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MDCPS safely reduces number of children in state custody

Mississippi currently cares for 700 fewer children and teenagers in foster care than it did 14 months ago thanks to a successful three-pronged effort to reunify families, remove obstacles to adoption and avoid removal of children from birth parents – all while keeping the safety and protection of these children an over-arching priority.

In April 2017, the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services had custody of 6,094 foster children who were removed from their homes by the courts because of neglect, abuse or exploitation. On May 15, 2018, the number of children in foster care had been reduced to 5,403.

“Ensuring the safety and protection of Mississippi’s children is the single most important determination for every action we take regarding the care of these children,” said MDCPS Commissioner Jess H. Dickinson.

“Our priority is to ensure the safety and protection of every child. Our goal is to move these children – safely and prudently – into permanency whether that be reunification with their birth parent or through adoption, if it is determined by the courts it will not be possible to return them to their homes.”

MDCPS is also working with private partners statewide to provide intensive, in-home services to at-risk children and their families. The goal is to resolve issues which, if left unaddressed, could deteriorate to the point that children would not be safe in the home and must be removed and taken into state custody.

Children who come into state custody are placed by court order into licensed foster care - either with a relative (emergency placement) or with a licensed foster family, therapeutic foster homes, group homes, or residential treatment facilities. A child’s placement is determined by what level of care best meets each child’s individual needs.

“At best, foster care is intended to be a temporary intervention for children who need the safety and security of an out-of-home placement. It was never intended to be a long-term or permanent solution to the problem,” Dickinson said.

“We operate on the conviction that children develop best when raised in families and that all children and youth both deserve and need a permanent and loving family.”

To acknowledge these tandem permanency efforts by MDCPS, Gov. Phil Bryant declared May as Foster Care Month and June as Family Reunification Month in Mississippi. October will be observed as Adoption Awareness month.

MDCPS has also emphasized the recruitment and licensure of additional foster care homes in all Mississippi counties to provide safe and caring temporary placements for children in custody. In the past 12 months, Mississippi has licensed more than 330 new foster homes in 50 Mississippi counties. Currently, MDCPS has 2,768 licensed foster homes to accept children in custody.

“Everything we do works together to keep children safe and protected,” Dickinson concluded. “Each day we show up to work, we see a success story.”

On May 21, Dickinson participated in an Adoption Day celebration held in Marion County in which the court finalized adoptions for children – one who had been in the foster care system for more than three years. It was one of numerous events held statewide.

“So many wonderful people work hard every day and night to protect these children and find them safe homes. I am so grateful to be a part of this celebration,” Dickinson said.

On May 9, Dickinson attended a first-ever Reunification Day celebration in Jackson County during which nine families were reunited with the children, upon court order, after the parents had addressed specific problems and resolved safety issues which had led to the children’s removal from their homes.

“You have proven to yourselves and to your families that you are willing to do what it takes to succeed, because your children and your families are worth it,” Dickinson told the parents gathered in the courtroom. “Everyone has family problems. Many run away from them but you had the courage and the will and determination to face them, and to fix them.”

- **Adoption**

In 2016, MDCPS identified more than 1,500 children in state custody who had a permanent plan for adoption but whose case progress had stalled. Working in tandem with the Office of the Attorney General and the court system, MDCPS began in July/August 2017 to examine each case to identify obstacles to adoptions being finalized. A new director was promoted to manage the Permanency Support Services Unit. The changes implemented have significantly decreased processing times for all adoption documentation, tasks and submissions.

MDCPS has also made it a priority to move children as quickly as possible from state custody to a successful adoption whenever adoption is the child's permanent plan and reunification with the birth family is not possible or recommended. In partnership with Casey Family Programs, MDCPS began a process of Rapid Permanency Reviews in Spring 2017. This has resulted in a significant increase in finalized adoptions.

In fiscal year 2017, there were 302 adoptions finalized. In fiscal year 2018, the agency has already finalized 574 adoptions.

- **Reunification**

In 2017, MDCPS facilitated the safe reunification of 2,272 foster children and youth with their birth families. The agency has increased efforts in 2018 to make sure safety and neglect issues are resolved by working closely with families and parents to address and resolve problems so children can be safely reunited in as short a time as possible.

“Reunification takes work, commitment and a huge investment of time and resources by parents, family members, family service specialists, foster parents, service providers, attorney, courts and the community at-large,” Dickinson said. “These families work hard to overcome an array of challenges to reunify safely.”

- **Safe at Home**

MDCPS has adopted a comprehensive plan of work which focuses all staff efforts to identify and implement measures to keep families intact whenever safely possible. This includes: strengthening initial safety assessment tools and protocols, providing expanded and more intensive in-home services; ensuring all reasonable efforts have been made before recommending removal of a child from the home; strengthening

family plans to resolve safety/risk issues as expeditiously as possible; and maximizing use of all federal funding to supplement state-funded child protection efforts.

In January 2018, MDCPS launched statewide an intensive, in-home services program “in-CIRCLE” which provides at least 10 hours of in-home services to at-risk families. The goal is to resolve issues which, if left unaddressed, could deteriorate to the point that children would not be safe and must be taken into state custody. MDCPS staff, along with two non-profit subcontractors, work with the children and families to reduce/prevent trauma caused by removing children from their birth parent’s custody. In-Circle is provided through a contract with Canopy Children’s Services and Youth Villages.

Of the families receiving these services, 89 percent report the overall safety of their child or children has “significantly” improved; 78 percent say they are “very confident” they will use the skills they have learned to ensure their child stays in their home and 75% say the relationship with their child has “significantly improved.”

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Children in MDCPS Custody

(As of the last day of each month)

- April 2017 – 6,094
- May 2017 – 5,930
- June 2017 – 5,950
- July 2017 – 5,891
- August 2017 – 5,855
- September 2017 – 5,819
- October 2017 – 5,830
- November 2017 – 5,735
- December 2017 – 5,577
- January 2018 – 5,578
- February 2018 – 5,477
- March 2018 – 5,506
- April 2018 – 5,450
- May 2018 – 5,403* (*5/15/2018)

