

Denver Department of Human Services  
**Response to and Workplan for Third Party Recommendations**  
March 6, 2008

In November 2007, the Denver Department of Human Services (DDHS) requested a third party review of its policies, protocols, and practices related to investigating and intervening in possible incidents of child abuse and neglect. The review was conducted by two organizations with expertise in child welfare policy and practice.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) is a national organization that specializes in best child welfare practices. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) is the largest foundation devoted to disadvantaged children and families.

The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) also reviewed the report for consistency with current state policy and attended many of the review meetings.

As a state supervised, county administered system, DDHS is grateful for the participation of all three parties in the review process. Denver has a productive working relationship with the Colorado Department of Human Services and works intensively with the State on funding for child welfare, the training of staff, administrative reviews, quality assurance and program development.

DDHS is pleased with the comprehensive, thorough, and thoughtful response that is reflected in the Report. It provides a roadmap for further improvements.

The review found that while DDHS does a number of things well, there are areas where the agency needs to improve. The report states: "Denver County is moving in a direction that is entirely consistent with a national movement – supported by federal policy and accountability measures- to keep children safely in their own homes whenever possible, and to promote permanency for those who are in out-of-home care and cannot return home. There is very little argument about the overall philosophical direction in which Denver County is moving: to make more preventive services available in the community, to support families more intensively *before* they need intensive child protection help, and to involve families more closely in decisions about the safety of their children."

While DDHS has aggressively engaged in enhancing child welfare practice for a number of years, DDHS also takes seriously the key areas and recommendations made by the review team and will implement every recommendation contained in the Report by November 30, 2008.

This response addresses the recommendations in the Third Party Report and additional comments that the Department offers in light of the Department's own internal review of policies, processes, and outcomes.

## **DDHS Response: Risk and Safety Assessment**

The Colorado Department of Human Services requires that a Risk and Safety Assessment is completed at the outset of the Department's involvement with a family. Assessing risk and safety in a thorough and ongoing manner is essential for protecting children. Key changes in this area include: the requirement that supervisors and workers complete a thorough review prior to closing of any assessment; retraining of all agency staff in risk and safety; completion of risk and safety assessments every 90 days through the course of a case; reorganization of staff functions to enhance the taking of child abuse and neglect reports; and enhanced coordination with other counties.

- ❖ On February 11, 2008, the Department clarified the risk and safety assessment protocol by instituting a new policy, Assessment Worksheet for Social Case Worker and Assessment Closing Checklist for Supervisory Staff (Appendix A). The policy reviews practice and ensures that all appropriate case steps have been taken before the assessment is closed. This includes ensuring that:
  - A thorough assessment of present and impending danger to the child was made.
  - The investigative caseworker has made every attempt to contact the referring party to gather more information about the family and the concerns provided in the referral.
  - All children in the family have been interviewed face to face and separate from other siblings and caretakers.
  - All caretakers, household members, collateral contacts, including other agencies, family members and neighbors of the concerned child(ren) have been interviewed separately and in their primary language. This includes adults not related to the child, but who have ongoing or sporadic caretaking responsibilities for the child.
  - Assessment of the home environment for both safety and risk factors has been completed.
  - Criminal background checks have been completed on adult members residing in the household using Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Lexis-Nexis and the Sex Offender registry if appropriate.
  - The assessment findings have been used in case planning for the family.
  
- ❖ DDHS will develop a policy that requires risk and safety assessments be completed every 90 days for all open child protection cases. This process is being incorporated into the 90 day review process for all cases. This is in addition to the State requirements that risk and safety be completed at the start and close of a case and when there are major changes in the case or when reunification occurs. This revision in practice will be in place by May 31, 2008.

- ❖ In addition to the changes which have already been made, a policy will be implemented by May 31, 2008 to ensure that prior to closing the assessment, the supervisor will consider and review the following actions:
  - Treatment services will be reviewed to ensure services delivery has been done in conjunction with Risk and Safety.
  - An aftercare plan will be developed so that the family knows who to contact if new concerns arise.
  - A closing meeting will occur with the family to review the plan. The caseworker will review the plan, with the family, to assure that treatment issues have been addressed and that the family understands the aftercare instructions.
  - The closing plan will be reviewed and signed by the family, as well as both the ongoing supervisor and a program administrator.
  
- ❖ In order to ensure that further background checks are done and that they are completed on all members of a household, additional trained investigators will be hired and a policy will be in place to require background investigations to be done on all adults in the home.
  - The investigation will include reviewing Trails, Lexis-Nexis (Colorado court records), and CBI records. Current checks are being done but do not include all members of the household.
  - When CBI records are reviewed, Denver is already being notified if the person reviewed accrues criminal charges in the future.
  - For cases referred to the Sex Abuse Intake Unit or with a sex abuse allegation the Sex Offender registries will also be reviewed.
  - This will be in place by May 31, 2008.
  
