

# CONNECTIONS

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*Bringing Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' employees closer together*

## Protecting Vulnerable Nebraskans: Meet some of the Heroes of Adult Protective Services

By Melissa Lindell

*June is Elder Abuse Awareness Month, and we want to highlight some of the good work that our Adult Protective Services team is doing across the state to help vulnerable adults who may experience abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation.*

We put out a call for stories and received several. These are just some of the ways that #TeamDHHS is helping people live better lives:

 APS had several reports and investigations with one couple who lived by themselves. During the first investigation, the family would not allow the worker into the home. The husband was terminally ill and in and out of the hospital. The family was isolated both geographically and emotionally from their family. It was not until the third investigation after the husband passed away that Melody Hulse was able to get into the home and the wife was willing to accept services. A niece agreed to become Power of Attorney and she and Melody worked together to get services in the home.

After her husband passed away, the wife was left with about \$300,000 of debt. The wife also had a son from a

previous relationship who she had not had contact with for about 10 years because her husband told the son not to come around and manipulated the wife to believe her son wanted nothing to do with him.

When a call was made to the Area Agency on Aging to arrange for services, it was learned one of the people at the agency was her daughter-in-law and the woman agreed to meet with her son and daughter-in-law. She reconnected with them and the grandchildren that she had not seen for 10 years. The idea that the son did not want anything to do with his mom was not accurate.

Her daughter-in-law is now taking home-made meals to her each week, and her Power of Attorney is working with an auction company to liquidate assets to pay off the debt. In the end, the success is the reconnection with family that she had lost during her marriage.


**LaDonna Mead**  
*Child and Family Services Specialist Supervisor/Adult Protective Services*



 A local fire chief complimented the work of Randy Agena with a physically disabled client living in neglectful circumstances. This client had very limited mobility and frequently fell due to physical and environmental circumstances, and then was not able to get up. The fire chief explained that they frequently had to go to her house to pick her up, which sometimes caused them to arrive late to other emergencies. The client, whose partner recently passed away, was depressed. She was having trouble addressing her needs and managing her care because of depression. She was not able to maintain her needs at her apartment, and was in danger of eviction. Randy put together a team of people to meet with the client to address concerns and come up with a solution to her problems. The client admitted she was scared and unable to meet her needs, and that she needed help around the clock. The staffer arranged for the client to receive rehabilitative care at a nursing facility because this is what the client needed at that time. The fire chief

said a lot of people tried to figure out how to help this person, but nobody knew what to do until Randy became involved. This case exemplifies what APS is about: honoring personal autonomy while establishing safety. Our team is lucky to have Randy as a member."

**Ben Kroeze**  
*Adult Protective Services Supervisor*

 We received a case about an elderly woman who was about to lose her home. Otto Burton established a rapport with the woman and quickly realized that she was experiencing some cognitive impairment. Otto decided it would be best for her to be evaluated and worked with a geriatrician to have an evaluation completed in the woman's home. At the same time, Otto worked tirelessly to find a new living environment for the woman, calling numerous apartment complexes and reaching out to the woman's children, who refused to assist their mother.

Eventually, Otto was able to have a guardian appointed through the Office of Public Guardian. His intuition and the intuition of the geriatrician lead us to believe the woman was being exploited and decided to subpoena her bank records.

(Continued on page 8)

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**DHHS Helpline:** 1-800-254-4202, (402) 471-6035 in Lincoln, or via email at [dhhs.helpline@nebraska.gov](mailto:dhhs.helpline@nebraska.gov)

Chief Executive Officer: <b>Courtney Phillips</b>	Medicaid and Long-Term Care Interim Director: <b>Rocky Thompson</b>
Behavioral Health Division Director: <b>Sheri Dawson</b>	Public Health Division Director: <b>Tom Williams, M.D.</b>
Children and Family Services Division Director: <b>Doug Weinberg</b>	Developmental Disabilities Division Director: <b>Courtney Miller</b>

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CLS Administrator: <b>Kathie Osterman</b>	Graphics and Layout: <b>Judy Barker</b>
Editor: <b>Melissa Lindell</b>	

**Readers are invited to submit news, photos and story ideas to the editor via:**

**Phone:** (402) 471-4047  
**Fax:** (402) 471-3996  
**E-mail:** [dhhs.pio@nebraska.gov](mailto:dhhs.pio@nebraska.gov)  
**Interagency mail:** NE State Office Bldg, 3rd Floor  
**U.S. mail:** P.O. Box 95026  
 301 Centennial Mall South  
 Lincoln, Nebraska 68509-5026

# Let the Summer Fun Begin

By Leah Bucco-White

Summer is one of the most exciting times of the year for kids, but it's also a time when kids can be at risk for injuries. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is here to help with our 10 summer safety tips to keep your adventures as safe as they are fun.

