



Transforming Child Welfare in North Carolina: A Unified Vision for Children and Families

North Carolina's child welfare system is undergoing meaningful transformation to ensure better outcomes for children and families – no matter where they live across the state.

..... Executive Summary

North Carolina's child welfare system provides essential services to protect children and build stronger families. Longstanding challenges like underfunding, workforce shortages and inconsistent administration of services across county lines have created real barriers to safety, permanency and well-being for children and families who become involved in the system.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is taking action in collaboration with our 100 local departments of social services to transform the child welfare system. The following outlines the department's efforts to modernize the system's statewide infrastructure, to strengthen the child welfare workforce and to improve outcomes for children and families through coordinated initiatives across child- and family-serving systems.

Our purpose is simple: the North Carolina child welfare system can and must do better.

A System Ready for Change

North Carolina child welfare is under extraordinary pressure. For decades, the county-administered, state-supervised system has operated with minimal state funding, severe workforce shortages and without the statewide infrastructure or community-based supports needed to create consistent outcomes for families across all 100 counties.

The result: county agencies are overwhelmed and under resourced. Families navigating the system encounter fragmented services, long waits and uncertainty about their pathway to safe case closure, reunification or permanency. Children spend too much time waiting for permanent placements, increasing the risk of negative outcomes, and those who have complex medical or behavioral health needs face even more barriers to finding long-term stability in a setting that's right for their care.

These issues are not new, but the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic on both families and child welfare services exposed and exacerbated the most critical faults in the system. Too many children in DSS custody spend the night in a DSS office

or emergency department because the right placement is not available when they need it. Too many families affected by substance use, housing instability, domestic violence, lack of basic needs or other systemic challenges do not have access to the right treatment and support services within their communities. The gap between what families need and what services are available continues to widen, and the reality is that child welfare involvement often reflects unmet needs elsewhere across child- and family-serving systems – such as health care, behavioral health care, education, the justice system or safety net services.

In recent years, NCDHHS has led a statewide, coordinated effort to transform child welfare services to better respond to the scale and complexity of today's challenges. This includes fundamental improvements like workforce development, modernized technology, stronger state support and better access to care – building blocks toward a reimagined system that lives up to its promise to keep children safe and help families thrive.

What We've Done: Practice, Prevention and Permanency

NCDHHS has laid the groundwork for child welfare transformation through bold initiatives to strengthen statewide infrastructure, redesign staff training, expand prevention programs and better align permanency services with system priorities for families, foster parents and kinship providers.

Regional Support Model

To better support North Carolina's county departments of social services, NCDHHS has implemented a Regional Support Model that increases the state's capacity to provide technical assistance, oversight and supervision for the administration of child welfare services. This model includes:

- Seven Regional Directors of Social Services, each serving as a local liaison to support leadership and improve practice across the counties in their region
- Continuous Quality Improvement process to support local DSSs in analyzing root causes for challenges and developing innovative strategies to improve county practice
- Dedicated Regional Child Welfare Specialists to provide hands-on quality assurance and case consultation, ensuring service delivery in alignment with state policy
- A focus on improving regional access to resources and services, cross-county collaboration and practice consistency across the state

This new model also includes NCDHHS' Regional Abuse and Medical Specialists (RAMS) program, designed to reduce county barriers to accessing the most appropriate medical consultations for vulnerable children. Developed and managed in partnership with the University of North Carolina and the NC Child Medical Evaluation Program, the RAMS team provides guidance on high-risk cases of abuse or neglect involving children three years of age or younger, substance-affected infants, and/or children who are medically complex. The innovative program has transformed how North Carolina's child welfare system responds to these complex cases, providing the tools child welfare social workers need to better protect children, improve safety planning and address well-being needs.

The Regional Support Model improves regional access to services, increases visibility, promotes shared accountability, and provides real-time support for DSS leaders and frontline social workers as they administer child welfare services for the children and families in their counties.

Workforce Training and Support

NCDHHS has invested in developing new training, practice standards and recruitment strategies to build a more skilled and resilient child welfare workforce. These initiatives include:

- A redesigned Pre-Service Training program, based in real-world practice, that better prepares new child welfare social workers to succeed
- Introducing Track Trainings to better prepare child welfare social workers to excel in their specialty area – such as Child Protective Services Assessments or Permanency Planning – and to provide ongoing training for continuous practice improvement
- Development and implementation of statewide Practice Standards, helping counties align around consistent expectations for high-quality service delivery
- Efforts to strengthen workforce recruitment and retention, including partnering with universities through the Child Welfare Education Collaborative to reintroduce stipends for students pursuing careers in child welfare services

We're building a reimagined system that lives up to its promise to keep children safe and help families thrive.



These efforts aim to: 1) build a strong, qualified workforce that is prepared for the complexity and demands of child welfare practice, and 2) develop leadership capacity and equip supervisors to better support their staff in doing this work well.