- ❖ All intake staff members are being retrained in Risk and Safety Assessment by April 14, 2008. All other case carrying staff will be trained by August 31, 2008.
  
- ❖ Monitoring of risk and safety compliance will be included in the current quality assurance efforts as the practice is enhanced.
  
- ❖ DDHS has been impacted by the ever increasing expectations and caseloads. The Department has approval to add 40 new staff to the Family and Children's (F&C) Division and will continue to evaluate the need for additional staffing (see staffing distribution in Organizational Challenges section).
  
- ❖ By August 31, 2008, to enhance our ability to immediately assess safety, the Department will combine and reorganize the functions and responsibilities of Hotline and Emergency Response Team workers. Hotline and Emergency Response Team workers are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for initial response to calls concerning child abuse or neglect.
  
- ❖ On May 7, 2007 the Department issued a directive requiring that, the investigative caseworker must contact every county where the family's case is open in the Trails system. If the contacted county does not respond, or

chooses not to investigate, Denver will conduct the investigation despite the fact that the Trails record may indicate the "open" status is in that other county.

- ❖ In order to ensure that full investigations and background checks are completed, two additional investigative staff are needed to conduct collateral contact investigations, sex offender reviews, search for relatives and conduct other investigative initiatives (see second personnel request in Organizational Challenges).

### **DDHS Response: Voluntary cases**

The term "voluntary services", commonly used in Colorado, is somewhat misleading as it implies families have a choice whether to comply or turn down services. In actuality, voluntary services generally represents a category of casework where there are low to moderate risk and safety concerns being addressed by the Department, with a family, and without the involvement of the Denver Juvenile Court. In essence, the family voluntarily agrees to accept services. Voluntary services can only be offered when the family is completely cooperative and in compliance with their treatment plan, and the safety and risk factors that placed children in "harm's way" can be managed safely without court intervention. If at any time the family refuses to cooperate with their treatment plan or is no longer compliant with expectations around safety and risk, a Dependency and Neglect Petition (D&N) is filed with the court and the case will undergo court oversight.

A voluntary placement may occur when no court case has been filed. Families may place their children with safe relatives or kin. They may also place their children voluntarily with DDHS for a period of no more than 90 days. Both situations are under DDHS oversight.

The Department's community collaboratives provide an additional set of eyes and ears to ensure the safety and well-being of the children being served. They are also the service providers in many instances for the families.

DDHS has already implemented a change in the voluntary service policy to require automatic court filings in cases where methamphetamines are used, where a sibling is already involved in a D&N case or where a court terminated parental rights on another child in the prior year. The Department also requires administrative approval for opening a case for voluntary services. Until DDHS improves the perception of the caseworkers among court personnel, it is necessary to provide this additional level of oversight on decisions from the TDM meetings involving voluntary cases.

In an effort to continuously improve and prioritize performance in the child welfare system, the Quality Improvement team has built a system to support the field with management and data tools including: assessment closure, face-to-face contacts, 90 day review, and permanency planning.

DDHS is also creating new policies to ensure that there is consistency in decision making, additional oversight, and that intensive monitoring and data tracking occur on voluntary cases.

- ❖ On February 25, 2008, the Department implemented a new policy for voluntary cases – Determining Voluntary or D&N filing for Ongoing Service Provision (Appendix B). The policy provides:
  - the structure for a more consistent decision making process which expands the definitions of case factors that warrant court involvement and indicate that voluntary case services are not appropriate;
  - clarification of circumstances in which a voluntary case turns into a court monitored case;
  - the decision process of determining the appropriate service path; including the administrative override.
  
- ❖ As previously mentioned, the Department is expanding practice to require that risk and safety assessments be completed every 90 days for all open child protection cases to guide ongoing case decisions. This process is being incorporated into the 90 day review process for all cases.
  
- ❖ By May 31, 2008, the Department will enhance the quality improvement system to include:
  - monitoring voluntary service application and service delivery as well as appropriate financial support;
  - providing data to improve the quality of voluntary services/cases;
  - systemic tracking of outcomes on the voluntary cases.
  
