

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

**HENDERSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

MEETING DATE: May 16, 2012
SUBJECT: Social Services' Informational Update
PRESENTER: Melinda Lowrance, Member, DSS Board
ATTACHMENTS: Yes

SUMMARY OF REQUEST:

The DSS Board is providing monthly three-minute informational updates to the Board of Commissioners regarding various Social Services issues. The May 2012 update, provided by DSS Board member Melinda Lowrance, pertains to the issue of Child Protective Services in Henderson County.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

No Board action requested. This item is for information only.

Suggested Motion:

No motion suggested.

Good Morning. I am Melinda Lowrance, member of the Henderson County Board of Social Services. I am here to present information regarding Child Protective Services, the fourth topic in our series on the role of DSS in the community. We appreciate the support of the Board of Commissioners for this series of presentations as part of our efforts to educate the public and advocate for the state-mandated role of DSS.

Every Henderson County child has the right to be safe. Child abuse and neglect threaten a child's safety by placing the child at risk of physical and emotional harm and even death. Parents have the fundamental and legal right to raise their children and our community presumes parents will protect their children from harm. When parents fail to protect children from the harm of abuse and neglect, our community has a responsibility to intervene to protect the child.

While the true extent of child abuse and neglect is not known in Henderson County, 2500 children were reported to Social Services in 2010-11 by someone in our community alleging the child was being maltreated by their parents. Most reports were from relatives, neighbors, schools, law enforcement, doctors and non-profits. A report is a request to Social Services for an investigation into a suspected incident of abuse or neglect; a report is not necessarily a fact...it is the raising of a question about a child's safety. In order for Social Services to investigate, a report must describe and meet NC Statute legal definitions of abuse or neglect. Of the 2500 children reported in 2010-11, Social Services investigated 1770 children. Investigations are an involuntary intervention with a family and must meet the letter of the law.

Of the 1770 children investigated, 95 were removed from their home by a judge. For up to twelve hours, a DSS worker, doctor or law enforcement officer can remove a child if a child appears in imminent risk of harm; more than twelve hours requires a judge's ruling. The Social Services investigation must have facts to present to the court for a judge to remove a child. I've learned, through my service on the Board of Social Services, that the social worker must also provide proof work was done to prevent the removal. A judge is required by federal law to have findings of fact in the court order that Social Services worked to keep the child(ren) in the home.

I've heard it said if someone (a child advocate or a parent advocate) isn't mad...then DSS is not doing its job. Protecting children is no simple task. In every child protection case, a Social Services worker works with the inherent tension between the child's rights and the parent's rights....balancing child safety and the parent's constitutional rights. I did not know prior to becoming a Social Services Board member that, by law, Social Services must insure both the child's and parent's rights are protected. The law says social workers must insure each child and parent receives services, due process and legal representation. This dual role drives much of the controversy in child protection by DSS.

Over 90% of needs found in investigations are based on neglect, not abuse, and Social Services arranges for or provides services to children and their parents to address these needs. Services are provided without regard to income and may include in-home specialists, day care, parenting/child management classes, mental health services, financial and employment assistance. Mental health assessments and counseling are provided on-site at DSS, or in the home, by an outposted **Families Together, Inc.** worker located at the main DSS office. The collaboration with Families Together, Inc. assures timely and quality mental health services for children and parents. Of the 148 children referred to Families Together, Inc., 91% had mental health services started the day of referral.

Since 1998, Social Services has contracted with **The Mediation Center (formerly Dispute Settlement Center)** to facilitate child and family team meetings. The Board of Social Services believes that social workers have a great deal to contribute to child safety, but important to resolving problems are the families themselves and other community service providers. The Mediation Center facilitated meetings for 330 children (201 parents) in FY 2010-11 in a safe environment so all parties, particularly parents, could be heard and a mutually agreed upon plan made to better address child safety and the family's needs.

In cases involving abuse or serious neglect, the Social Services Board supports multi-disciplinary team staffings at **The Healing Place**. Bi-weekly meetings, facilitated by The Healing Place staff, are held to establish a dialogue and plan shared by primary protection providers (Social Services, law enforcement and the District Attorney's Office); a medical doctor is also a core participant. In FY 2010-11, 200 new cases were reviewed. Mutual planning between child protection professionals improves decision making, safety outcomes, cooperation between professionals and litigation.

The Board of Social Services wishes to thank our community partners working to ensure Henderson County children are safe. Henderson County has a high number of child abuse/neglect referrals from the community; that means our partners and concerned citizens care and report any suspected abuse or neglect to Social Services in order to keep children safe.

Thank you for your interest and support. I would be glad to take any questions.