

**NEWS from the North Dakota Department of Human Services
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Results released from North Dakota Child and Family Services Review

BISMARCK, N.D. – Today child welfare stakeholders gathered in Bismarck to hear results from a recent Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) conducted by the Children’s Bureau, U.S. Administration on Children, Youth and Families. The federal review identifies strengths and areas needing improvement in a state’s child welfare practices and programs that help serve and protect vulnerable children and families.

“This review is a transparent look at North Dakota’s entire child welfare system that includes county social services, the North Dakota Department of Human Services, the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation’s Division of Juvenile Services, tribal social services, private service providers, foster parents, the juvenile court system, attorneys, children and families involved in child welfare services, and other stakeholders who work with children and families,” said Diana Weber, a program administrator for the Department of Human Services.

The department’s Child and Family Services Division, along with partners, began the review with analysis of child welfare data and completed a statewide assessment. In addition, a federal review team was onsite during the week of Sept. 12, 2016, and conducted a review of 65 case files from Burleigh, Cass, Grand Forks and Morton counties and held multiple in-person interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and partners.

North Dakota’s review measured performance on 18 items relating to safety, permanency and well-being outcomes, and 18 items relating to systemic factors that affect the achievement of positive outcomes for children and families. Items were rated as either “strength” or “area needing improvement.”

Weber said the review’s purpose is to ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements, to determine what is actually happening to children and families as they are engaged in child welfare services, and to assist states in helping children and families achieve positive outcomes. The review examines areas of child protection services, in-home services, family preservation services, foster care case management, adoption and independent living services.

Areas rated as strengths included: providing appropriate services to meet children’s educational needs, having a statewide information system that provides details about every child in foster care, and coordinating services with various other federal programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Head Start.

Other strength areas were that children in foster care are receiving periodic reviews at least once every six months; permanency hearings for children in foster care are being held every 12 months; proper notice of court hearings and reviews are being given to caregivers to ensure their participation; and training is provided to foster and adoptive parents, and employees of state-licensed or approved facilities that care for children in foster care.

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Areas needing improvement include permanency, safety and well-being outcomes such as having a written case plan developed jointly with the child's parents, termination of parental rights proceedings, quality assurance system, training for child welfare professionals, having an array of services accessible to children and families in all areas of the state, and services individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served.

Weber said all states are required to create a Program Improvement Plan that addresses the areas needing improvement identified in the review. The plan must be submitted to the Children's Bureau in April, and North Dakota must achieve the plan goals within two years.

Work on the plan will begin this afternoon with over 40 child welfare stakeholders who were invited to attend a meeting in the Pioneer Room at the State Capitol. Participants include department staff, county and tribal social services staffs, representatives from the Division of Juvenile Services, the juvenile court system, private service providers, families involved in child welfare services, and other stakeholders who work with children and families.

Once the plan has been approved by the Children's Bureau, child welfare stakeholders will meet regularly to review progress on the specific action steps, tasks, and goals identified in the plan.

Child welfare partners have already begun to implement broad and long-term strategies and initiatives for improving child welfare practices in the state. This includes creating a Child and Family Services five-year plan that sets specific child welfare goals and timeliness for achievement, requesting technical assistance from the Capacity Building Center for States, a national organization contracted by the Children's Bureau to assist states with child welfare practice improvements; and collaborating with Casey Family Programs on policy updates, workforce development and training, improving data quality and other initiatives.

This is North Dakota's third federal review. Reviews are held approximately every six years and are required by federal law. To date, no state has ever achieved full compliance in the three review rounds.

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