

Department
of Children's
Services
Strategic Plan

2020-2024

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Commissioner Message

The Department of Children's Services (DCS) is Tennessee's child welfare agency, providing care, treatment, and support for the state's most vulnerable citizens. Established through legislation in April 1996, DCS protects children who are victims of abuse or neglect, strengthens families through treatment and trauma-based services, provides services that lead to permanency for children in state custody, and develops community-driven solutions to challenges faced by young people and their families. The department's top priority is the safety of children and the public. That is the guiding principle that drives our work to serve children and families in Tennessee.

The department's four-year strategic plan is largely guided by the implementation of the Families First Prevention Service Act (FFPSA). This important federal legislation passed by Congress in 2018 is intended to curtail the use of group care for children and places an emphasis on family foster homes and services that will help families stay safely together.

DCS successfully implemented the FFPSA on July 1, 2021, months before the federal deadline imposed on child welfare agencies in all 50 states and the department's five year-prevention plan has been approved by the Children's Bureau. However, this is just the start. As the FFPSA is carried out, the department will continue to put more evidence-based prevention programs in place to help keep children out of state custody and provide quality residential treatment programs for those children who do come into the state's care. DCS has an opportunity to move the needle on child welfare by being a leader in shifting public policy and making a difference in the lives of Tennessee children for decades to come.

DCS' four-year strategic plan also focuses on workforce recruitment, training, and retention and enhancing the array of services to meet the needs of children and families.

This strategic plan establishes numerous and specific goals that is guiding the work of the department's three major divisions (child safety, child programs, and juvenile justice) through 2024 and beyond.

On behalf of the dedicated DCS case managers and other staff in all 95 counties across the state who serve children and families every day, I am encouraged and excited for what the future holds for the Department of Children's Services and how we can make lives better for all Tennesseans.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Nichols
Commissioner

Mission, Vision, Values Overview

Mission

- Provide high quality prevention and support services to children and families that promote safety, permanency, and well-being.

Vision

- To create safe and healthy environments for children where they can live with supportive families and engaged communities.

Values

- **Relationships:** The child welfare system in Tennessee is a collaborative, aligned system of partners that provides unique interventions to our most vulnerable populations.
- **Integrity:** Ethics, fairness, and sincerity are the foundation for a successful organization.
- **Diversity:** Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and to maintain strong connections with their identified community, faith, and culture.
- **Learning:** Staff should have opportunities and managerial support for continuous professional development and innovation.

Goal 1: Implement Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA)

Objective 1: By July 1, 2022, the Division of Federal Programs will host informational sessions with provider agencies on well-supported evidence-based treatment models included in Tennessee's Five -Year Prevention Services Plan to better enable those providers to make informed decisions about choosing new treatment models.

To meet this objective:

- Define new FFPSA structure and merge existing workgroups into one workgroup. The workgroup will meet frequently to ensure the department is on track with implementation benchmarks.
- Work with providers to collect and distribute information regarding the eight new prevention programs.
- Partner with Fiscal to develop service rates for each of the new treatment models covered by the prevention services plan.

Objective 2: By July 2025 recruit and train provider agencies to deliver Parent-Child Interactive Therapy, Parents As Teachers, Home Builders, Brief Strategic Family Therapy, and Nurse Family Partnership across the state.

To meet this objective:

- Publish Request for Proposals to solicit provider agencies interested in delivering the new prevention services by October 2023.
- Use FFPSA implementation funding to pay for the delivery of the new prevention programs by September 2025
- Assess current MST contract to determine need for expansion by July 2023.

Objective 3: By August 2023, the Division of Federal Programs will assess the Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTP) to identify trends in children and youth who remain in a QRTP long enough to require a designated Commissioner Review and provide performance information on regions meeting required QRTP benchmarks.

To meet this objective:

- Review Commissioner Review forms submitted between July 2022 and June 2023 to identify trends in children/youth's reason for requiring longer stays, as well as providers that have longer lengths of stay.
- Review regional QRTP spreadsheets created between July 2022 and June 2023 to identify regional trends, training needs, and potential court or other systemic barriers impacting performance.

Goal 2: Address Workforce Recruitment, Training, and Retention

Objective 1: The Human Resources Division, working in tandem with Regional Leadership, will develop a recruitment strategy to attract and retain qualified staff.

To meet this objective:

- Continue recruitment efforts at colleges and universities to include at least two visits annually and expand participation at other career fairs and venues at least quarterly to identify qualified candidates.
- Continue partnership with Communications to improve social media messaging of frontline positions and attract career professionals.
- Increase recruitment of multilingual employees and implement a pay differential for those with fluency in needed languages by January 2023.
- Analyze case manager job specifications to ensure alignment of expectations for qualified staff by July 2022.

Objective 2: Employ an external consultant to review current standards of practice and provide recommendations to create a more efficient and streamlined system that continues to place an emphasis on quality services.

To meet this objective:

- Hire an external consultant to provide guidance, direction, and recommendations to streamline system by June 2022.
- Identify representatives from all program areas and divisions to engage in this work with the consultant by June 2022.
- Representatives will review existing standards of practice with consultant by December 2022.
- Consultant will provide recommendations to TN DCS by June 2023.
- DCS will vet recommendations and identify action steps to implement by December 2023.
- All action steps will be fully implemented by June 2024.

Goal 3: Develop and Implement Strategies to Strengthen Network Development and to Address Child/Youth Placement Stability

Objective 1: The Department will initiate strategies and action steps that progressively assess and reevaluate the efficiencies embedded under the umbrella of DCS Network Development as part of ongoing quality improvement efforts.

To meet the objective:

- Reassess how regional vs. central office placement responsibilities are aligned and make changes as indicated for improved efficiency.
- Revisit provider agreements to address referral process and responsiveness to agreements.
- Institute protocols and methodologies to ensure that placement requests are guided by appropriate assessments.
- Work with regions to develop utilization review practices that result in appropriate and timely movement and a higher percentage of step-downs from high level placements.
- Integrate Chapin Hall needs assessment recommendations into placement planning where indicated.
- Expand the network through exploration of unused beds or expanded capacity.
- Re-assess the UCA process, how it currently functions, and implement practice changes to improve efficiency and reduce cost.

Objective 2: The Department will implement a foster home placement assessment model designed to test the validity of improving placement stability rates by assuring that when children enter custody a full-scale clinical assessment may guide the efficacy and sustainability of future placements.

To meet the objective:

- Develop a profile and protocol for assessment foster homes.
- Recruit homes that are willing to serve as assessment homes.
- Create an orientation and an enhanced training module for homes selected.
- Research and adapt a structured methodology to meet the educational needs of children/youth placed in homes outside their school districts.
- Select a provider skilled in clinical assessments and consultation to evaluate the child/youth in the foster home setting for a period of 14-30 days and provide an informed recommendation regarding needed level of care.
- Develop an evaluation process that determines whether outcomes for children placed in assessment homes reflect measurable improvements in placement stability.