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Note: Sound bites on this topic will be available shortly: www.dhhs.ne.gov/audio

Mug shots can be found at: http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/newsroom_downloads_images.aspx

State Wards Continue Decline; Other Services Also Improve

Lincoln – While the number of state wards continues its dramatic decline since 2012, other measures by the federal government also show improvement in how children and families fare in Nebraska’s child welfare system, said Thomas Pristow, director of Children and Family Services in the Department of Health and Human Services.

In March 2012, Nebraska had 6,121 wards in its protection. On May 19, Pristow said DHHS safely reduced the number of state wards by 1,623, or 26.5 percent.

“The numbers prove that we’re consistently making significant progress on keeping children safe at home where it’s less traumatizing for them to receive services,” Pristow said. “This is a tremendous testimony to the ingenuity, hard work and dedication of DHHS staff and our contractors, especially those in the field, and participation by the families themselves.”

Since state wards fell below 5,000 last December, the number of wards declined in 23 of 25 weeks.

“It’s obvious from the declining numbers that our case managers and supervisors are holding to their commitment to serve children in their home when it is safe, and to locate services that effectively address their needs, and that families support these efforts,” Pristow said. “Since March 2012, we have continued to see a healthy and steady decline in the number of state wards.”

He attributed a new evidence-based, safety assessment tool called Structured Decision Making, which supports case managers evaluating a child’s safety and risk for potential future harm. SDM is designed to provide a higher level of consistency and validity in the assessment and decision-making process. The result has been that after using SDM to identify a child’s risk for harm, fewer are entering the system.

He noted that some juvenile offenders have moved to Probation along with those entering the system since October 1, 2013, as part of the requirements of LB 561, which passed the Legislature in 2013. It shifts supervision of juvenile offenders in the community from DHHS to the Office of Probation Administration with an emphasis on diversion.

While that change has contributed to the decline in state wards in recent months, he pointed out that the number of wards has consistently fallen since March 2012. Pristow said the pace of the decline in 2012 was 8.4 percent, as compared to 13.1 percent in 2013, and 7.1 percent in the first four months of 2014.

"On a lot of fronts, our efforts for more than two years are showing the improvement in numbers of children in the system that we expected," said DHHS CEO Kerry Winterer. "But, I want to emphasize that safety is our primary concern and that any decline in the numbers of wards has not nor will it jeopardize the safety of children. All our efforts are geared toward safely keeping children home while receiving services. We expect more positive numbers, and a healthy and safe decline in state wards, as we continue to work toward best child welfare practices."

In addition, the federal government's Administration for Children and Families, a part of the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, measures how well states successfully work with state wards, Pristow said.

Of six indicators of success, the Department meets or exceeds four.

In April, the indicators exceeded by Nebraska DHHS include:

- Timeliness of adoption.
- Permanency for children in foster care.
- Absence of the recurrence of maltreatment.
- Stability of placement

Pristow said DHHS is nearing the requirements for two others:

- Timeliness and permanency of reunification, which is 6 points below the federal target.
- Absence of maltreatment in foster care at 99.65 percent, just 0.03 percent below the federal target.

"This shows that we're finding ways to help children and families as we work to keep children safely at home," Pristow said. "Our goal is to provide resources at home to assist families in addressing their challenges and leading to a better life."