



# Children & Family News

November 2006

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*N.D. Dept. of Human Services' Children & Family Services Division Update*

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## Foster youth and staff attend national conference

*This past fall, the Department of Human Services sent a team to a national foster care and permanency conference in Washington, D.C., which included two young people who have received foster care services. Participant John Stautz wrote the following article.*

*By John Stautz, Foster Youth, Age 17*

"When the city was built, it was built with the intention of intimidating foreign heads of state. Washington D.C. is the most powerful city on earth."

How many of us have heard this line or a variation of it? It is true. Walking around the city, one can't help but feel impressed. There is a vast array of official buildings, and of course, the White House. D.C. is also home to some of the nation's most recognizable monuments and memorials. The city has always been associated with the words "power" and "politics," but "foster care"?

It only seemed fitting that the 2006 *National Convening on Youth Permanence*, hosted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was held in Washington D.C. on September 13 – 16. Teams from 39 states including North Dakota came together to focus on what the foster care system can accomplish by working collaboratively to improve youth permanence. Youth permanence is establishing a permanent connection between a youth in care and a caring adult.

North Dakota was represented by Paul Ronningen, Director of the Department of Human Services' Children and Family Services Division; Tara Muhlhauser, Division Deputy Director and Child Protection Services Administrator; Dawn Pearson, State Independent Living Coordinator for the Division; Paul Komrosky, PATH foster parent; and fellow

foster youth Kevin Stautz and me. The team went to learn strategies for improving the state's approach to youth participation in foster care programs and youth permanence. Tara and John also gave a brief presentation on the importance of youth permanence and North Dakota's progress.

There were general assemblies to hear several panel discussions. A panel of youth spoke on youth permanence. These former foster youth shared their stories of struggle and triumph, leaving many watery eyes. Also, a panel composed of members of the media spoke on improving the relationship between the media and the foster care community.

The state team met with North Dakota Congressman Earl Pomeroy in his office. He expressed his support for state programs addressing the needs of youth in care. The congressman is a good-natured individual with a sense of humor. It was fun for me to talk with him because he is an alumnus of the University of North Dakota where I am a student. Someday I hope to be in a political office, and so the sit-down was something I truly enjoyed.

The conference was a great learning experience. The team was able to formulate a state plan for addressing youth participation, as well as youth permanence. The collective brainstorming helped illuminate state strengths and weaknesses.

The opportunity to talk to other youth was especially beneficial because it helped me gain information for starting a North Dakota State Youth Advisory Board. The board would be responsible for interacting with state systems as well as petitioning state and local officials. I believe, by establishing this board, youth will be able to shed a new light on the foster care system. I'm going to take this opportunity to yet again petition for what I would like to name the advisory board:

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(Continued from page 1)

Advocates for North Dakota Youth Influence (ANDYI), which was my suggestion to Dawn Pearson. Hopefully, the board will be up and running in the near future.

All there is left to do is to take the information we learned at the conference and educate others. I believe our state will continue to serve youth in the best possible way it can. I appreciate this opportunity, which was given to me, and encourage other youth to become more involved in the care they are receiving. North Dakota has all the tools for success.

## Kenna to serve on national child welfare review team

Kate Kenna, Director of the Department's Northeast Human Service Center in Grand Forks, has been named a team leader by the federal Administration of Children and Family Services for their next round of state performance reviews. Kate will lead a team of experts as they travel to states and assess performance on federal child health, safety, and permanency standards.

"This is a huge honor. Federal officials recognized Kate's expertise in child welfare," said Children and Family Services Division Director Paul Ronningen. "North Dakota's children and families will benefit because Kate will bring back information to help us further improve services."

## Child welfare reviews scheduled

North Dakota's next federal Child and Family Services Review is scheduled for April 2008. All states must undergo this comprehensive review process that measures performance on child safety, permanency, and well-being.

To help the state prepare, county social services and the Department are collaborating on hiring additional quality assurance staff in Burleigh, Cass, Grand Forks, Stark, and Ward counties. They will be reviewing the quality of services delivered to children and their families involved in the child welfare system. These include families receiving services such as

wrap-around case management, parent aide services, intensive in-home therapeutic services, foster care, and child care.

"This will help ensure that families receive quality services, which is the cornerstone of the federal reviews. States that do not meet federal standards risk losing federal funding and must complete a performance improvement plan, which is a very staff-intensive effort," said Paul Ronningen.

## Staff Updates

### **New Early Childhood Administrator**

**Linda Jagielo**, Ph.D., joined the Department as the Early Childhood Administrator in October 2006, relocating from Wisconsin. Linda holds a Doctorate of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction, with an emphasis in Early Childhood Teacher Education, from Kent State University. She has extensive experience in the field, including experience directing two childcare centers, and serving as a Head Start center director and as a National Head Start Fellow at the Head Start Bureau in Washington, D.C.

### **Muhlhauser has new role**

This summer, **Tara Muhlhauser**, J.D., was named administrator of child protection services for the Children and Family Services Division. Previously, Tara worked to build collaboration between the courts and the child welfare system. She retains some of those duties.

### **Staff added to do background checks**

**Nadine Ehrhardt** was recently hired to help **Brandy Wiese** process criminal background checks of prospective foster and adoptive parents, guardians, and employees at residential childcare facilities. North Dakota has conducted background checks for years, but the volume of FBI background checks has grown, in part, due to the federal Adam Walsh Child Protection & Safety Act of 2006.

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**Children & Family Services Division**

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