Commissioner's Weekly Wrap Up

DCS Communications Office

June 24, 2005

Upper Cumberland Case Manager Vacancies

CM3 and CM4 positions are available in foster care in the Upper Cumberland region, covering Smith, Macon and Dekalb counties. For more information, contact Linda Maggart at (931) 405-1047.

DCS Writing Contest

Submitted by Karen Chamberlain, Foster Care and Adoptions

I would like to remind everyone that DCS, along with community stakeholders, is sponsoring a writing contest for children and youth in custody and post custody. The contest's theme focuses on children and youth exploring what makes their caseworker special to them and provides an opportunity for our children and youth to express themselves, while recognizing the hard work and positive, life changing impact caseworkers can have.

Participants in the contest will be divided into the following categories: Kindergarten-5th grade, 6th-8th grade, 9th-12th grade and post-custody. First, second and third place prizes will be given to the winners in each of the 12 regions. There will also be first, second and third place winners chosen to represent the entire state. Prizes will be awarded to the caseworkers of the winners, and recognition will be given to all participants. The entry deadline is July 15.

We want to encourage all children and youth to enter. For more information about the writing contest and where to submit entries, please call the regional contact persons listed below. You can also contact Karen Chamberlain at Central Office at (615) 741-9858.

Southeast – Carol Plemons, (423)-744-2804
Northeast – Lucretia Sanders, (423)-282-2906
Southwest – Barbara Maners, (731)-423-6491or Yalunda McClatchen, (731)-426-0865
South Central – Jonathan Brashier (931)-722-3839
East – Leanne Crawford, (423)-318-6800
Shelby – Glenda Taylor, (901)-578-4185
Knox – Lisa Brookover, (856)-594-6633
Davidson – Jana Elkins, (615)-253-5124
Hamilton – Tajuana Mitchell, (423)-634-3148
Upper Cumberland – Felicia Harris, (931)-646-3112
Mid-Cumberland – Frank Mix, (615)-217-8900
Northwest – Cindy Boyd, (731)-884-2630

Reducing Trauma for DCS Children and Families

Submitted by Commissioner Viola P. Miller

We know that anytime we are forced to remove children from their birth home, we create a major trauma for that family. There is no way that we can prevent damage from this trauma, but we can take every possible opportunity to minimize that trauma and, thus, the resulting damage. Let me tell you a story.

One of my earliest memories resulted from a traumatic separation from my family. I remember the pain and fear to this day, and I could not have been older than three or four.

My family had moved from Shreveport, La., where my parents lived most of their lives, to Memphis. My dad had a very nice job offer there, and he took it. After a few months, my parents decided that they wanted to move back home. When we moved, they had sold the home where my brother and I were born and now they tried unsuccessfully to buy it back. They made the decision to build a new house on the same street. We were, therefore, without a home until ours was finished.

My aunt had an old converted chicken house behind her home. My parents made the decision that we would "make do" there until our house was finished. Shortly after we were in this none-too-exciting place to live, my parents decided to go check on the new house and leave me with my aunt. I cannot to this day remember where my brother (one year older and much braver) was. No one really explained much to me about any of this. I was thinking, I am sure, that we had a solid and loving family and that would keep me secure. Well, it did not.

From the time they left until their return over two hours later, I sat on a rock by the street watching every car that passed. I knew in my young heart that I would never see my family again. I was certain they had abandoned me to this aunt I didn't really know very well. I felt terrible guilt that I must have somehow done something terribly wrong and sinful (we were big Baptists) to have driven my family away. As young as I was and as old as I am, these memories are as fresh as if they had happened yesterday.

In retrospect I can think of all the things my family, including my aunt, could have done to minimize the trauma. My parents could have taken more time to make certain that I understood that they would be back. They could have told me that they loved me and given hugs before they left. They could have had me keep some small object that I knew was important to them. My aunt could have seen that little tear-stained, toe-headed kid sitting out on that rock and joined me for a few minutes. She could have given me an opportunity to tell her how scared I was that my parents would never return. And that nasty brother of mine could have been around somewhere as a part of this memory!

Think back on your life. Do you have any memories like this one? If you do, use it when you remove a child. Remember what would have been comforting to you. "Everything will be okay" is no good because it will not. "It's not your fault" is pretty worthless too because you're

certain that it is. Hugs, reflecting feelings, age appropriate explanations, taking along familiar objects and listening are all good strategies.

All regions have copies of *A Child's Journey Through Placement*. This book does an excellent job of providing information on reducing the trauma of moves.

Of course, the very best way to reduce this trauma is to prevent the move from ever having to happen.

Thanks for all you do everyday for Tennessee's families and children. Keep up the good work. We'll never be as good as we want to be, but we are getting better everyday.

Davidson County Foster Parent Appreciation

Submitted by Gwendolyn Covington, Team Leader, Davidson County

The Davidson County region held its foster parent appreciation picnic on June 4 at Shelby Park in Nashville. This event was held to show the region's foster parents how much they are truly valued and appreciated on a daily basis for caring for our children.

Foster parents were encouraged to bring their entire family to the picnic and celebrate their accomplishments with each other. DCS staff had the pleasure of playing games with the children and fellowshipping with the foster parents and their families.

