

**For Immediate Release**

October 14, 2014

**Contact** Russ Reno, Communications and Legislative Services, (office) 402-471-8287 or (cell) 402-450-7318, or [russ.reno@nebraska.gov](mailto:russ.reno@nebraska.gov)

## **Alternative Response Pilot Project Launched in Five Counties for Children, Families**

**Lincoln**—Parents of the children in five counties who are reported to the State as possible victims of abuse and neglect may be offered an alternative to law enforcement and the courts starting Oct. 1, if there is a low risk of harm to the children, said Thomas Pristow, director of the Children and Family Services Division of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Alternative Response, an additional approach in child welfare to help families receive the services and supports they need to keep children safe, started Oct. 1, in five pilot counties: Lancaster, Dodge, Sarpy, Hall and Scotts Bluff.

He said the program is designed to provide services and supports to families when a report of child abuse or neglect proves to be less serious, but appears to be driven by stressors related to poverty or if the family is in need of support.

DHHS began looking into Alternative Response in 2012. Legislation was passed in 2013 enabling DHHS to use Alternative Response to address the needs of these families and children, he said. Between 40-50 stakeholders representing a cross-section of disciplines met monthly as a statewide committee to provide input on the design of the program as part of the work of the Nebraska Children's Commission.

"Alternative Response aims to help families resolve the basic challenges confronting them so they can avoid further involvement with the child welfare system," Pristow said. "When the situation is assessed safe for the child, it's less traumatic for them to receive services and supports in the home, and when trauma is reduced, services are more successful."

He said community organizations in the five pilot counties have been working with DHHS to make sure that families have concrete supports, such as transportation, food and shelter as well as other identified needs. Also, Alternative Response will be implemented statewide if the evaluation shows positive results and the Legislature passes enabling legislation.

Weekly staff meetings will be held to assess how the new program is operating, he said.

“Alternative Response is a creation of the leaders in Nebraska’s child welfare system,” said Kerry Winterer, DHHS CEO. “Working with them to build this program ensures Alternative Response has the confidence from every corner of the state, and more importantly, the commitment to make it work locally so children and families live better lives.”

When a report is made to the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline (1-800-652-1999), 21 criteria are applied to identify whether the report can be accepted for Alternative Response. Matching even one criterion disqualifies the family from participating, Pristow said.

The University of Nebraska will evaluate outcomes to determine the impact of Alternative Response.

“DHHS is working in the pilot communities to connect families with sustainable, formal and informal supports in order to prevent future risk of child maltreatment,” Pristow said. “Staff have been holding community meetings and partnering with local stakeholders to identify available services and gaps in services needed to help children and families. This has resulted in organizations stepping up to offer services, and in some cases, local organizations have become aware of existing services already available in their community.”

Alternative Response is one of the primary strategies identified in the Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project which was granted by the federal government in September 2013. The five-year program will allow DHHS the flexibility to use federal and state funds amounting to \$153 million to develop programs to avoid out-of-home placement of children at low risk for abuse and neglect as well as the ability to provide the usual foster care payments, he said.

The other arm of the waiver involves structuring provider contracts to measure the quality of service to children and families and the impact on their lives using Results-Based Accountability. That, he said, coupled with Alternative Response, were deemed a good demonstration project to determine whether trauma can be reduced by keeping Nebraska children safely in their home while providing impactful services to the family.

A large percentage of children enter Nebraska foster care with a primary allegation of neglect, Pristow said. Of 4,657 victims of child abuse and neglect last year in Nebraska, 84 percent were found to be neglected physically, emotionally or medically.

“One of the purposes of the Title IV-E Waiver Project is to engage families in local services without the threat of having children removed from their homes,” he said. “Cases of neglect offer a significant opportunity to provide services to children at home, and given the high number of neglect cases that occur each year, we should be able to help many families.”

He estimated as many as 150 families may qualify for Alternative Response services in 2014, and 550 in 2015.

“When we work with families through Alternative Response, we focus on concerns and solutions, and we don’t use the labels of ‘perpetrator’ or ‘victim,’” Pristow said. “Research shows that with a less accusatory and more collaborative approach, families are more willing to receive and find value in the services they receive.”