- ❖ By August 31, 2008, the Department will expand the current quality improvement efforts and create a 'ChildStat'-like case review process which will include all types of cases. This process involves the random selection of cases for high level review, evaluation and discussion and compliments the quality assurance efforts. To ensure the additional quality improvement efforts (additional monitoring, compliance and 'Childstat') are executed, three additional staff are needed, (see second personnel request in Organizational Challenges). To support all of the changes, two additional support staff are needed and will be assigned based on caseload and need.
  
- ❖ In order to build mechanisms for staff to be more involved in the community collaboratives and the community partners to better understand and meet the needs of families, community partners are hosting and attending more Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings where risk and safety are evaluated and discussed and where clear case plans are developed. DDHS staff members facilitate and attend these meetings and will have more opportunities to partner with the community to develop resources for families.

- ❖ To ensure the staff training and follow up on the quality improvement efforts one additional FTE for training is needed, (see second personnel request in Organizational Challenges).
- ❖ The Department will develop and implement Kinship Orientation meetings to provide:
  - in-person information regarding services and support available to kin caregivers;
  - education for kin support and guidance to the certification process;
  - education for kin regarding the court process and their specific roles and responsibilities.
  - This work will start by May 31, 2008.
- ❖ The Department is enhancing the support to kin by many actions listed in the Kinship Care response. (See next section.)

### **DDHS Response: Kinship Care**

Kinship homes may be licensed under state rule as licensed foster homes and receive the same financial support as other foster homes. Unfortunately, many family members who are willing and able to provide safe homes cannot meet the housing space requirements or other certification requirements to become a licensed foster home. In addition, children are often placed due to emergency situations and state licensing requires 12 hours of training before becoming licensed and an additional 15 hours within the first three months of receiving a provisional license. For people who had not planned to become a parent and suddenly take in a child, caring for the child often takes priority over obtaining financial assistance. DDHS needs additional licensed foster and kinship homes for children. As a result, DDHS has developed an extensive foster care recruitment plan in order to secure more homes for children. Kinship care and foster care homes are critical for ensuring child safety when a child is unable to live with his/her family of origin. DDHS is committed to enhancing the resources available to our lower income kinship homes. DDHS is also engaging in an extensive foster care campaign to recruit additional foster homes.

- ❖ In an effort to support kinship caregivers the Department currently refers kinship families (primarily for low income families who are entitled to aid benefits) for traditional aid programs within DDHS such as Medicaid, Food Stamps, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In addition, an eligibility worker has been stationed at each Family to Family site to help with enrollment. These staff members were placed in 2007 and will become more involved in the TDM process. DDHS also provides Special Economic Assistance to purchase car seats, cribs, clothing and food to bridge their receiving child specific cash assistance through TANF.
- ❖ The Department will enhance our work with kinship families by developing a Kinship Care working group to better address the needs of Kinship families.

This group will include kinship families. In addition, the work group will help focus on recruitment and retention of kinship homes. The group will be encouraged to develop recruitment and retention plan, a help line, a resource data base, information for kinship families and guidebooks for families. All materials will be developed in English and Spanish. Four additional staff members and one supervisor are needed to implement these efforts. This group will convene by August 31, 2008.

- ❖ By August 31, 2008 the Department will reinvigorate the Connections Initiative. The Connections Initiative was a State funded initiative to help locate biological family members. DDHS will renew efforts to assist in the locating of extended family members. Three diligent search workers are needed for these efforts.
- ❖ A foster care recruitment plan has been developed and will be implemented by August 31, 2008.

### **DDHS Response: Team Decision Making**

Team Decision Making (TDM) staffings are held as part of the initial assessment, and when critical decisions are made regarding the child and/or family (e.g. changes in the case plan, or changes of placement of the child(ren)). A TDM brings the family together, including the child, caseworker, supervisor, an impartial facilitator, and other family or community advocates who may be invited by the family.

The use of TDM in Denver is highly effective in engaging families and their natural support groups. The TDM balances the inclination of an individual caseworker or supervisor making case decisions based upon personal values with a group perspective. In addition to TDM, which is focused on placement decisions, the Department also utilizes group staffings for many different kinds of treatment planning and consultation.

The TDM process will be clarified and updated to respond to the recommendations.

- ❖ The Department, by May 31, 2008, will clarify the role and use of TDM including:
  - the situations that require TDM as prescribed by best practice models including the components of the TDM including:
    - the use of Risk and Safety Assessment;
    - information and the identification of safety and risk factors;
    - information regarding the findings of the case;
    - family strengths;
    - who should attend;
    - the preferred location;
    - the information needed in the TDM report ;
    - the decisions about placement.