The picnic would not have been such a success without the efforts of some committed DCS staff and community volunteers, including Michael Adams (Touch of Class catering), Gloria King, Tyran T. Copeland, Mitzie Copeland, Deverick Murray, Stanley Southhall, and Theodore Dunn, Jr., who helped make sure the 300 guests had a good time.

Data Update

Submitted by Rhonda Simpson, Director, Data Quality

What began as a quite a challenge and, at times, felt like a nearly impossible task, has finally given us the opportunity to began looking at our agency through some very specific and important outcome data and management indicators. Over the past two months, we have been diligently and patiently working through what types of data is necessary to drive our practice forward in meeting the challenges of today's children and families.

Good data is essential in helping us know how to guide our planning and decision-making and increasing our capacity to provide strengths-based, family-focused, culturally-responsive, community-based services to those children and families who need us the most.

With respect to providing data needed to comply with the Brian A. Settlement Agreement, we have developed a reporting protocol and formats for reporting compliance in the key areas of

timely reunification and placements with relatives, timely adoptions, placement stability, length of stay, achievements for youth who exit at the age of majority, re-entry data and more. These and other monthly performance indicator reports, such as numbers of case manager and client face-to-face contacts, entries into foster care, number of children placed in family settings and more, have been successfully presented to the Brian A. Technical Assistance Committee (TAC) and Children's Rights, Inc. (Brian A. plaintiffs). In order to monitor and measure compliance, these reports will be provided on a regular schedule going forward.

Not all has been easy, and some of these reporting capacities had to be developed very quickly. In all cases, however, the effort has been priceless in the excellent monitoring tools that have resulted for the regions with regard to caseload and supervisory compliance, open investigations on Brian A class children open over 60 days, number of available resource homes by region and county, etc.

We have come a very long way in a very short time, and have made unbelievable progress. But as one might imagine, we still have a ways to go. We cannot let our guard down. We must continue to move forward at a steady and productive pace while maintaining a positive outlook to achieve success. After all, our success in producing these essential data is critical to evaluating and continuously improving outcomes for our children and families.

We have implemented regional planning that is data driven and designed to help drive practice in reducing the overall number of children that will ever need to enter our care, and when that is inevitable, continually increasing the population of children that can remain close to their home, in a family-like setting, and then be quickly and safely returned to their homes, live with relatives or be placed in a loving and permanent adoptive home. We will be monitoring regional, and in some cases, county progress, on each of these outcomes every quarter – looking carefully to note where good practice can continue and eliminating those practices that do not appear to be achieving success for children and families.

In addition to continuous improvements in new and existing data, some of the information you can look forward to receiving sometime in the future include data to help monitor and increase the number of siblings placed together and promote visits between siblings when they are unable to be placed together. You can also look forward to receiving data to help increase the number of visits between parents and their children, filing timely termination petitions, making timely adoptive placements and more.

In closing, I want to extend tremendous appreciation to all of the program and technical staff that have spent numerous hours working through each of these outcomes and reports and your continued work on these as we see this through to some level of closure. Everyone has done a remarkable job pulling together for the good of the children and families! Though we are still pushing forward, we have been able to re-capture credibility with outside agencies including the Brian A. Technical Assistance Committee, all of whom commented recently how impressed they have been with the agency and the amazing progress that has been made in such a short time. This is very good news! They also made it very clear they believe we have finally reached a level of being able to truly move the agency forward in a progressive and positive way through

the use of reliable and informative data that ultimately drives best practice. They could have never imagined such progress just a few short months ago.

Thanks to everyone for your support.

Continuous Quality Improvement in the Northwest Region

Submitted by Janie Alexander, CQI Coordinator, Northwest

With 19 CQI teams up and running since January, 100 percent of Northwest staff are members of CQI teams. We have 18 teams that are meeting monthly, and a regional Level III team that is meeting quarterly. Our teams have been very productive in identifying needs and creating action plans for improvement.

We are very proud of the fact that due to several teams compiling resource list for their respective counties, our CQI team members have come together and completed a comprehensive resource booklet of available Northwest resources. This was a large task, but a vital piece of information for a region with limited resources.

All of our teams have focused on recruitment and retention of foster homes. We are especially proud of the efforts made by one team. This team initiated the idea of marching in the Humboldt "Strawberry Festival" and the Trenton "Teapot Festival". As many as 15-20 of our case managers participated in these parades. We even had a foster parent and a previous foster child participate.

Quality visitation has been an agenda item for several teams. In an effort to promote this, some teams have recruited existing foster parents who are willing to transport to visits and supervise visits. Our stipend interns are being utilized to supervise visits due to a CQI team presenting this to the regional level. We have a team that is currently working toward replacing the toys in the visitation room at the regional office. This team has also recruited a volunteer to paint a mural in the visitation room. We have another team that is working toward installing playground equipment at the regional office.

These are only a few highlights from the Northwest region. Most of our teams have focused on issues that would impact outcomes for our children. We are proud of the fact that our Northwest CQI teams have included all DCS staff in problem-solving and decision making processes, which in turn improves morale and workplace satisfaction.

I can accept failure. Everyone fails at something. But I can't accept not trying. – Michael Jordan

It is not the load that breaks you down; it's the way you carry it. – Lena Horne