1. **Swim safely.** Have a responsible adult supervise children swimming or playing in or around water. Wear a life jacket when boating.
2. **Protect your skin.** Put on sunscreen that is at least SPF 15 and has UVA and UVB protection and a wide-brimmed hat to protect your skin from the sun. Reapply sunscreen



after swimming and excessive sweating.

3. **Stay hydrated.** Drink plenty of water even if you don't feel thirsty.
4. **Don't get bit.** Use bug spray. Put on insect repellent with DEET or Picaridin to protect from mosquito and tick bites. Be sure to follow the instructions on the label.
5. **Wear a helmet.** A properly-fitted helmet is the best way to prevent head injuries while biking, skating and skateboarding. And ride on the sidewalk when you can.
6. **Buckle up.** Use seat belts, child safety seats, and booster seats as appropriate for a child's age and size for any trip across town or across the country.
7. **Wash your hands often.** Wash hands with clear running water and apply soap. Rub hands for at least 20 seconds, then rinse.

8. **Chill or refrigerate leftovers quickly.** Don't leave food out at room temperature for longer than two hours (or one hour if the outdoor temperature is above 90° F).
9. **Walk safely.** It's always best to walk on sidewalks or paths and cross at street corners, using traffic signals and crosswalks while looking left, right and left again before crossing the street.
10. **Be an engaged driver.** Distracted driving is driving while doing another activity that takes your attention away from driving, like texting, using in-vehicle navigation, and eating.

Like these tips? Be sure to follow DHHS on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



## EDITOR'S NOTE: From Melissa Lindell

This edition is my last issue of *Connections*. I am leaving Nebraska to move to Upstate New York in July. I want you all to know that it has been my privilege to work with every one here. I have met some wonderful people at DHHS, and have made lasting friendships too. I want to thank you for sending in your ideas for stories, for the website, and letting me know about the good things that are happening here at DHHS. Please continue to do that by sending those ideas to [dhhs.pio@nebraska.gov](mailto:dhhs.pio@nebraska.gov). Thank you for everything #TeamDHHS!





*Courtney Phillips, CEO*

## *Message from Courtney Phillips, CEO*

### **Happy Summer #TeamDHHS!**

I hope that y'all have been able to get outside and enjoy this warm weather and some of the things our great state has to offer. I plan on heading back out across the state this summer to see members of #TeamDHHS and talk about the progress being made on our Business Plan.

You may remember that 2016 marked the launch of our first-ever agency Business Plan, "Real Improvements, Sustainable Progress. Better Lives for Nebraskans." The 25 initiatives in the plan served as a road map for us to achieve Gov. Ricketts' goals for our state. The Department completed 19 of the 25 initiatives with significant progress made on the

remainder. Several of the initiatives span beyond the 2016-2017 Business Plan and are being carried forward with expanded strategies and deliverables. Our new Business Plan, covering July 1, 2017- June 30, 2018, will be launched soon.

The past month, our team has been working hard to make updates to that Business Plan, and to set the next goals for the agency. The plan is designed to strategically guide our team as we work to fulfill our mission to help Nebraskans live better lives every day.

I want you to know that we are making progress as an agency. That is evident in continued improvements to ACCESSNebraska. Average call wait times for economic assistance decreased from 14 minutes in August 2015 to under five, and wait times for the Medicaid call centers have been consistently under five minutes. Timely processing of 95.28 percent of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program applications ranks Nebraska 15th in the nation compared with 48th in April 2015.

We improved our application process for developmental disability services. The agency consistently heard the process was confusing and cumbersome, and we worked diligently to create efficiencies. Time to determine

eligibility was slashed from an average of 69 days to 14. The application was streamlined from 14 pages to three, and developmental disability services were added to the ACCESSNebraska website to access information any time.