- ❖ By August 31, 2008, a refresher training on TDM for facilitators, workers, supervisors, attorneys and the judicial division will be completed to ensure appropriate use, decision making and “gatekeeping” of non-placement decisions.
- ❖ By May 31, 2008, the TDM facilitators will “gatekeep” the TDM process to ensure that only the appropriate prescribed reasons for TDM as indicated in the policy clarification. The TDM facilitators will be held accountable to the policy.
- ❖ Three additional TDM facilitators are needed to address the need of the increased demand for team decision making, (see second personnel request in Organizational Challenges).

### **DDHS Response: Court Collaboration**

DDHS takes the relationship with the court system and the current tensions between DDHS and court personnel very seriously. A new position, Child Protection Division Director, has been added and one of the primary assignments is to work with the courts (see Organizational Challenges). In addition, DDHS will be enhancing the capacity of the City Attorney’s Office to assist with court work.

DDHS has and will continue to engage in many efforts to enhance collaboration which include:

- ❖ Continuing its regular meetings with the Presiding Judge, both by the Child Protection Division Director and by the supervising City Attorney assigned to the Division.
- ❖ In order to ensure that staff members are prepared for court, additional legal capacity is being added, assignment of attorneys to courtrooms will be reviewed and strengthened, and regular worker training will be conducted. A total of two additional legal staff members have already been approved for hiring and four more are being requested. In order to appropriately respond to court orders for supervised visitation and to ensure compliance with court orders, two additional family advocates are needed.
- ❖ A work group comprised of DDHS, attorneys and court personnel is already working on developing protocol for court reports, especially content and timeliness.
- ❖ Additional training for DDHS and City Attorney’s Office personnel on how to work with the courts is scheduled for April 14, 2008. This training will cover working with the courts, communication between caseworkers, supervisors and attorneys and, expectations and capabilities of each.

- ❖ By August 31, 2008, the Department will enhance the accountability of court compliance by:
  - A court report review process to include the City Attorney's Office.
  - An accountability system to track at the worker and supervisor level the compliance of timely submission of court reports.
  - The information from the accountability system will be used by supervisors in the performance evaluations of staff.

### **DDHS Response: Community Collaboratives**

Community partners are instrumental in supporting families, keeping children safe and assisting the community with child protection. The Department has embraced the partnership and collaboration of the Community Collaboratives concept. Since 2000, DDHS has been engaged in creating additional community partnerships. Initially, two Family to Family community sites were developed. In 2005, an additional five sites were added bringing the community partners to over 100 separate entities who are now working together on child protection. In order to strengthen these efforts, DDHS is embracing additional communication mechanisms and working to clearly identify roles and responsibilities.

- ❖ Annual meetings with the collaborative agencies reinforce, celebrate and expand the bi-monthly collaborative meetings. In the Spring of 2007, the Department hosted a celebration on becoming a National Anchor site for Family to Family. In March of 2007, DDHS hosted an annual Family to Family Collaboratives Summit and a follow up Summit will be held not later than November of 2008.
- ❖ At the bi-monthly steering committee meetings, roles and responsibilities will be clearly delineated and defined. A set of written expectations will be developed by August 31, 2008. As delineated earlier, hosting the TDMs in the community will also help workers and community partners understand roles and responsibilities.
- ❖ The Department will explore the development of a Community Collaborative newsletter to showcase family successes and upcoming community activities. The assessment of communication tools will be completed by May 31, 2008.
- ❖ An external Communications Plan is being developed. The plan includes website development (internet and intranet), marketing materials development, community presentations, and a child welfare public education campaign that is planned for 2009.

## **DDHS Response: Organizational Challenges**

The annual employee survey conducted by the City, has demonstrated significant improvement in morale since 2003. Even while undergoing the stress of the recent fatalities, the morale rating in the Family and Children's Division was at 80% while the citywide average was 75%. This survey was completed in October of 2007 and DDHS had a response rate of 76%. The stress of the recent fatalities has taken a toll on staff morale. DDHS staff members take very seriously their role in protecting children and helping families.

There is a critical need to continue to develop staff capacity in order to enable staff to make the right decisions for each child and family. Preparing and supporting the staff's effort to achieve the vision requires attention to workforce issues including caseloads and workload, quality supervision, competency based training, adequate and appropriate resources and responses to the many other barriers to achieving the organizational mission.

There are two staffing proposals referenced throughout this document. The first is the addition of 40 FTE to address the increase in caseload. Maintaining manageable caseloads is critical. On March 3, 2008, the hiring of 40 additional full-time staff was approved by City Council to help address the rapidly increasing caseload in child welfare. An additional 25 full-time staff are necessary for the implementation of this plan and will be requested by May 31, 2008. A funding plan is being developed and will include federal, state, and local resources. The total projected cost for implementation of the recommendations is \$1,748,000 per year.

