

**Health and Human Services Committee**

**LR-37**

**September 15, 2011**

Good morning, Senator Campbell and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Mike Puls (M-I-K-E P-U-L-S) and I am the Northern Service Area Administrator for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. The Northern Service Area is comprised of 24 counties in Northeast Nebraska with Children and Family Services Specialists located in O'Neill, Center, Dakota City, Pierce, Pender, Norfolk, Columbus, Fremont and Blair. My office is located in Norfolk. I am pleased to have this opportunity to provide you with information about child welfare and juvenile services in the Northern Service Area.

I have been asked to discuss the impact that the loss of our lead contractor, Boys and Girls Home of Nebraska, had in the Northern Service area and some of the child welfare challenges we are currently facing. I will also talk about what we have implemented in order to overcome these challenges.

On September 30, 2010, the contract between the Department and Boys and Girls Home of Nebraska to provide non-treatment services and service coordination was terminated and the responsibility for providing these services to children and their families returned to the Department.

In the last year, we have worked diligently to get contracts in place for these services. We were fortunate to regain many of our former service providers as well as providers that had been offering services in other Service Areas. We continue to develop new contracts for existing services that are needed and explore the possibility of adding new services such as an Initial Response Unit and a Family Finder program.

Although we have increased the number of community-based non-placement services since the departure of Boys and Girls, the same cannot be said about placement services.

Within the last year, we have lost 41 group home, shelter and treatment beds. Boys and Girls closed their facility in Columbus in early 2011. They were licensed for thirty (30) group home and shelter beds but due to the staff to youth ratio requirements of their contract, Boys and Girls seldom took 30 youth in their facility, Eleven (11) Treatment beds were lost when OMNI closed their Columbus program in August of this year.

Currently, there are three group homes and four shelters in the Northern Service Area. Group homes and shelters in Fremont and Macy will take either gender, and a group home and shelter in Norfolk serves girls. There is also a shelter for younger children in Norfolk.

Families Matter believes that children should be maintained in their home or in a family like setting whenever possible and our increased use of approved Foster Homes and having more youth placed in their own homes, lessen our need for group home beds.

We continue to be in contact with community partners to examine the possibility of establishing a new group home and shelter in either the old Boys or Girls facility or in another location.

Our licensed foster home numbers have declined significantly. In November of 2009, there were 210 licensed foster homes in the Northern Service Area. As of August 2011, we had 143 licensed foster homes. There is a shortage of foster care placements in the NSA overall but especially for youth who are older, exhibit behavioral issues or are part of a sibling group.

However, our focus on the use of kinship care or approved foster homes offset some of the loss of our foster homes. An approved home is used when placing a youth with a family member or someone previously known to the child. In November of 2009, we had 87 approved homes. We now are averaging over 123 approved homes a month for the last three months! As of August of this year, 49% of the Northern Service Area youth placed in a non-treatment family home setting were in a relative home or home known to the child.

One of the guiding beliefs of Families Matter is that children grow best in their own home and that they should remain at home whenever the child's safety can be assured. With use of in-home supports and services, the Northern Service Area has been able to increase the percentage of children served in their home from 32.5% in November 2010, to 35.7% as of August 2011.

After Boys and Girls, the responsibilities to recruit, train, and support our licensed and approved homes came back to the Department. At the same time we wanted to make sure that our licensed and approved foster parents received the support that they needed during their placements.

In order to bring about the support and the focused recruitment that was needed we contracted out the recruitment, licensing, training and support of all licensed and approved foster homes. The Agency Supported Foster Care (ASFC) providers must complete a general support plan for each foster family that is tailored to their

individual strengths and weaknesses. Child specific support plans are also developed to help the foster parents work more effectively with the each youth that are placed with them.

Another major area of concern has been the retention rate of our Children and Family Services Specialists. The turnover rate for the NSA for 2009 was 15.1%. For 2010 it was 23.3%. For the first 8 months of 2011 the turnover rate is at 14.2% or an annualized rate of 21.2%. The turnover rates for 2010 and 2011 would not include an additional 11 staff that left the Children and Family Services Division for other jobs within the Department or transitioned from one position within this Division to another.

To combat those vacancies, we hired temporary staff whenever possible and started the hiring process as soon as we knew someone was leaving. This allowed us to have staff hired and in training before the current CFS left. We also got approval for 3 "forward fill" positions to help fill the void of any future vacancies.

Since system reform began in 2008, there has been an emphasis on Quality Assurance (QA) activities in the NSA. Some QA activities that were put into place during the service coordination contract have remained, including Quality Assurance of Family Team Meetings and home studies, monitoring of the Service Area's Program Improvement Plan, (PIP) and holding quarterly Children and Family Services mini reviews.

Monitoring of the Comprehensive Quality Improvement (CQI) activities within the Service Area is done by a Service Area CQI Team, Initial Assessment and On-going Liaisons, and the involvement of community stakeholders. The Initial Assessment and On-going Liaisons mentor other supervisors and track data related to permanency and safety to identify trends and possible reasons for those trends. Community stakeholders meet on a quarterly basis to help find solutions to the issues identified in the Service Area's PIP. Members of our CQI Team and the Safety and Permanency Liaisons are part of the Community Stakeholder Team to ensure that information flows in a continuous cycle and all three aspects of the CQI plan are well informed and connected.

A Northern Service Area Partners Advisory Council was recently established to problem solve, educate, and discuss common barriers and community issues that affect children and families. Members include representatives from Dodge County CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), Foster Care Review Board, Fremont United Way, Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association, Nebraska Federation of Families, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Nebraska State Patrol, Professional Partners, Platte County Attorney's office, Columbus Hospital, a GAL

from Fremont/Blair area and a mental health professional from Norfolk. One of the group members also serves as a representative to the Statewide Partners Advisory Council.

Families Matter is a statewide reform initiative of the child welfare and juvenile services system. The NSA is committed to making Families Matter succeed and believe that we can safely serve more children in their home or in Kinship care and have fewer children in the state's care. As our staff completes the Proficiency Development Training, which is part of our State's PIP, we will continue to increase our safety assessment and evaluation skills in every situation without compromising children's safety.

The Northern Service Area is committed and responsive to the children and families we serve as well as our community stakeholders. We have high standards and hold ourselves accountable to those standards. We will continue to have challenges but I believe that we will meet and excel in our efforts to overcome these challenges.

If you have questions, I will do my best to answer them.

Thank you.





