



# Bulletin

**NUMBER**

#15-68-02

**DATE**

March 10, 2015

**OF INTEREST TO**

County Directors

Social Services Supervisors  
and Staff

Tribal Social Service  
Directors and Staff

County Fiscal Coordinators  
and Staff

County Attorneys

Tribal Attorneys

Private Child Caring  
Agencies

**ACTION/DUE DATE**

Review and implement as  
directed.

**EXPIRATION DATE**

March 10, 2017

## Northstar Care for Children Uniform Assessment Tool

**TOPIC**

Northstar Care for Children Uniform Assessment Tool.

**PURPOSE**

Inform county and tribal agency staff and other stakeholders of the Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth uniform assessment tool, which will support child welfare professionals in their work with the child welfare system.

**CONTACT**

For questions regarding the Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth and its implementation:

[northstar.care@state.mn.us](mailto:northstar.care@state.mn.us)

For questions regarding using the Social Service Information System (SSIS) in implementing the Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth:

[dhs.ssishelp@state.mn.us](mailto:dhs.ssishelp@state.mn.us), or 651-431-4801

**SIGNED**

JAMES G. KOPPEL  
Assistant Commissioner  
Children and Family Services Administration

**TERMINOLOGY NOTICE**

The terminology used to describe people we serve has changed over time. The Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) supports the use of "People First" language.

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## I. Introduction

Effective Jan. 1, 2015, children entering foster care or experiencing a change in placement or legal status may be eligible for Northstar Care for Children (Northstar Care). A full discussion of eligibility is found in the [Northstar Care for Children General Practice Guide](#). The goal of Northstar Care is to improve permanency for children in Minnesota by:

- Reducing the number of children who leave foster care without a permanent family
- Reducing benefit discrepancies among the permanency options
- Reducing the length of stay for children in out-of-home care
- Increasing the percentage of children adopted within 24 months of entry into foster care.

## II. Uniform Assessment

In Minnesota, foster care, adoption and kinship or relative care were treated differently. Each program had different benefits, rate assessment tools and rules. Under Northstar Care, three different methods of assessment have been replaced by one assessment tool that focuses on a thorough assessment of the individual needs of a child and the level of parenting required to care for a child. The Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth (assessment tool) will be used to determine the benefit rate for a child:

- In a family foster home
- In extended foster care – supervised independent living
- Who has been adopted from foster care
- Whose custody has been permanently transferred to a relative or kin.

A uniform assessment is central to Northstar Care and its unified benefits. It determines the supplemental payment, one of three main benefits available under Northstar Care. See [Northstar Care for Children General Practice Guide](#), Section II, Benefits.

## Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth

The Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth (MAPCY):

- Is the tool established by the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Human Services (the department).
- Is completed or entered into the Social Service Information System (SSIS) and appears under a child's name on the set-up screen.
- Determines whether a child will receive a monthly supplemental payment, and if so, the amount of this payment. **Exception:** Children in Northstar Adoption Assistance designated as "at-risk" receive no monthly payment, regardless of MAPCY level.
- Is similar to how the previous Difficulty of Care assessment determined part of the amount of the monthly foster care benefit, or how the supplemental assessment process worked for pre-Northstar Relative Custody Assistance or Adoption Assistance.

The same assessment tool is used as a child progresses from foster care to kinship or adoption. The assessment tool asks two basic questions:

- What are a child's needs?

- What is the caregiver doing to meet those needs?

The assessment tool:

- Measures the needed parenting level, whether foster parents, relative custodians or adoptive parents
- Considers the individual needs of a child and the extra care, attention and impact on a caregiver's family to safely parent a child in the home and community
- Shifts the focus away from how "sick" or "difficult" a child is
- Focuses on a child's well-being and development
- Supports a child's safety while in placement
- Supports a child achieving permanency.

### **Assessment Based on Age**

Because the assessment tool focuses on developmental tasks, there are three types of assessments for:

- Children ages birth – 12
- Youth ages 13 – 21, including youth in extended foster care living in a foster home
- Youth ages 18 – 21 who are in extended foster care – supervised independent living.

