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Statement from Rick Roberts, director of the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services:

Today's meeting with the Hamilton County Commissioners has accelerated our plan to participate in a county-wide system to notify our department of foster parents with criminal backgrounds. We are now requesting that each foster parent who has not done so already, and all adults living in that foster parent's home, submit a signed release within 30 days granting permission for their Social Security number to be screened in the new system. Those who do not comply within 30 days will no longer be eligible to care for new foster care children and we will petition the Hamilton County Juvenile Court to remove all existing foster children from their homes, despite any trauma the disruption might create for the child.

We are unsure of the ramifications of this decision. We do know that we have a severe need for foster parents at this time and losing any foster parent from our 285-home network or from the private agencies that care for 445 of our children would put additional strain on the system. Being a foster parent is a tough job; we are thankful for the many selfless, loving families who now help us and our hope is more will come forward.

Since Sept. 20, 2006, we have worked side-by-side with the Hamilton County Clerk's Office to make this instant-notification system a reality. Administrators from this department have talked about this project on camera in media interviews and with officials in Columbus as a project that could become a model for the state. This is indicative of how serious this department takes its responsibility when it comes to keeping foster children safe. We often go above and beyond state requirements when it comes to safety. We recently gave the commissioners a list of reforms we'd like to see, given money and resources. We have 12-14 staff dedicated to working with people in Columbus on many of the reforms that are being discussed. In fact, many are our ideas.

Our pilot project – which was always intended to include only the names of foster parents who work directly with our department – revealed 27 out of 304 parents had criminal backgrounds. Twenty one of these foster parents had convictions that we were already aware of through our normal background checks. However, because normal background checks only turn up convictions, there were six arrests that had not come to our attention.

We have preliminarily investigated all 27 cases. In cases where there were convictions, none were for offenses that would automatically exclude a person from being a foster parent through state regulations that govern foster care. Most had been thrown out or pleaded down to lesser cases. All but five of the arrests were five years old or older.

While many of the cases involve passing bad checks or are related to the confinement of dogs, there are a few more serious offenses that we will investigate further. Should we determine the homes are not suitable, we will petition the Hamilton County Juvenile Court for their removal and a hearing with all concerned parties will be held. A magistrate will ultimately make the decision on the child's removal.

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We're happy to see this pilot project moving forward to the next phase, as it will enhance what we already do to help protect children. We currently conduct criminal, fingerprint and credit checks, check prior abuse and neglect history, ask parents to participate in thorough home studies, require 30 hours of upfront training and more ongoing training, and visit foster parents homes at least once a month.

Many of our employees have dedicated their lives to helping children. Child protection is the department's top priority. We look forward to adding this valuable tool to the mix of things we do to help keep Hamilton County's children safe.

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