

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

**HENDERSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

MEETING DATE: July 18, 2012
SUBJECT: Social Services' Informational Update
PRESENTER: Gary Cyphers, DSS Board Member
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 July 2012 update, provided by DSS Board member Gary Cyphers, pertains to the issue of foster children.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

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

Suggested Motion:

No motion suggested.

In my role as a volunteer on the Henderson County Board of Social Services, learning what foster children go through has caused me to reflect upon my childhood. I had two parents who loved me and made sure I had a nice place to live and food to eat. I grew up like most everybody does: I went to school, had friends, had a home with a dog and celebrated holidays (especially Christmas and my birthday)...I was living life the way it was supposed to be. Some children, however, do not have a clue about how daily living during childhood should be.

Children come into foster care because they have been victims of abuse or neglect. Some require help with undisciplined and delinquent behaviors. Many require care for physical or emotional handicaps or disabilities. Once in foster care, a child is on a path that is dictated by federal and state law. There are specified events, guidelines and timelines that must be followed for foster children by everyone who works with the child. Children entering foster care may experience grief and emotion at the separation from parents and challenges adjusting to a new environment.

The following is a story about "Micah", a composite of many foster children. My hope is that you will understand that beyond the term "foster child" exist children who only want to grow up the way it is supposed to be:

This story begins on day one when Micah, an eight-year old boy, is removed from his mother by a judge because she is in jail for drug abuse...again. This is an emergency situation and the DSS social worker places Micah with a foster family until information can be gathered and it can be determined if there is a relative who will care for him. On day ten, Micah learns he will not be going home soon; the court ruled Micah returning home would not be safe. He will be staying with another foster family who can commit to on-going care. Micah meets other people involved in his case. While most children learn that school is important, Micah never had a role model to make him think of school as important. Not being able to read or write was not a matter of concern to him or his mother. When he is enrolled in the neighborhood school, he finds that he is very far behind his classmates. After two months, Micah is learning the routine and what is expected of him, but going to court looms ahead. He feels confident that his mother will be better and he will go home. Instead, the court find Micah's mother is still abusing drugs, is not working and has moved in with a new boyfriend. A court order is made that specifies what his mother must do to get Micah back. Children in foster care have feelings like everyone else. Rejected by his mother, Micah feels angry, unloved, unwanted and blaming himself for what has happened. By month five, Micah is disruptive, uncooperative, and disrespectful according to his foster parents and they have asked for Micah to be removed due to his disruption to their home. Meanwhile, the social worker has been continuing to work with relatives in the hope that a relative will step up for Micah's care. An uncle, watching Micah's situation, decides his sister is not going to be willing to do what's needed for Micah. During months five to nine, Micah settles in under the care of his uncle and the other relatives who have taken a special interest in helping him and supporting his uncle. Micah trusts his uncle and is learning to trust others. His relatives and the DSS social worker have helped him understand why he can't be with his mother and that he is not responsible for her problems. During month ten, Micah learns at a hearing that the court agrees with the DSS social worker and others that his placement is going well, his school grades are up and his emotional well-being is greatly improved. Micah is being cared for and watched over by a caring uncle who cares about what happens to him. Several months later, the court awarded custody of Micah to his uncle.

In FY 2011/12, two hundred (200) children were in foster care, ranging in age from infants to age twenty-one. Of those children, 51% were between the ages of 0-5 and 32% were ages 6-12. Most children were cared for in a relative's home (34%) or a foster parent's home (49%). A small number of children spent time in a group home, therapeutic facility, detention center or jail.

Each foster child has an independent judge-appointed Guardian ad Litem (GAL) working solely for the child's rights. The DSS social worker is mandated to work to protect both the child's and parent's rights. This difficult role of the social worker...wearing two hats...is often a source of emotion and confusion for the foster child, foster parents and others working with the child. Federal law requires the judge must rule

a child's court hearing that the DSS social worker has made "reasonable" efforts to return a child to his/her parent(s) and whether going home is contrary to the child's welfare.

It is the hope of DSS that all foster care situations end on a happy note like "Micah's" did. Our social workers, foster parents, GALs and community partners put forth their best efforts to accomplish positive results for children in foster care.

Continued Hearings Reported by NC Administrative Office of the Courts

District/ County	2005-2006			2010-2011		
	Total Hearings	Continued Hearings	% of Cont'd Hearings	Total Hearings	Continued Hearings	% of Cont'd Hearings
District 29B Henderson	536	290	54.1 0%	1168	260	22.2 6%

Henderson County legal and social work staff, the Board of Social Services and former County Commissioners worked together to put measures in place to reduce court continuances for children in foster care. Every continuance either delays a child returning home or delays a child's adoption. Henderson County attorney Susan Fosmire and Social Services Program Manager Jerrie McFalls are to be commended for this outcome that has made a difference for children.