Each assessment uses specialized questions organized into domains. Each domain has a focus around examining the needs of a child and what a caregiver is doing to meet those needs (or in the case of independent living settings, a youth's support needs).

In the "child/youth needs" section of each domain, assessors select one of the following:

- "a" describes a strength
- "b" describes basic needs
- "c" describes several needs
- "d" describes high needs.

In the "parental care and attention" section of each domain, assessors select indicators that best describe the level of parenting:

- Basic, parental care common for most parents
- Significant, parental care that offers a child extra care and attention without the assistance or direction of qualified professionals
- Extensive, parental care that is directed or guided by a qualified professional and/or represents considerable impact on a family
- Exceptional, parental care that involves attention to an identified safety risk, and the caregiver's attention and actions ensure the safety of a child and family members at home and in the community
- Extraordinary, parental care that maintains a child with the highest needs in the community, preventing residential placement.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24]

## **Child Assessment Sub-tool**

The child assessment tool has the following domains:

- Placement experience
- Dynamics in caregiver's home
- Supervision, guidance and structure
- Mental health, physical health and development
- Preserving connections
- Developing identity
- Education
- Child care.

## **Child Care Allowance**

Under the child care domain, the assessment determines the amount available for a child care allowance, in part based on the age of a child. A child care allowance may be available, if needed, by the caregiver(s) for work or education. The child care allowance:

- Consists of an increase beyond the starting benefit level
- Partially defrays costs and is unlikely to cover the full cost of child care
- Has a higher range for children birth – age 6 than for those ages 7 – 12
- Is not available for youth age 13 and older, unless they are parents themselves and in extended foster care – supervised independent living.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivisions 2-3, and section 256N.28, subdivision 2]

**Note:** The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is a better support than the Northstar Care child care allowance. The child care allowance must not be included in an assessment if child care is available through CCAP or other non-foster care sources.

## **Youth Assessment Sub-tool**

The youth assessment sub-tool has the same domains as the child assessment tool, but does not have a child care domain. This assessment should also be used for all youth ages 13-17 and for youth ages 18 – 21 living in a licensed setting who need the day-to-day supervision of a caregiver.

## **Extended Foster Care – Supervised Independent Living Assessment Sub-tool**

The extended foster care assessment sub-tool should be used if youth are ages 18 – 21 and living in a supervised independent living setting which includes apartments, dorms, host homes and other settings. This assessment should be used when a youth's independent living setting is an adult foster home, and is considered a boarder, not a placement in the home. For example, a youth may rent a room in a home that is also licensed as an adult foster home.

The extended foster care – supervised independent living assessment sub-tool has the following domains:

- Transportation to preserve connections
- Transportation to work or school
- Communication
- Young parents
- Child care for young parents.

**Note:** For comprehensive information on the three assessment sub-tools, domains, child needs and parenting indicators, the department has issued the [Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth Practice Guide](#).

### III. Initial Assessment

An assessment is required within 30 days of placement, similar to the Out-of-home Placement Plan, but can be completed any time after placement. County and tribal agencies are not required to complete an assessment unless a child is in placement for over 30 days.