Our team has worked to make processes easier for those we serve. We prioritized a customer-friendly process for the approximately 176,000 health care professionals the department licenses annually. Simplified applications, streamlined screening and faster turnaround times are improvements made to nurse, medication aide and other licensing processes.

Many people were involved in the implementation of Heritage Health, Medicaid's new managed care program. It began operations on January 1, 2017, integrating physical health, behavioral health and pharmacy services into a single comprehensive and coordinated system. Having one health plan responsible for a more complete range of services encourages better health outcomes and more cost-effective services.

We also are working to tackle the problem of prescription drug overdoses. The Department and the Nebraska Health Information Initiative launched an enhanced prescription

drug monitoring program as part of our prescription drug overdose prevention initiatives. Health care professionals who prescribe and dispense medications now have online access to patients' controlled substance medication histories, and all dispensed prescriptions for controlled substances must be reported to the system.

These are just some examples of the progress that we have made as a team in the last year. There are too many to mention here, but this will give you a sample of some of the accomplishments you've achieved.

None of these could be accomplished without the tireless work that you do each day. Thank you for being a dedicated member of #TeamDHHS who live our mission of helping people live better lives.

# In Gratitude



The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' mission: **Helping people live better lives.**



Here are some letters & notes DHHS employees have received thanking us for the work we do every day to help people live better lives.

Dear **Courtney Phillips,**

It is good to read about progress in the Department and our Governor's approval. Change is always very challenging. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

**Dr. James Walton Blackburn, Ph.D.**

Dear **Sondra Brown** (SSW, ESA)

I want to commend Sondra for her timeliness, compassion, and overall professionalism! I want her recognized for being nice over and above the normal treatment my clients usually receive from HHS workers!!!

Thank you,

**Carol** (Douglas County Mental Health Program Intensive Case Manager)

Dear **DHHS Fremont CSC,**

Thanks for all of your support! [For the Spring Sundries event, which served many families]. Bless your hearts.

**Renae Kirshenmann,**  
Fremont Salvation Army

Dear **Ms. Maggie Thoms:**

I am writing to you today to recognize Jennifer Menebroker, SSW. Jen has been our caseworker in our Medicaid application for my father. My dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's some time ago and currently resides in a memory care facility in Columbus.

Jen has been absolutely great to work with. Her compassion, sense of empathy to our situation, her communication, and her professionalism has exceeded our expectations. This has been a difficult time for our family, and Jen has been a source of reassurance for us during this time. Jen has helped us navigate through all of the requirements for the Medicaid worksheet, the application process, and through the final verification of resources. We had received some advice from elder attorneys prior to beginning the process that left us unsure as to how to proceed, but Jen has provided clear answers and sound direction on what we needed to do. I can't imagine having to go through this process without her guidance.

Myself and my family feel very fortunate to have had her assigned as our caseworker. She has done an outstanding job, and I wanted to recognize her efforts.

Sincerely,

**A thankful family member**

**Carol Halley** (SSW, WSA) was "outstanding and went above and beyond" her duties to assist me with what started out as a frustrating phone call. Carol was "lovely" to visit with to be commended on our agency having such an employee.

**A Grateful client**

# Teen Driver Safety is No Accident

A new program is helping one state make the streets safer for teen drivers

*This story first appeared on the website of (EDC) Education Development Center, Inc., a global education and health nonprofit organization. Jeanne Bietz, is DHHS's Motor Vehicle Safety Coordinator within the Injury Prevention Program.*

By most measures, [Nebraska's Graduated Driving Licensing \(GDL\)](#) program, which governs motor vehicle use for teenage drivers, has been a success. Since the law went into effect in 1998, teen driving fatalities in the state have decreased 60 percent. And in 2016, [only 20 teen drivers](#) were involved in fatal crashes—the lowest number in years.

But at [13.3 deaths per 100,000 teenagers](#), the rate of teen fatalities due to motor vehicle crashes in Nebraska is still nearly twice the national average of 7.2 per 100,000.

With research showing that implementation of GDL restrictions does lower fatalities, Jeanne Bietz, Nebraska's motor vehicle safety coordinator, believes that the key to saving more lives is to better educate the people with the greatest responsibility for monitoring and enforcing these restrictions—parents.

