlson is committed to working as a team with others involved in foster children’s lives. They said, “she encourages relationships between children and their birth families and understands that foster care is a commitment to be meaningful in a child’s lifetime.”

Jon and Carol Mielke of **Bismarck, N.D.**, received the *Outstanding Foster Parent* award. As licensed foster parents, they currently care for an infant and a toddler. Nominators praised them for being active team members and for supporting and respecting birth families and welcoming them into their own home.

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In addition to honoring people who provide child welfare services, conference organizers also recognized two very inspirational young people. **Alexandria Nyhusmoen** of the **Devils Lake** region received the *Outstanding Foster Youth* award, and **Sean Kurta** of the **Bismarck** area, was awarded the *Outstanding Former Foster Youth* award. The two teens were recognized for self-improvement and goal achievement, leadership skills, advocating for the needs of foster youth, supporting peers, and presenting a positive image of youth through their accomplishments and lifestyles.

On any given day in North Dakota, an average of 1,261 children are in foster care because of either abuse or neglect, or involvement with the Division of Juvenile Services. Human services data indicate that relative placements, in lieu of foster care, have climbed by 113 percent in the past five years.

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