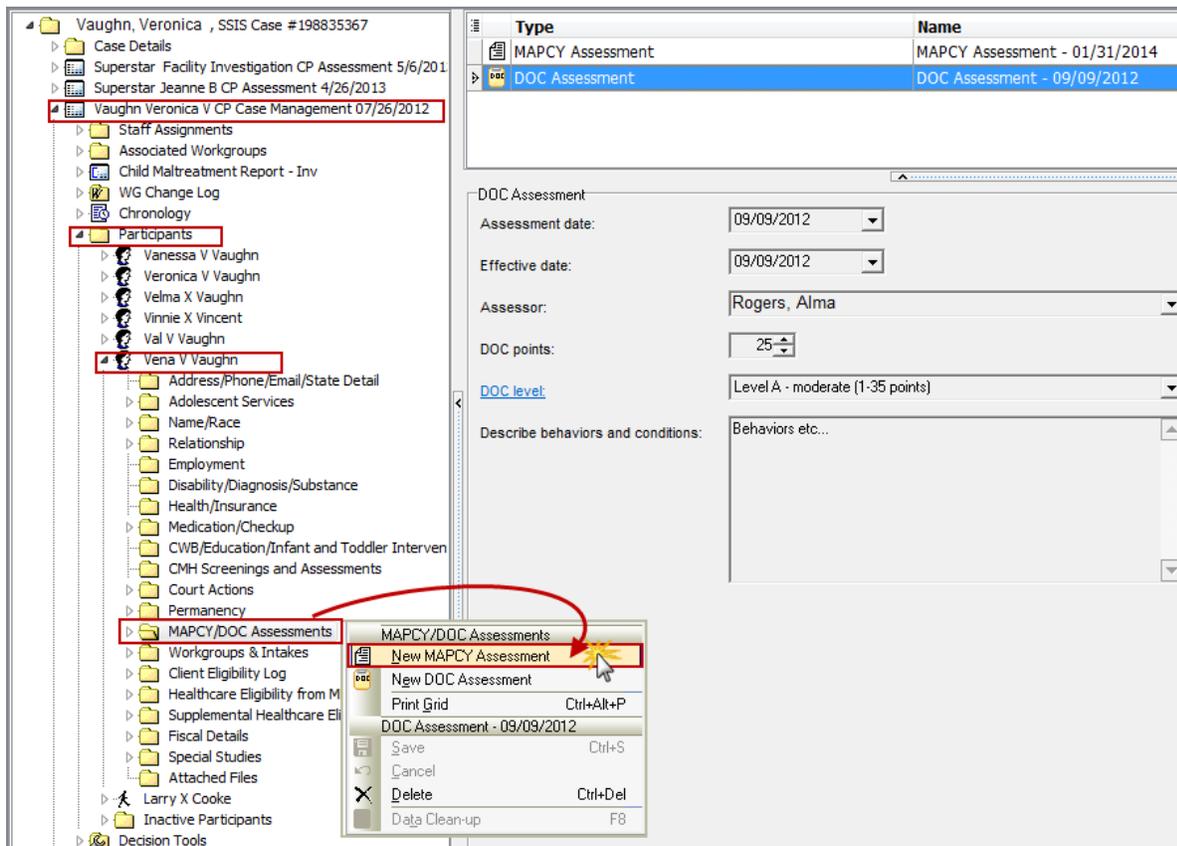
[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivisions 1-4 and 12-14; and section 256N.28, subdivision 2]

Once a child is in a foster care placement, the following needs to happen:

- Enter placement in SSIS
- Collaboration to complete the assessment tool
- Enter the assessment into SSIS
- Approval of the assessment in order for payment to occur.

The assessment tool is located in SSIS and needs to be entered into SSIS for payment. In SSIS, the assessment tool is referred to as “MAPCY.” The following steps will locate the assessment tool:

- Complete a Workgroup Search, expand **My Caseload**, and highlight the workgroup for the identified child that should receive an assessment
- Access the Action menu and select **Open With Case in New Window**
- Expand the Workgroup, expand the Participant’s folder, expand the identified child’s Participant node.
- Access the Action menu for the MAPCY/DOC Assessments folder and select **New MAPCY Assessment**.



**Note:** A [job aide](#) is available with step-by-step instructions on how to complete the assessment process in SSIS.

## A. Emergency Rate

A default emergency rate (Level D) is available to county and tribal agencies without an approved assessment, but only for the initial 30 days of a continuous placement. See [Northstar Care General Practice Guide](#), Section II. B, Primary Benefits. Agency staff may decide to conduct an assessment at any time, replacing the emergency rate. Once the initial assessment is completed, if the benefit goes:

- Up, the higher rate is retroactive to the placement date
- Down, the lower rate is effective as of the date the assessment was approved or the 31<sup>st</sup> day of placement, whichever is earlier.