“When parents in Nebraska want information about teen driver licensing, they often go to the state's drivers' manual and the department of motor vehicles,” says Bietz. “But these sources



Jeanne Bietz, Motor Vehicle Safety Coordinator in the DHHS Injury Prevention Program.

focus on the process for licensure, not driving rules and regulations for teens. So a lot of parents just don't know that teens face driving restrictions. We have a lot of work to do.”

For the past 18 months, Bietz and a team from Nebraska has been working with the Child Safety Collaborative Innovation and Improvement Network (CS CoIIN), a program of the [Children's Safety Network \(CSN\)](#) at EDC, to identify ways to better inform Nebraska parents about GDL.

## Getting results

The team first designed a card to educate parents about the requirements and benefits of the GDL program,

which in Nebraska, begins as early as 14 1/4 years and encompasses four different types of permits.

Next, it was time to test the card. Rather than using a standard statewide evaluation, which would have taken months to conduct, Bietz opted for a series of parent focus groups. She credits the CS CoIIN with helping her develop a plan that gave her accurate, timely feedback.

“I was glad to focus on the immediate data we could collect from our target groups,” Bietz says.

The focus groups generated important insights. Not only did they confirm Bietz's belief that many parents had limited information about GDL, but they also showed that the card was effective in informing parents about teen driving practices. Feedback from these focus groups was incorporated into a second version of the card, which was then disseminated in five Nebraska schools.

“Nebraska's reliance on data from the interviews and quick pilot studies was a big deal,” says EDC's **Jennifer Allison**, who directs CSN. “We're trying to help states see that

making decisions based on ‘some data now’ can be better than waiting for ‘perfect data later.’”

These efforts are making a difference. This spring, 98 driver licensing offices throughout Nebraska are distributing a new GDL informational card to teen drivers—and their parents—when teens apply for their learner's permits. Bietz is also enlisting the help of state and local law enforcement, pediatricians, and insurance companies to reinforce the message that GDL saves lives.

“In public health, you often don't see the reward of your work for years,” she says. “But with the CoIIN teen driver safety cohort, we've been able to get parents the information we know they need. It's immediate gratification.”



# High School Students also Educated at Schools Operated by DHHS

*Adapted from a News Release by Russ Reno and Julie Naughton*

About 20,000 Nebraska students cross a stage each spring to receive their high school diploma. Another group of students who are less visible also attends classes and earns their diplomas in non-traditional schools operated by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Young men at the Hastings Regional Center in Hastings attend the Nebraska Youth Academy. The Lincoln Regional Center's Whitehall campus in Lincoln serves young men who take classes at the Morton School. Both facilities offer high school credits to keep youth on course to graduate from their home high school.

The Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTCs) in Kearney for boys and Geneva for girls also provide credits. In addition, students may earn their diploma at the schools located on-campus, West Kearney High School or Geneva North High School.

"Continuing a youth's educational progress is critical to their rehabilitation," said DHHS CEO Courtney Phillips. "Education is one of the most important assets a youth can earn while under our care. Their future success may very well hinge on not only earning a diploma, but also any encouragement we can instill in them to continue their education or to prepare for a vocation."

"When most youth arrive, they're usually behind on completing their high school credits," said John McArthur,

principal at West Kearney High School. "About 50 percent have previously attended special education classes, or have a verified disability. This can result in youth acting out in school, which may lead to the reason they are here. The root of the youth's problem can be a disability."

First thing on arrival, their academic standing is evaluated, especially math and reading. If test scores are low, more are conducted to identify other educational gaps. A part of the youths' treatment program is an academic plan that fits their individual needs. Their plan becomes part of the program the youth must complete.

"The youth at the YRTC arrive with so much turbulence and instability in their lives," said Matt Asche, principal at Geneva North High. "Throughout their time here, they are regularly reminded that one certainty in life is that their education can never be taken away."

Students at the DHHS schools study in a supportive environment where they hear the benefits of getting an education. For some students, completing their education turns into an expectation.

"On occasion, the youth have a sense of possible hopelessness to graduate on time," said Nebraska Youth Academy Principal Craig McLey. "Once they realize that it can be accomplished, they have told me their attitudes toward their education changes because they know that we truly care about their success."

During calendar year 2016, a total

of 1,995 credits were earned by youth at the Nebraska Youth Academy, noted McLey. The youth averaged 29 credits each prior to discharge, which equates with a semester of credits. Last year at Whitehall, students earned 970 credits.

