



Minnesota Department of **Human Services**

May 12, 2009

Dear Citizen Review Panel Members:

Thank you for your work over the past year and for the presentation of your 2008 Annual Report at the Child Safety and Permanency Division's staff meeting on April 27, 2009. The Department's response to your report follows.

Seventh Annual National Citizen Review Panel Conference

As stated in your Annual Report, the highlight of the year for Minnesota's Citizen Review Panels was hosting the Seventh Annual National Citizen Review Panel Conference in St. Paul on May 21-23, 2008. Your contributions in planning, presenting workshops, hosting, setting up audio visual equipment, donating items for conference bags, facilitating groups and evaluating the conference were crucial to its success. It was a pleasure for the Minnesota Department of Human Services to be a sponsor of this conference that showcased the panel's work on a national level.

Child and Family Service Reviews and Program Improvement Plans

The participation of panel members from all four counties in the Child and Family Service Review process, and in monitoring the Program Improvement Plans, continues to enhance the child protection system, encouraging achievement in the outcomes of child safety, permanency and well-being. By responding to members' requests for information and regularly scheduled updates, the county child protection agencies must articulate progress of implementing their Program Improvement Plans, and continue to evaluate what needs to be done. It helps to keep everyone on-task and moving forward.

Independent Living Skills for Youth Transitioning from Foster Care

The Department appreciates the panels' continued perseverance to ensure that youth who are leaving foster care have the skills they need to successfully live on their own. The Washington County Citizen Review Panel's committee, Advocacy for Independent Living Skills Resources, continued to educate their legislators about the needs of youth transitioning from foster care.

Promoting implementation of the new law that mandates that youth must have successfully completed education in 11 required independent living skills areas before a judge can discharge them from foster care was helpful. The Ramsey County Children's Services Review Panel's Independent Living Skills Committee recommended that a member of their committee serve on the Ramsey County Children's Justice Initiative to help monitor implementation of these requirements. Ramsey County panel members also added the 11 required independent living skills to the form they use when participating in the administrative reviews of youth in long-term foster care. These were both excellent ideas.

The Department issued Bulletin #09-68-01, Adolescent Services Provides Guidance on Transition Planning and Requirements for Older Youth in Care, on April 22, 2009. It is on the Department's Web site at:

http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectonMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=dhs16_143818#b68

Independent Living Skills for Youth Transitioning from Foster Care (Continued)

Contact Claire Hill, consultant, Minnesota Department of Human Services, Adolescent Services Unit, with questions or comments about the contents of the Bulletin at (651) 431-4686 or claire.d.hill@state.mn.us.

Child Welfare Financing

Panel members' concern about funding of child welfare services, including the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP), is appreciated. The Department makes funding recommendations to the governor. He then makes funding recommendations for all state departments to the Legislature. The governor's budget recommendations in the areas of adoption assistance, child permanency, and protecting children (includes PSOP and other early intervention programs) are:

Adoption Assistance and Relative Custody Assistance

The Adoption Assistance (AA) Program provides financial assistance to adoptive parents of children with special needs. The AA rate varies by age of the child and difficulty of care. The Relative Custody Assistance Program (RCA) provides monthly financial assistance to a relative or a person significant in the child's life who accepts permanent physical and legal custody of a child who was in foster care. The rates are the same as AA.

Many of these children require psychological, medical, educational and social services. Parents of these children have difficulty meeting their special needs without financial and other supports. Providing these supports promotes adoption, and transfer of legal custody so fewer children become wards of the state, and counties no longer pay for foster care.

The governor recommends \$2,412,000 in fiscal year 2010, and \$5,370,000 in fiscal year 2011, for both the AA and RCA programs. This proposal adjusts the appropriation for AA and RCA to align with the projected use of the programs. The governor also recommends that starting in fiscal year 2011, AA and RCA will transition into the Northstar Care for Children, a child permanency program that provides a single permanency benefit.

Child Permanency – Northstar Care for Children

The Governor recommended development of a single permanency benefit program combining the Adoption Assistance, Relative Custody Assistance and Family Foster Care programs to the 2009 Legislature. The new program would be called Northstar Care for Children and would collapse more than 225 basic or difficulty of care rates into 13 rates. This would take effect on January 1, 2011.

Family Foster Care, Relative Custody Assistance and Adoption Assistance have evolved into three distinct programs. Temporary family foster care typically provides higher financial support than the two options that offer a permanent home for a child. This disparity results in many children remaining in long-term foster care. The governor's proposal of combining these programs into a simplified single benefit Northstar Care for Children, would decrease racial disparities, promote permanency for children in foster care, and their best interests. The only significant costs would be to modify the Social Services Information System (SSIS) to accommodate the new program. Unfortunately, it does not appear that the legislature will act on this proposal this year.

Protecting Children Act

The governor recommended a major component of the Children and Community Services Act (CCSA) grant be redirected to a Protecting Children and Strengthening Families Act grant. If passed, this would become effective on January 1, 2011.

The CCSA grant was created in 2003 with the intent of providing child-related, flexible, consolidated federal and state grants to counties. Counties requested the word, "community" be added, permitting them to use some of the funds for adult services. This flexibility has come with some disadvantages. When faced with fiscal limitations and reduced budgets, counties have not always prioritized early intervention services for children and families. When risk factors are addressed early, and families receive the resources they need, public costs can be reduced. The Parent Support Outreach Program started as a pilot and has demonstrated positive outcomes for children and families who accepted early intervention services. PSOP and other programs like it need to be sustained in the child protection system over time. Clear state direction in law will help to ensure the continuation of early intervention services. The new Protecting Children and Families Act would define child welfare policy, set state priorities, and create accountability for achieving improved outcomes for children and families. A fund would be established to address the safety, permanency and well-being of children involved in the child protection system. There is no additional fiscal impact associated with the Protecting Children and Strengthening Families Act. However, again the 2009 Legislature has not acted on this recommendation.

Looking Ahead

The Department looks forward to the recommendations from the Citizen Review Panels' evaluation of county agency, worker and community service provider capacities to identify, contact, and engage non-custodial fathers in child protection cases. This information will be included in the Department's Program Improvement Plan, and a guide for involving non-custodial parents, to be developed and shared with counties and tribes throughout Minnesota.

October 2009 marks the 10-year anniversary of Minnesota's Citizen Review Panels. The Department looks forward to continuing work with the Chisago, Ramsey, Washington and Winona County Panels. Department staff is excited to welcome the new Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel which will get underway in June 2009. The Department plans to continue expansion of Citizen Review Panels to other counties and tribes in Minnesota.

Thank you for all your hard work and continuing commitment to Minnesota's children and their families.

Sincerely,



Erin Sullivan Sutton, Director
Child Safety and Permanency