**Note:** In early 2015, SSIS will always set a lower rate to the 31<sup>st</sup> day of placement. The capability described above will be added as soon as possible.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivisions 1 and 5-6; section 256N.26, subdivision 6]

**Note:** A county or tribal agency may pay more than the emergency rate but the additional amount is non-reimbursable through Northstar Care. If paying more than the emergency rate, payments must be split and entered into SSIS as two payments, one for:

- Emergency rate (Level D), and

- The additional cost with a special cost code of 96 – Additional foster care (non-reimbursable).

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.26, subdivision 6]

## **B. Assessors**

The county or tribal agency **must** ensure the uniform assessment is completed by capable and trained assessors who are overseen by the lead approver and other approvers. Assessors are responsible for accurately assessing a child's needs and the parenting actually provided by the caregivers. Case managers may be best for completing assessments with input from a child's team, but agency specialists may also accomplish these tasks.

To complete a comprehensive, accurate assessment, assessors should:

- Have significant knowledge about a child, their needs, parenting provided and other important information
- Gather input from a child's team (caregivers, licensing worker, guardian ad litem, parents, youth, etc.)
- Enter assessment information into SSIS and send for agency approval
- Send caregiver, or youth in extended foster care – supervised independent living, notices and rating reports.

## **Number of Assessors**

At minimum, all agencies should have at least one assessor and one "backup" assessor.

**Note:** One staff person cannot assess and approve the same assessment. Staff may have both roles in SSIS, but cannot perform both roles for the same assessment.

## **Appeals**

The assessment rating report and notices have information on the appeals process.

## **Collaboration**

It is vital for a comprehensive individual assessment that assessors gather input from and collaborate with caregivers, licensing workers, placing workers, parents, guardians ad litem, youth and others on a child's team. Collaboration with caregivers is particularly important. Except in unusual cases, the county or tribal agency **must** engage the caregiver as the assessment is being completed.

When involving caregivers in the assessment process, focus on:

- The parental care provided by caregivers at the time of assessment
- Parenting provided, not services
- Soliciting feedback.

The county or tribal agency **should** engage youth ages 13 and older in the assessment process, when developmentally appropriate. For these youth:

- Involve them in a facilitated discussion

- Follow a Positive Youth Development model
- Be mindful of their limited knowledge of the assessment process
- May legally be an adult
- Solicit feedback.

For youth in extended foster care – supervised independent living, there will not be a caregiver. In addition to the above:

- Provide youth with a copy of the assessment
- Provide youth with notices and rating reports.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivision 2 and 256N.28, subdivision 2]

## C. Approvers

After assessors complete entry of an assessment, it **must** be reviewed and approved by an agency-designated approver. Approvers:

- Review a child's needs and parenting indicators to ensure their well-being needs are met
- Ensure documentation of high child needs and subsequent high levels of parenting
- Ensure assessments are completed by day 30 of a child's out-of-home placement and subsequent due dates.

Quality assurance begins with approvers, so they should:

- Be in a position to disagree with an assessor, such as a supervisor
- Exercise good judgment
- Communicate and collaborate with assessors and other approvers to ensure consistency across an agency and work toward statewide consistency
- Identify agency system issues related to the assessment
- Provide consultation, support and guidance to assessors.

Approvers may send an assessment back for additional work or changes before approving it.

## Tips for Approvers

The following tips may help approvers:

- **Start with the scoring.** The scoring tab provides the assessment at a glance.
- **Review the child needs rating.** If a's or b's are selected, this means a child was assessed with a number of strengths. In contrast, if c's or d's are selected, this means a child has a number of needs.
- **Compare the child's needs rating to the parenting indicator levels.** This will identify areas that are not conforming. Lack of conformance may be appropriate, but may need further review in the assessment.
- **Always review Domain C, Supervision, Guidance and Structure.** If parenting indicators are rated extensive or exceptional, this means a caregiver is providing supervision that is not typical for a child's age.
- **Read documentation of the assessment.** Documentation must describe a child's "d" ratings and parenting indicators rated extensive and/or exceptional. If the documentation does not adequately describe the rating, review with the assessor.

## **Number of Approvers**

At minimum, all agencies should have at least one approver and one “backup” approver.

