

More Minnesota children to move to permanent families through Northstar Care for Children

Written by

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Hundreds of children under state guardianship are waiting in foster care for families – parents to adopt them or relatives to assume permanent, legal custody.

Last week, Human Services Commissioner Lucinda Jesson announced Northstar Care for Children, a plan to help these children, who have spent far too much time in foster care, become part of permanent families. Joining her were Joe Kroll, executive director of the North American Council on Adoptable Children, and parents who have adopted children from the foster care system.

Gov. Mark Dayton's proposed budget invests \$2.57 million in Northstar Care for Children, a single benefit program that will support permanency through adoption or legal guardianship by a relative for children beginning Jan. 1, 2015.

"Through Northstar Care for Children, we will reduce the number of children waiting for families as well as the length of time they have to wait," said Jesson. "We will provide financial support to meet children's needs and ensure they grow up in permanent families they can count on for a lifetime."

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Currently, the financial incentives across the three programs are inconsistent, with family foster care – a temporary setting – typically providing higher levels of financial support than Adoption Assistance for adoptive families or Relative Custody Assistance for caregivers who offer permanent homes for children. Under Northstar Care for Children, those in foster families, adopted families and relative families will receive the same benefit.

"This disparity in payments is a barrier to permanency for children, leaving far too many in foster care for lengthy periods," said Jesson. "And the consequences for them and society are tragic. These children are more likely to experience homelessness and have involvement in the criminal justice system. We can't allow that to continue."

Kroll offered his perspective on the importance of the proposal. "There hasn't been an increase in the basic adoption rate in decades while foster care payments have received cost-of-living increases year after year," said Kroll. "It isn't fair to a foster child who is adopted to suddenly see a significant decline in benefits. The child's needs are the same so the benefits should be the same."

All children would go through a uniform assessment to determine their needs beyond the basic payment level. Children under age 6 would receive a lower benefit, reflecting the fact that they are more likely to be adopted or obtain a relative custodian than children age 6 and older, and the disparity in payments is not a barrier for these younger children. Children in all three existing programs would be grandfathered under current programs unless specifically transitioned into Northstar Care for Children.

As of January 2015, the department estimates 2,003 children will receive Relative Custody Assistance and 6,418 children will receive Adoption Assistance. During 2011, 7,679 children were in family foster care.

Adoptive parents also shared their experiences with adoption, highlighting the importance of financial support through state programs at the Capitol news conference.

"While foster care is a temporary solution to caring for children in crisis situations, no child should grow up in foster care," said Jesson. "We have a responsibility to find safe, loving, permanent families who can meet their needs as soon as possible. Northstar Care for Children can help make that happen."