- ❖ A Deputy Manager has been appointed to oversee the Family and Children's Division. This was done to better meet the managerial/supervisory Family and Children's structure in order to allow the Division to operate more efficiently.
- ❖ Beginning in February of 2008, the division began advertising for a Director of Child Protection. (Appendix C) The Child Protection Director will provide direct oversight to the Child Protection Intake and Ongoing sections.
- ❖ The 25 FTE that are being requested for staffing to implement the recommendations of this Report include:
  - 1 additional trainer
  - 2 family advocates to assist with court-ordered supervised visitation
  - 3 TDM facilitators
  - 5 staff to support kinship (1 supervisor and 4 support workers)
  - 3 diligent search workers
  - 2 administrative support for caseworkers
  - 2 investigation workers
  - 3 quality assurance workers
  - 4 Legal staff (2 attorneys, 2 legal secretaries or paralegals)

- ❖ The Department will update and revise the policy on case transfers from one section to another, in an effort to create a seamless transition from intake to ongoing services and enhance the current administrative working relations. The policy will update the criteria for what needs to be completed before a case is transferred, timelines, and assurances that there will be no gaps in services when a case moves from the intake caseworker to the ongoing caseworker. This will be completed by May 31, 2008.
- ❖ In the caseload request, DDHS was given approval to enhance the youth ongoing section/area. Nine new employees are being added to help with casework in this area. These new employees will help ensure that sibling groups are kept together and services are more appropriately accessed. In addition, by November 30, 2008 a full assessment will be completed on case flow within the youth services section.
- ❖ The Communications Department will coordinate a Communications workgroup for the F&C Division. This workgroup will develop a comprehensive communications plan that will be followed by the entire division to improve the overall outcomes for children and families. This group will be in place by May 31, 2008.
- ❖ In January 2008, the child fatality response process for the Family and Children's Division moved to the Performance Improvement and Accountability Division. By May 31, 2008 the Fatality Response policy will be updated.
- ❖ The Human Resources Division will create a Retention workgroup to develop additional internal efforts to address recruitment including recruitment of staff members who are bilingual in Spanish, staff assessment, mentoring of staff, staff salaries, and retention. This workgroup will be in place by May 31, 2008.

### **Response: Parent and Youth Involvement**

In an effort to help bridge these gaps and help develop more understanding between the agency and the clients, DDHS created an enhanced customer service program in 2007 for parents and children, engaged consumers in the strategic planning process, and presented the plan to foster and adoptive families for input. DDHS adopted a Team Decision Model in order to help include the views of the entire family in decision making. DDHS takes very seriously the need to create mechanisms for greater involvement by parents and youth.

- ❖ As referenced earlier, by November 30, 2008, the Department will develop a resource advisory group made up of kinship families, adoptive families, and

foster care caregivers to gain feedback on recruitment, retention and support.

- ❖ The Family and Children's Division has a complaint process to handle all complaints for the Department. The complaint process is managed by an objective complaint coordinator located outside of the case carrying sections who meets (mediates) with the parties involved and reviews the files and makes a recommendation to the division director for final decision of the resolution of the complaint.
- ❖ By November 30, 2008 the Department will reinvigorate the current youth advisory committee to enhance its effectiveness and increase ongoing youth participation. This will include developing a mechanism to provide youth a meaningful voice for input into DDHS.
- ❖ Through the model court process, the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court mandated youth attend their permanency hearing. DDHS assists with the coordination of the youth's involvement in the permanency hearings.

### **Conclusion**

This response addresses the recommendations in the Third Party Report and additional comments that the Department offers in light of the Department's own internal review of policies, processes, and outcomes. The department has already undertaken actions to implement many of the recommendations. The timelines in the work plan will ensure that all recommendations are implemented by November 30, 2008.

For a detailed presentation of the actions DDHS is taking in response to the review, please refer to the DDHS Response Report that follows this executive summary.

DDHS management and staff take very seriously its mission to keep children safe. DDHS again thanks the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Child Welfare League of America and the Colorado Department of Human Services for its thorough review.

To ensure ongoing improvement, DDHS has asked the Child Welfare League of America and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to provide an annual update on progress towards implementation of these recommendations. Denver Human Services is committed to working with the State of Colorado Department of Human Services on any and all recommendations resulting from the separate statewide review of child fatalities.

DDHS is grateful to our dedicated staff, elected officials, community partners, parents, youth, law enforcement, schools and legal system for willingly participating in this review. We are committed to working with the entire community to protect children and to assist families.