At the YRTCs, students attend an eight-period day and can earn 35 credits a semester, which is typical for Nebraska high school students. They can earn up to 20 additional credits in the summer or 90 total each year.

At Geneva North High, Asche said 31 youth graduated in 2015 and 2016, and so far this year, four young women have received their diploma. Four young men recently graduated from West Kearney High. Twenty-one students graduated from in 2015 and 2016, and one earned his GED certificate.

Brenda Towns, staff assistant at Geneva North, praised the caring and dedication of school staff. "They give 100 percent in the best interests of the girls," she said. "Teachers and other staff come in early and stay late, including weekends, to meet the needs of the girls."

One recent graduate at YRTC-Geneva found that creating a bond with the teachers helped her succeed at Geneva North. She added that without the supports at

YRTC-Geneva, she would have had more difficulty graduating from a traditional school.

Her experience, in particular, caught the eye of Dr. Kenneth Zoucha, medical director for the Hastings Regional Center and YRTC-Geneva. After years of living with active and untreated mental illness and substance use disorder, she was very angry, defiant and scared. In February, she walked away from the YRTC-Geneva and was returned a day later.

"Since then, she worked with her treatment team to reengage in the program and with amazing success, completed the requirements and has graduated," he said. (Continued on page 7)



In the photo are, left, Frank Heinisch, Advisory Board Chair, presenting a diploma to one of the young women. Also pictured are Matt Asche, principal of Geneva North, and Lt. Gov. Mike Foley.

DHHS Schools *(Continued from page 6)*

Students and teachers like the smaller teacher-to-student ratios so students receive more individualized instruction. Their academic plans allow students to work at their pace. McLey said the feelings of the teachers are reflected in their comments about students and their accomplishments when they leave:

- “It was a joy to help this student earn his credits, and to see the smile on his face when he completed the work.”
- “This individual is not only driven at the high school level, but also has plans after graduation to continue his education.” *(Continued on page 7)*
- “He worked hard in the classroom and was determined to get his diploma.”
- “A positive role-model for his peers in the classroom.”

Students not only study core courses like math, social studies, science and English, but also can take electives in family life skills, health, art, career education, the building trades, and business and technology. Together, classes help youth prepare for life after they leave the facility whether it be work, community college or a four-year college.

“West Kearney High School was a great opportunity to catch up and achieve my credits,” said a young man who graduated Friday (6/2). “The teachers would not let me give up. I tried my hardest and stayed focused on my success. I was determined to graduate and with the help of West Kearney High School, I have achieved my goal.”

As youth near completion of their program, the DHHS schools involve vocational rehabilitation and the Department of Labor in training to prepare them for employment and continuing their education. Online college classes also are offered to jump-start the youths’ post-secondary education.

“Once the youth earn the right to be called a high school graduate, the treatment staff help them prepare for the next phase of their education by applying for college and any available scholarships,” said McLey.

“Our teachers believe in each youth’s potential and work to inspire education to create responsible, dedicated and successful individuals,” Asche said. He receives calls on a regular basis from past students for a transcript of grades to enter a two or four-year college. As wards of the state, most youth are eligible for tuition-free post-secondary classes.

Today’s students have more challenging needs and behaviors, and the DHHS schools work proactively to evolve ahead of the curve to meet their needs, Asche said. The school environment can sometimes be challenging, but it also is very rewarding every time students complete their program and are able to leave the facility.

“That’s the time we celebrate for them,” he said. “That’s why we’re in education, because every student is important.”

Congratulations to three young women from the YRTC-Geneva who graduated high school in May.



## DHHS’s Sheri Dawson named to National Substance Abuse Board

*By Julie Naughton*

Behavioral Health Director **Sheri Dawson**, R.N., has been elected to the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors (NASADAD) executive board, she will represent Region VII, which includes Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Kansas.



NASADAD fosters and supports the development of effective alcohol and other drug abuse prevention and treatment programs throughout every state.

At DHHS Dawson has played a leadership role in creating a centralized data system for the division, driving to expand medication-assisted treatment statewide and speaking to raise awareness of substance use disorders nationally.

