

**NEWS from the North Dakota Department of Human Services
600 E. Boulevard Ave. - Dept. 325, Bismarck N.D. 58505**

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Media contacts: LuWanna Lawrence at 701-328-1892 or Heather Steffl at 701-328-4933

New initiative seeks to prevent children from entering foster care and encourages family engagement

Initial participating counties include Burleigh, Grand Forks, Mercer, McLean, Oliver, Sheridan and Stutsman.

BISMARCK, N.D. – At any given time, there are about 1,600 North Dakota children and youths in foster care. The North Dakota Department of Human Services' Children and Family Services Division will launch a new initiative in select counties aimed at preventing more children from entering the foster care system by engaging with families earlier to support the safety, permanency and well-being of their children.

Starting Oct. 1, the Family Centered Engagement Initiative will be available to families in Burleigh, Grand Forks, Mercer, McLean, Oliver, Sheridan and Stutsman counties. The initiative will bring together a variety of people who have a relationship with a child to make decisions with the child's family to improve child outcomes.

"North Dakota has a long history of providing high-quality engagement and decision-making strategies for families, such as Family Team Decision Making and Family Group Decision Making," said Tracy Miller, the department's child maltreatment prevention and family preservation services administrator. "This new initiative is a bit different in that it encourages earlier engagement with families to divert children from being placed in foster care by keeping them safely at home or with relatives whenever possible."

Families may be referred to participate in the family-centered engagement process by either county social services or juvenile court. The focus is on families with children at risk of removal from their home, children who experienced an emergency removal or children who are involved both in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

A family-centered 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, child welfare professionals, juvenile court staff, teachers and others involved in a child's life. Families leave with a written action plan that outlines their goals, expectations and a safe plan for their children. Data is collected on family outcomes.

Grand Forks County Social Services Director Scot Hoepfer is hopeful this team-focused initiative will make a difference in the lives of families from his county.

"Preventing children from entering foster care and keeping them in a home setting with people they know and love is a win-win for everyone," he said. "This facilitated team process allows for planning to occur in a neutral setting. I believe families will be more comfortable participating and engaging in the process."

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The department plans to expand the Family Centered Engagement Initiative to Barnes, Ramsey, Walsh and Ward counties at a later date.

Miller said implementing the initiative in phases will increase the likelihood of having a larger impact, as modifications can be made based on outcomes and lessons learned before it is expanded.

The Family Centered Engagement Initiative aligns with efforts to redesign the delivery of social services to serve children and families more effectively and efficiently, and will also support the implementation of the Dual Status Youth Initiative being led in collaboration with the North Dakota juvenile court system.

“We are very excited to participate in the Family Centered Engagement Initiative, as it enhances the Dual Status Youth Initiative efforts that we are a partner in,” said Kim Osadchuk, Burleigh County Social Services director. “Any time you can bring all the entities involved to the table to help support and empower families to succeed, the outcome tends to be positive as the family does not feel forced and can drive their own plan and change.”

The department collaborated with the Capacity Building Centers for States, Casey Family Programs and The Village Family Service Center for over a year to develop the initiative and implementation plan. A county interest survey and readiness assessment, county-specific data and provider staffing capacity were factors used to identify the initial eight counties for implementation.

For more information on the Family Centered Engagement Initiative, contact The Village Family Service Center in Bismarck at 701-255-1165 or the Department of Human Services’ Children and Family Services Division at 701-328-2316, toll-free 800-245-3736, ND Relay TTY 800-366-6888 or tramiller@nd.gov.

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