Human Services audit report highlights need for continued investment in ND families and children to meet growing demand for services

BISMARCK, N.D. – Today, the North Dakota Department of Human Services responded to the final report of the agency audit conducted by the Office of the State Auditor that covered the period beginning July 1, 2019, through June 30, 2021.

The report contains eight findings including the areas of child protection services and the substance use disorder voucher program, among others.

According to DHS Executive Director Chris Jones, the department agrees with many of the findings, and in most cases has already implemented actions to address them. For example, the department has hired a team member to focus on substance use disorder voucher program eligibility. Additionally, to support child safety, North Dakota has implemented a single statewide child abuse and neglect reporting line and a new safety framework practice model with human service zone partners.

He also points out the audit looked at performance during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It is true, the pandemic impacted the human service system’s ability to provide in-person service in areas such as behavioral health and child welfare. Individuals and families were under additional stressors, which can be a contributing factor for child abuse and neglect. In addition, at the height of the pandemic, opportunities for individuals to access supportive services in their communities were also more limited.”

He said, the department plans to use the audit findings to underscore the need to make additional investments in North Dakota’s families and children and to support a fully resourced team.

“While child protection services best practice standards suggest that each child protection worker should manage a caseload of approximately 12 children/families, workers managed average caseloads of up to 29 cases each in one month during the audit timeframe,” Jones said.

For long-term impact on this situation, he said, “we need to invest in prevention and early intervention strategies supporting strong, stable families and preventing child abuse and neglect.”

Jones said, the department looks forward to working with the Governor’s office and the legislature to strengthen North Dakota’s capacity to ensure that children and families thrive.

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