“This gives Nebraska a stronger voice among national leadership and helps to spotlight the successes of our prevention and treatment efforts,” said DHHS CEO **Courtney Phillips**. “Sheri will ensure that prevention will always have a seat at the table when treatment is discussed and that effective alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse prevention services are sustained in the state.”

“I look forward to ensuring that substance abuse disorders are a normalized part of the healthcare conversation,” said Dawson. “Integrating behavioral health issues, which include both mental health and substance use, is key to treating the whole person.”

Alcohol is the most abused substance in Nebraska, with 19.3 percent of adults engaging in binge drinking, according to the 2015 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data.

# The Rules for Eating Lunch at Your Desk

By Jacqueline Whitmore

Modern workday lunch habits have completely transformed. The two-martini lunch died decades ago, and the formal sit-down lunch has all but disappeared.

These days, more entrepreneurs and office workers are choosing to eat at their desks rather than step away from the office for an hour. While it's hardly an ideal situation, **and may even result in lower productivity**, it's become the norm.

But just because everybody's doing it doesn't mean everybody's doing it politely. Before you dig into your desktop lunch, keep these office etiquette tips in mind.

**AVOID PUNGENT FOODS.** It's a good idea to stay away from foods that contain garlic, onion or heavy spices -- especially if you work in close quarters. Pungent foods like curry and chili can quickly permeate an entire office suite as well as your breath.

**TIME YOUR MEAL.** It's best to eat your lunch at your desk during the typical lunch hour. If everyone around you is eating, you're less likely to annoy people or distract your officemates.

**TOLERATE INTERRUPTIONS.** Don't expect your boss and co-workers to leave you alone while you eat. Especially if you work in a cubicle, it will be difficult to notify others you are unavailable. You can set your IM to away, but when you are physically in the office, others will assume you are available to talk.

**TURN OFF YOUR PHONE.** Your lunch hour can be a great time to catch up on work and e-mail while you eat, but do yourself a favor and put your phone on silent and take a break. Besides, it's best not to talk to others over the phone with your mouth full of food.



**BEWARE OF BACTERIA.** Your phone, desktop, keyboard, mouse and other office supplies can get messy when you regularly eat at your desk. Clean and disinfect your space daily and don't let leftovers and messy wrappers linger in your trash can overnight for the insects to enjoy.

**KEEP THE OFFICE KITCHEN CLEAN.** Clean up after yourself. If you share a kitchen with others in your office, be cognizant of any mess you accidentally leave behind. Clean any dishes you use right away and don't let your plates, utensils or coffee cups sit in the sink for hours. Purge old food from the refrigerator regularly to avoid repugnant odors.

**ASK IF PEOPLE MIND.** When in doubt, ask your office neighbors if they mind you eating at your desk. I always ask this question of my seatmates when I want to eat something on an airplane. It's important because some people are sensitive to certain foods such as peanuts.

# Meet the Heroes (continued from page 1)


The woman's guardian also noticed suspicious transactions on the woman's account. We came to learn that a technician who made a service call to the woman's home to fix her furnace had befriended her and had her add him to her bank account. This person took over \$2,000 from her account.

The team member collaborated with local law enforcement and the alleged perpetrator was arrested and charged with abuse of a vulnerable adult. The woman is now in a safe environment. Otto used his skills as an investigator to realize there was more to this story and dug deeper.

He also collaborated with others to keep the woman safe and to get her an evaluation. His collaboration with law enforcement helped protect the woman and possibly others from exploitation.

**Gina Mack**

*Child & Family Services Specialist Supervisor*

 Late one evening Dana Gellermann was on-call and received a call from a police officer. An elderly woman who had recently left the apartment she shared with her daughter, and now lived with her boyfriend, was lost. Police and family located her, but her boyfriend did not want her to return to the apartment because she frequently wandered away. The woman refused to go home with her daughter or grand-daughter, as she feared they would place her in a facility.

Dana couldn't get the woman to go with her family and she did not meet the criteria for Emergency Protective Custody. The woman finally agreed to stay with her boyfriend. Everyone played a role in helping the woman and her family develop a plan to assist the woman in receiving the help she needs. Our team was able to help this woman get the help she needs without continued involvement.

**Patsy Juedes-Fulk**

*Child and Family Services Specialist Supervisor*

Thank you to everyone who shared their stories! We appreciate the work you do each day to keep our vulnerable adults safe!