

Improving Relative Search and Placement Practices

Related MnCFSR Outcomes/Performance Item(s)	Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children. MnCFSR Item 15: Relative Placement
County/Tribe	Isanti County Family Services
Supervisor	Ann Stackpool-Gunderson
Contact Information	Ann.stackpool-gunderson@co.isanti.mn.us 763-689-8161

Since the initial MnCFSR in 2007, Isanti County Family Services has consistently placed children with relatives at a higher rate than the state rate. The supervisors and caseworkers have developed and implemented consistent practice and a systemic approach to ensuring that children are placed with relatives when possible and appropriate.

Process Description:

- When a child enters foster care, parents are given a folder that includes a [“Kinship/Relative Outline”](#). Families receive separate forms for maternal and paternal relatives. Isanti County Social Services did not develop the form, but borrowed it from another agency.
- The search for relatives begins immediately. Assessment/investigating workers “set the stage” and establish the importance the agency holds in placing children with relatives. Ongoing caseworkers continue the process of identifying and considering relatives.
- Caseworkers at all phases of the agency’s involvement send the same message: “We want to work with you to find a safe living arrangement for your child, and placing with family is better, if possible”.
- Caseworkers ask families to identify all of the child’s relatives. The initial question is not “who can the child live with” but “who are this child’s relatives”. Relatives who are thought to be unwilling/unable or those who may have licensing disqualifiers are still identified and their contact information is collected . Workers can then give thorough consideration to all relatives. Relatives who are not considered for placement may still support the child, parents and/or the reunification effort in other ways.
- Families may fill out the forms themselves, or the caseworker may go through the form with the family to support a comprehensive identification of relatives.
- Clerical staff send relative search/placement letters to relatives initially, and those who do not respond are sent a second letter two weeks later.

(cont'd...)

- Isanti County developed a "[Relative Search Report to Court](#)" template, filed in all cases involving children in out-of-home placement, to demonstrate the agency's efforts to consider and place with relatives.
- Juvenile Court orders include template language directing parents to participate in relative search/placement efforts.

Factors that contributed to success included:

- Supervisor set clear practice standards that emphasized the benefits for children when placed with relatives.
- Caseworkers from the assessment, ongoing, and licensing program areas generated ideas and had input into designing the existing process for a consistent, systemic approach to identifying, locating and considering relatives. Staff contributions to the design supported "buy in" across workers and units.
- The agency's goal is to place children with relatives within 30 days of their entry into foster care. To support that goal, staff and supervisors met with non-relative foster care providers to engage their support for placements with relatives and to ensure children experience support and smooth transitions to relative foster care.
- The agency's culture now supports "family with family" and there is ongoing scrutiny of efforts to thoroughly identify and consider relatives as placement options for children. Caseworkers prompt each other to thoroughly consider placements with relatives.
- Efforts to place with relatives are a standard part of internal case reviews conducted during unit meetings, group supervision and case mappings. Relative search/placement efforts are also reviewed in individual supervision.

Recommendations for implementation:

- Keep the process organized, efficient, and easy for caseworkers; supports consistent practice.
- Maintain clear staff roles and responsibilities for identifying, locating, considering, and licensing relatives.

Next steps:

- Expand relative search and placement practices to children's mental health cases.