Administrative Office of the Courts

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FEDERAL GRANT ALLOWS EXPANSION OF COURT PROGRAM FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

SANTA FE – A newly awarded $7.7 million federal grant will allow courts to serve additional families in abuse and neglect cases in Sandoval, Valencia, Bernalillo, San Juan and McKinley counties through a program that more quickly leads to a safe, permanent home for children in foster care.

The Family Advocacy Program uses a multi-disciplinary team approach shown to improve child and family well-being and support New Mexico's public policy of reunifying families when possible. A team consisting of a court-appointed attorney, a social worker and a parent mentor works with parents at the outset of a child protection case, including to address substance abuse problems and strengthen the parents' ability to care for their children.

The program is a joint initiative of the Thirteenth and Second Judicial District Courts and the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). The collaborative project targets counties with large abuse and neglect caseloads and attempts to reduce proceedings in which parental rights to child custody are terminated.

"The program's performance data reflects children are in foster care for shorter periods of time, returning to their parent's care sooner, achieving permanency faster, with higher rates of guardianship, and lower rates of termination of parental rights," said Marie Ward, presiding judge of the Second Judicial District's Children's Court Division. "In awarding this grant, the federal Department of Health and Human Services is recognizing this success and expressing confidence that we can do even more to improve the health and well-being of more New Mexico families."

The grant provides $7.7 million over five years for expanding the Family Advocacy Program in Sandoval and Valencia counties in the Thirteenth Judicial District and Bernalillo County in the Second Judicial District, and establishing the program in San Juan and McKinley counties in the Eleventh Judicial District.

"The Eleventh Judicial District is grateful to be included in this initiative and excited to begin this project. Our goal is to achieve permanency for children in foster care faster and safely," said Chief District Court Judge Karen L. Townsend.

The New Mexico Supreme Court initiated the program and piloted it in 2013 in the Thirteenth Judicial District Court. The Second Judicial District Court began accepting cases through the program in 2017. San Juan and McKinley counties were selected for an expansion of the program to measure how it works in areas with a large Native American population where child protection cases involve provisions of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act.

Since its July 2013 inception, the program has supported 101 cases involving 47 parents and 205 children. To date, 82 of those cases have been closed, with only four resulting in new child protection cases being opened involving the same parents.

The program provides additional resources for parents and children in child protection cases brought by the Children, Youth and Families Department, which under state law investigates allegations of abuse and neglect.

"The New Mexico Family Advocacy Program meets a critical need in abuse and neglect cases," said Louis McDonald, chief judge of the Thirteenth Judicial District Court. "This program is not possible without the hard work of social workers, respondents' attorneys and CYFD staff."

According to initial data, family reunification occurred in 70 percent of the program's cases in the Thirteenth Judicial District in 2013 to 2017.

The grant will provide about $1.1 million during its first year, with amounts between about $1.6 million to $1.7 million in the following four years.

"AOC hopes to take the program statewide if it continues to show success," said AOC Director Artie Pepin. "The grant funding will permit courts to hire additional social workers and parent mentors to serve more clients, provide training and develop a database to help in evaluating how well the program is working."

The State Bar of New Mexico recently honored the Family Advocacy Program with its 2018 "Outstanding Program Award."

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