## **Time Frame for Approval**

Assessments should be approved within five days of completion.

## **Check the Approval Log Regularly**

Approvers should check the Approval Log regularly. Approvers in larger agencies will need to check daily.

**Note:** Until an assessment is approved, it cannot be used as a basis for payments in SSIS.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivision 2]

## **D. Scoring the Assessment**

Scoring is done automatically in SSIS. This provides a consistent scoring process throughout the state.

Scoring depends on “building a ladder” for the caregiver. The best caregiver does not stop doing Basic level parenting when Significant parent indicators are added. They do not stop doing Basic or Significant levels of parenting when adding Extensive or Exceptional parent indicators. A complete ladder has a parenting indicator on each rung or level.

Higher assessment scores result from:

- Higher ratings on needs (more c’s and d’s)
- More parenting indicators
- Higher ratings in parent indicators (more Extensive and Exceptional)
- A complete “ladder” of Basic, Significant, Extensive and Exceptional parenting indicators.

Lower assessment scores result from:

- Lower ratings on needs (more a’s and b’s)
- Fewer parenting indicators
- Few high ratings on indicators (few Significant, possibly no Extensive or Exceptional)
- An incomplete ladder (missing levels among the indicators within a domain)
- Selecting the indicator “None” within a domain.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivision 2]

## **E. Extraordinary Level Increases**

The 2013 Minnesota Legislature added language to statute to provide a mechanism through which up to five levels can be added to the supplemental difficulty of care. Extraordinary Level increases are for a very small number of children with the highest needs. Extraordinary Level benefits are for caregivers providing intensive supervision that

fills a gap not covered by other services. An additional level of approval by a state approver at the department is needed for Extraordinary Level increases.

To qualify for an Extraordinary Level increase:

- An assessment must be completed
- The department's approval is required
- A child must physically reside with a caregiver.

**Note:** For more detailed information on Extraordinary Levels, see the [Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth Practice Guide](#).

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivisions 2 and 4]

## F. Financially Responsible Agency

Northstar Care names the financially responsible agency as the one that conducts the initial assessment and any reassessments, or ensures that these are conducted. The county or tribal agency that has financial responsibility at permanency continues to play that role after transfer of permanent legal and physical custody or adoption.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.02, subdivision 10; and 256N.24, subdivisions 5-14]

### When Two Agencies are Involved

Ordinarily, the legally and the financially responsible agencies are the same. When different, the legally and financially responsible agencies could both be counties, but the more common situation is that a tribal agency is legally responsible and a county agency is financially responsible.

If the legally and financially responsible agencies are different, the financially responsible agency:

- Is responsible for ensuring that an assessment is completed.
- Has final approval, but **must** request the assistance of the legally responsible agency in completing the assessment.
- Must give written notice of the results of an assessment or reassessment to the caregiver(s) or youth in extended foster care – supervised independent living within 15 days. The Notice of Assessment is in SSIS and includes the final benefit level and rights of appeal.

There are three possible situations regarding assessment capabilities of a legally responsible agency:

- 1) A legally responsible agency has all assessment capabilities. In this situation, the financially responsible agency must give great deference to the legally responsible agency's approved assessment. The legally responsible agency:
  - Is willing and able to do an assessment in a timely manner
  - Initiates an assessment or reassessment
  - Ensures that all its assessors are trained on the assessment tool
  - Have one or more internal agency-designated approvers who ensure agency and statewide consistency

- Ensures through its agency-designated approver(s) that required documentation of high needs and high parenting levels is adequately covered.
- 2) The legally responsible agency has most assessment capabilities and:
- Is willing and able to do an assessment in a timely manner.
  - Initiates an assessment or reassessment.
  - Ensures that all its assessors are trained on the assessment tool.
  - Does not have an internal agency-designated approver. The financially responsible agency must verify that required documentation of high needs and high parenting levels is adequately covered. The financially responsible agency-approver must work with the legally responsible agency to ensure statewide consistency with individual assessments and, if appropriate, with assessments through time.
- 3) The legally responsible agency is unwilling or unable to do the assessment. In this situation, the financially responsible agency:
- Seeks input from the legally responsible agency and completes an assessment based on that input, discussions with caregiver(s), youth, if appropriate, and considers other available case information.
  - Initiates an assessment or reassessment.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.02, subdivisions 10 and 14; section 256N.24; section 256N.28, subdivision 2]

