SAFEKEEPING - As of February 23, 2017, there were 5,936 children entrusted to the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services through state custody.

Dictionaries define safety as “the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury.”

Mississippi Child Protection Services is working to expand that definition even further to include an all-encompassing network of support, encouragement and nurturing for all of Mississippi’s children and their families. To that end, the state’s child welfare agency is proclaiming a year-long focus in 2017 to restore as many children as possible to a safe, loving and nurturing environment.

“Every day we wake up and begin our work, the overriding goal will be to ensure that every child in Mississippi is protected and free from abuse and harm,” said David Chandler, MDCPS commissioner. “Let it not be said that, on our watch, a child was allowed to remain at risk in a dangerous, threatening or unsafe situation.”

MDCPS staff will concentrate on improving the state’s delivery system of prevention and protection programs designed to support and protect children and their families in every Mississippi county. Particular emphasis is being placed on recruiting, training and licensing qualified and caring foster parents and homes to care for children who must be removed, at least temporarily, from their birth families.

"Keeping a child ‘safe’ means more than just removing them from harm’s way. We must do more to prevent at-risk situations from developing."

Tracy Malone
Deputy Commissioner of Child Welfare

The agency is also working this year to recognize and address the lingering effects of trauma experienced by children who have been removed from unsafe environments but, nonetheless, have experienced a disconnect with their support system.
MDCPS leadership and child welfare staff are capitalizing on a 12-month window granted by the U.S. District Court to build and equip a fully functioning stand-alone agency with the capacity to meet and sustain performance goals relating to the care of children placed into state custody.

Under terms of the Second Modified Settlement Agreement and the Stipulated Third Remedial Order sign by U.S. District Court on December 19, MDCPS has until January 1, 2018 before beginning court monitoring of its progress. In the meantime, agency leadership is meeting regularly with consultants from Public Catalyst of New Jersey to establish baseline measurements and develop statistical tools to determine the agency’s effectiveness and performance moving forward.

“This agreement gives you a lot more flexibility so the agency has the ability to manage the way it works while still achieving the outcomes it needs to for the children,” said Kenya Rachal, lead counsel for MDCPS in the Olivia Y lawsuit originally filed in 2004.

“Public Catalyst is actually going to be giving us technical assistance as we create some of our reports and they’re also going to help us establish a baseline for certain critical indicators.”

Some of these key indicators include:
- The rate of maltreatment in care
- Provision of health care for foster children
- Permanency plan development
- Child visitation requirements

Rachal said the settlement agreement has hit the re-set button and provided 12 months for MDCPS to develop a child welfare system able to sustain a high level of quality performance. A top goal for 2017 is developing workable measurement tools to track ongoing performance. Another is to lessen case workloads for frontline workers.

While stressing the critical importance of bringing MDCPS into full compliance with the federal court’s order, Rachal encouraged the agency’s child welfare workers and supervisors to maintain their focus on protecting children and nurturing families.

“You guys go and you take a child into care and you change lives,” she said. “Sometimes it’s just a few words that you say to that child or what you do to that child that makes a difference in their lives – and I want you to continue doing that work every day.”
More than 1,500 MDCPS workers, youth and county court judges, referees, chancellors, youth service counselors, school attendance officers, prosecutors, GALs, intake officers and court administrators gathered during three days of partnership building and team training hosted by the Administrative Office of Courts.

“I do believe that it was clear to everyone who attended that we are all in this together. Although we have different roles to play – we all want to follow the law and protect our children and youth and have them grow up to be successful,” said Supreme Court Justice Dawn Beam.

The three trainings held across the state were a great opportunity to bring all of the parties together who have a piece of the puzzle in working with the children in our care, according to Jennifer Walker, MDCPS professional development director.

Participants also completed work preference profiles to illustrate how understanding various personality and work types can produce improved productivity and foster team building.

**Field operations leaders receive updates**

Regional directors and bureau directors gathered in Jackson for three days in mid-January to discuss updates to agency policies and procedures as well as new ways to streamline operations for more effective delivery of services on the county level. State office staff provided directors with information on the development of the agency’s new CCWIS software and ongoing improvements to the existing MACWIS system. As a part of the development process, IT employees will be shadowing workers on all levels in every Mississippi county office to see how they use the agency’s database software, what functions are used most often and where usage problems occur.

Field operations leadership also received information about a new mental and physical health screening program developed by the University of Mississippi Medical Center to provide comprehensive needs assessments for children and youth.

**AOC teamwork training focuses on partnerships**

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Amelia Franck Meyer counseled a gathering of MDCPS workers in January to expand their definition of safety when dealing with at-risk children to include emotional well-being and protecting a sense of security. The childhood trauma session was sponsored by ReNew MS.

“The number one most stressful event for a child is the death of a parent. Number two is to be separated from a parent,” Meyer said, explaining that the impact of childhood trauma increases the risk of school dropouts, unemployment, homelessness, juvenile arrests and teenage pregnancies.

“Feeling unlovable is trauma. As children, we are dependent on our caregivers for our basic needs and survival. When we are unlovable, our very survival is put at risk.”

Meyer stressed key issues related to childhood trauma:

- Human beings must connect with other humans to thrive and survive, especially infants, children and adolescents.
- When we do not belong, we are vulnerable.
- Helping kids safely belong is urgent.
- When children do not feel safe and lovable, it changes their brains.
- Connections build resilience and protection.
- Trauma disrupts our ability to connect.
- Children “do” their pain, grief, loss and trauma.
- Childhood trauma is pervasive and has lifelong impacts.
- The goal of all treatment is safety and connection.
- There is hope for healing.

Girls Policy Institute

Girls Policy Institute works collaboratively with agencies across Mississippi to reach girls impacted by the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Their mission is to develop a community of young policy leaders throughout the state of Mississippi by equipping young women with the leadership skills, advocacy training and opportunities to create transformative policy change.

In 2017, GPI will partner with several MDCPS regions to host a series of town hall meetings to conduct a needs assessment to identify, from a youth perspective, the availability as well as gaps in existing resources. The work will culminate in a summer 2017 Girls Policy Institute, where regional participants will come together to create statewide policy recommendations.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA - Dr. Amelia Franck Meyer cautioned MDCPS workers to remember that children must have safe, secure and nurturing attachments to adults in order to thrive and survive.

Recognizing effects of childhood trauma

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