Prevention Services

NCDHHS is investing in evidence-based programs administered by community agencies to support families with services that can prevent child abuse and neglect before it occurs. As part of North Carolina's Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) plan, the department:

- Engaged with child welfare stakeholders and families with lived experience to identify critical gaps in services and inform the direction of North Carolina's preventive initiatives
- Launched Homebuilders, a program that provides intensive in-home family preservation and reunification services for families who have children at imminent risk of placement in out-of-home services
- Began piloting the Sobriety, Treatment, and Recovery Team (START) model in select counties to improve outcomes for families with substance use disorder and co-occurring child maltreatment

These services focus on strengthening families and promoting children's well-being by connecting them with resources and support systems within their communities before abuse or neglect occurs. NCDHHS continues to implement North Carolina's FFPSA plan, leveraging federal funding to expand prevention services across the state and shift the child welfare system to be more proactive – rather than responsive – in meeting children and families' needs.

Family, Kinship and Permanency Services

In addition to prevention, the goal of child welfare services is to provide the support families need to reunify safely and achieve lasting stability. When reunification is not possible, kinship care is often the best option because it allows children to maintain close connections to family and community.

To better align North Carolina's child welfare system with these priorities, NCDHHS has:

- Invested to expand access to the Bridging Families program, which provides professional foster parenting services designed to strengthen family bonds and improve relationships so families can achieve reunification and long-term stability
- Introduced financial assistance and respite options for kinship caregivers who provide

placement for children in foster care, regardless of whether they are a licensed foster parent

- Launched the Success Coach program, which transitioned the child welfare system from offering post-adoption services to providing comprehensive permanency support for all families – adoptive, reunified, in guardianship, or kinship care
- Redesigned the state's required training programs for foster parents and kinship caregivers to center a trauma-informed, family-focused approach to foster care

These innovations increase the likelihood of safe, successful, permanent placements and recognize that permanency is not the end of the journey – it's the beginning of a new chapter of support for families.

What We're Doing: Modernizing Systems and Services

Real transformation does not happen in isolation. It takes a deliberate, statewide shift – across agencies, across county lines and across systems of care – to ensure children and families get the coordinated, comprehensive support they need, when and where they need it. NCDHHS is working to modernize the child welfare system, improve systems integration and make it easier for families to access the health and behavioral health services they need.

Partnership and Technology Hub for North Carolina (PATH NC)

NCDHHS recently launched a phased rollout of PATH NC, the state's new child welfare information system that will unify and modernize child welfare assessment tools, case management and data across all 100 counties. Before PATH NC, counties have operated with a disjointed patchwork of independent data systems – with nearly half still largely reliant on manual processes and paper records for child welfare operations. For the first time, PATH NC means North Carolina will have:

- A single statewide system with real-time access to child welfare case history, regardless of where a child or family lives or receives services
- Redesigned, certified Structured Decision-Making tools to help social workers consistently assess safety, risk, strengths and needs, and align case decisions with state policy and best practice
- Mobile access and field functionality, including offline documentation, conforming technology to the reality that most child welfare work happens away from the office
- The ability to interface with other child-serving systems in the future, such as education and health care, to reduce redundancies and improve coordination

PATH NC is more than a technology upgrade – it lays the foundation for a better-functioning child welfare system that works across county lines. It also provides the tools and insights frontline staff need to better protect children, assist families and ensure consistent and positive outcomes.

Children and Families Specialty Plan (CFSP)

One of the most transformative changes currently underway is the Children and Families Specialty Plan, a Medicaid managed care plan specifically designed to serve children and families involved in the child welfare system. Set to launch in late 2025, the plan will:

- Ensure consistent Medicaid coverage and access to services regardless of where a child lives or is placed
- Provide a tailored care management approach that integrates medical care, behavioral health care and social supports – improving how families access and navigate essential services across systems
- Help reduce disruptions in treatment and service delays during critical moments in a child's care journey

In the future, the plan will also be made available to parents and family members of children and youth involved in child welfare, helping to address underlying challenges across family support systems and improve their ability to care for their children. The CFSP is an important step toward providing whole-person, whole-family care for some of North Carolina's most vulnerable children. It follows the family across placements and counties, improving access to critical services and care coordination.

Child Behavioral Health Services


Inconsistent access to quality, affordable behavioral health services across North Carolina remains a major driver of child welfare involvement and placement instability. As part of the state's \$835 million investment to overhaul behavioral health services, NCDHHS has deployed \$80 million to transform the child behavioral health system.

This initiative includes investments in behavioral health services designed to prevent child welfare involvement, as well as services to ensure children in DSS custody have access to treatment and placement options that provide the right level

of care for their needs. Some of the programs included in this funding are:

- Emergency Placement pilot program to secure temporary placements for children with complex behavioral health needs, who are often at the highest risk for placement instability, inappropriate boarding and delays in permanency
- Community-based services like Child First – a program created to serve mothers and children at risk of foster care (prenatal to age 5) that addresses risk factors to prevent involvement in the child welfare system
- NC Child Treatment Program training modules for child behavioral health providers to learn specialized models of care designed to help meet the unique needs of children who have experienced trauma
- Increasing access to behavioral health training and support resources for school staff as well as school-based tele-behavioral health services for students

The goal is to create an integrated system of care in North Carolina's homes, communities and schools to ensure children have access to the right services to prevent crisis, provide less restrictive alternatives to residential treatment and reduce the risk of child welfare involvement.