## IV. Reassessment

If a child is moving from foster care to kinship or adoption, a new assessment is not required if the following four conditions are all true:

- Child is in Northstar Foster Care
- The most recent assessment is with the prospective permanent caregiver
- The assessment is current (usually less than one year), and
- Nothing major has changed that would suggest that a new assessment should be conducted.

There are situations when SSIS might require a new assessment. An example is when a significant birthday has occurred between when the previous assessment was done and beginning the eligibility determination. Two significant birthdays (ages 7 and 13) affect monthly supplemental payment amounts.

For reassessment in Northstar Foster Care:

- A reassessment is due six months after an approved initial assessment, then annually thereafter
- A reassessment **may** be done more frequently at any time agency staff decides it is warranted
- Foster parents may request a reassessment if at least six months have elapsed since any previous assessment or reassessment
- Foster parents may also request a reassessment in less than six months by providing written documentation of significant changes in a child's needs that necessitate an earlier reassessment.

To request a reassessment, foster parent(s) send a written request for a reassessment to the financially responsible agency. The written request must include:

- The name of the child
- The name, address and contact information of caregivers
- The reasons for the request, and
- If requesting less than six months after the previous assessment, written supporting documentation for why a reassessment is needed now.

If a reassessment is requested by the caregiver(s), and is appropriate:

- The financially responsible agency is responsible for ensuring that a reassessment is completed
- The financially responsible agency has final approval, but **must** request the assistance of the legally responsible agency in completing a reassessment
- The agency responsible for reassessment must notify caregiver(s) of the reason for delay, if a reassessment cannot be completed (including approval) within 30 days of a caregiver's request, and a reasonable estimate of when a reassessment can be completed.

For reassessment of Northstar Kinship Assistance or Adoption Assistance:

- When Northstar Kinship or Adoption Assistance Benefit Agreements have been negotiated and signed by all parties, reassessments must pause until the court orders transferring custody or finalizing an adoption, or until the benefit agreement lapses, whichever comes first.
- After the court has ordered transfer of permanent legal and physical custody or finalized adoption, there are no required reassessments. However, caregivers may request a reassessment if at least six months have passed since any previous assessment or reassessment.
- The process for requesting and completing a reassessment is the same as for Northstar Foster Care.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.24, subdivisions 1, 5-6, 9-12 and 14; section 256N.26, subdivision 15]

## V. Special Assessment for a Commissioner Transition

The department orders commissioner transitions when funding permits, and it makes sense to transition a child who is on a pre-Northstar Care permanency program (Relative Custody Assistance, Adoption Assistance, or the Minnesota Permanency Demonstration Project) into Northstar Care.

The department is unlikely to request special assessments for commissioner transitions. However, if requested, an agency must complete the special assessment promptly, no longer than 30 days.

[ Minnesota Statutes, section 256N.20, subdivision 7; section 256N.21, subdivision 6; section 256N.22, subdivision 13; section 256N.24, subdivision 14; section 256N.24, subdivisions 1, 7-8 and 12-14; section 256N.25, subdivisions 2 and 7]

## **VI. Resources**

The department has issued a number of Northstar Care related-publications, including:

- [Northstar Care for Children General Practice Guide](#)
- [Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth Practice Guide](#)
- [Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth SSIS Tutorial](#)
- [Northstar Care for Children Maintenance and Supplemental Difficulty of Care Payment Rates, bulletin #14-32-11](#)
- [Pre-Northstar Foster Care Program Maintenance Rates, bulletin #14-32-10](#)
- [Paths to Permanency](#)

### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Advisory**

This information is available in accessible formats for people with disabilities by calling (651) 431-4660 (voice) or by using your preferred relay service. For other information on disability rights and protections, contact the agency's ADA coordinator.