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What's Next: Looking Ahead

The transformation of North Carolina's child welfare system is well underway – but meaningful, lasting change requires continued partnership, sustained investment and a long-term commitment to doing better for children and families.

Over the next two years, NCDHHS will build on the strong foundation now in place. Key initiatives are moving from planning to implementation, with growing momentum across state and county systems to better align, improve outcomes and deliver consistent, high-quality support to the children and families who need it most.

Charting the Next Frontier

As transformation moves forward, NCDHHS has identified several key opportunities for North Carolina to further improve and enhance child welfare services:

- **Enhancing prevention and early intervention services**, by expanding upstream supports that help prevent crisis and keep families safely together
- **Deepening collaboration with courts and law enforcement**, with a focus on reducing delays to permanency and advancing shared, trauma-informed approaches to working with children and families
- **Increasing capacity for foster care**, continuing to recruit kinship and foster parents not only to meet the state's demand for foster care but also to ensure children are placed within their communities in safe, stable, nurturing environments where they can thrive
- **Individualized child welfare practice support**, using Regional Support Model continuous quality improvement and real-time data through PATH NC dashboards to proactively identify areas for improvement and tailor solutions to counties' needs
- **Centering lived experience**, creating additional opportunities for family members and youth, tribal partners and other voices to participate in system design and transformation

HB612: A Moment of Opportunity

As NCDHHS continues to lead initiatives driving system reform, there is growing alignment among state agencies, counties, the North Carolina General Assembly, the courts, federal partners and other stakeholders around the urgency to act.

One example of this momentum is House Bill 612 – Fostering Care in NC, a bipartisan legislative proposal aimed at strengthening child welfare oversight and outcomes across the state. The bill reflects many of the same priorities already guiding NCDHHS' transformation efforts – improving state supervision, enhancing coordination across systems, and designing stronger tools to promote accountability and support county practice.

If enacted, HB612 would:

- Affirm and expand the department's authority to supervise and support county-administered child welfare services
- Improve pathways to permanency by addressing delays in court processes such as termination of parental rights and adoption
- Promote timely, stable placements for children in foster care
- Enhance the department's ability to respond when counties need additional support, intensive technical assistance or intervention

HB612 is just one sign that North Carolina is ready to do things differently. It builds on the foundational work already underway and represents a potential next step in formalizing the alignment, transparency and shared accountability needed to create a stronger, more responsive child welfare system.

Should this legislation become law, NCDHHS is committed to implementing it in a way that reflects the department's collaborative approach – one that values collaboration with county DSS agencies, respects the complexity of local practice and remains fully centered on achieving better outcomes for children and families across North Carolina.

Sustaining Progress

While recent investments and reforms have created new momentum, North Carolina still faces structural challenges. The state remains the least state-funded child welfare system in the nation, leaving counties to shoulder the majority of costs not covered by federal funds. This disparity contributes to significant variation in services and outcomes across the state.

At the same time, much of what's been achieved to date – from the Regional Support Model to PATH NC to behavioral health investments – has only been

possible because of strong support from the North Carolina General Assembly. Legislative leadership in funding behavioral health transformation, in particular, has made it possible to begin addressing long-standing service gaps that have directly impacted children and families involved in child welfare.

Sustaining this progress will require continued partnership – and continued investment – at the federal, state and county level. If we keep working toward a unified vision for child welfare services, we can create a system that works for North Carolina.

Conclusion

The opportunity before us is clear. For too long, the systems meant to protect children and support families have been under resourced and overburdened. But North Carolina is proving what's possible when we invest in infrastructure and align systems to make real change happen.

Child welfare transformation is not hypothetical. It is already in motion – through modernized tools, workforce development, stronger partnerships and better coordinated systems of care. The launch of PATH NC, the implementation of the Children and Families Specialty Plan, the Regional Support Model, the \$80 million investment in child behavioral health, the system alignment to prioritize kinship and permanency – all reflect a growing commitment to build a child welfare system that provides consistent, high-quality services worthy of North Carolina children and families.

NCDHHS recognizes this work would not be possible without the ongoing support of North

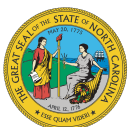
Carolina's child welfare agencies and providers, youth and families with lived experience, tribal leaders, members of the North Carolina General Assembly, NC Medicaid, behavioral health providers and many other partners across the state who share our goals for transformation.

Most importantly, we acknowledge the contributions of the state's 100 county departments of social services for their incredible leadership, steadfast commitment to creating better outcomes for families, and for working together with us to envision a brighter future for North Carolina.

This is just the beginning. NCDHHS has laid the foundation for a child welfare system that is more responsive, more consistent and more equipped to meet the challenges of today and the future. The work ahead will require sustained effort, shared responsibility and a continued focus on the children and families at the heart of it all.



Together, we can build a North Carolina where every child grows up safe, supported and given the opportunity to thrive.



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