

Realigning Foster Care

Q: Why is Hamilton County moving to a network-based foster care system?

A: Moving to a network-based foster care system benefits children, foster families and the agency. For example:

- The foster homes can capitalize on improved support and pay offered by network systems.
- Children – who increasingly come into the child welfare system with complicated needs -- will receive advanced, “therapeutic care” in network foster homes. Those who need only basic care will receive care from organizations whose primary mission is to provide foster care.
- This frees up resources (money and personnel) to expend on upfront services that will help keep families intact and children out of more costly long-term care.
- This will allow workers now dedicated to foster care to move to investigating child abuse allegations and providing ongoing monitoring in abuse cases.
- The move to network foster care will help with foster care recruitment. Private networks have an easier path to recruiting families because they do not have the stigma or red tape of government.

Q: When will this transition occur?

A: All agency foster homes will transition to private networks by April 1. The agency will stop taking applications for new homes on Jan. 22.

Q: How many homes will it impact?

A: The agency has about 220 homes...but only about 100 of them have placements. JFS will notify them of a transition deadline, provide them with information on area networks, help them through the recertification process and work to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Q: This is a big change for the agency?

A: Not really. More than three quarters of the children in the agency’s foster care system are already in network homes. Only about 20% of foster children are in agency homes. Most children require the more advanced care only available in private, therapeutic homes.

Q: Why are networks better?

A: Most networks are able to offer foster families more support when it comes to raising foster children than Hamilton County provides. They have smaller caseloads and can provide more individualized attention. They often pay more, too.

Additionally, network foster families are trained to provide the more advanced care that many abused and neglected children need. Therapeutic foster care offers lower caseloads, fewer placements, more case management and other advances over the traditional, more basic foster care offered through Hamilton County.

Q: What will happen to the children?

A: Children will not be disrupted from their placements. The families will move to new providers, children will not move from families. They will remain in the homes they have come to know as their own. The children will notice little change.

Q: Is this move being made for budget reasons?

A: Partially. But it is also being made because it will benefit children, foster families and the agency. There will be cost savings through reduced spending on support, transportation, child care, recruitment and training.

Q: How else does this benefit the agency?

A: The move to network foster care will allow workers now dedicated to foster care to move to investigating child abuse allegations and providing ongoing monitoring in abuse cases. These additional resources will allow the agency to provide more oversight and services to children before they enter the foster care system.

Additionally, this frees up resources (money and personnel) to expend on upfront services that will help keep children out of costly long-term care. This allows the agency to focus on keeping children out of foster care. The ideal situation in abuse and neglect cases is to provide services to the biological family so that the children can remain safely in their own families, homes, neighborhoods and schools. Children almost always prefer to stay with their biological families. Providing services such as parenting classes, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health treatment, etc. are one way to keep the children safe in their own environments. And, in the long run, spending money up front to keep children out of more costly long-term care will save dollars overall. It is the ounce-of-prevention-beats-a-pound-of-cure theory.

Q: Will children be safe in network homes?

A: HCJFS has for many years purchased foster care services from the same private network agencies that will be working with the transitioning foster families. Oversight regulations and requirements for networks will remain the same as for agency homes.

The agency will continue to require by contract network employees to make at least one visit per month to each home, seeing and interviewing the child to insure the child's safety and care. More such visits will be required as the level of care increases. This is already the norm. Case workers assigned to the children will also make visits in the home and other agency employees will be assigned to ensure networks' compliance.

Q: What does this mean for foster families?

A: Hopefully, the transition is easy. It is fairly simple....they must choose a provider and apply to that agency. Providers have different philosophies, pay different rates and have different requirements for certification. We will provide network information to our families and host a provider forum to let providers introduce themselves and discuss their agency with our families. This will help families choose the right fit.

Families may have to undergo additional training or perform additional duties to meet the requirements of certain new providers. We will work to ease the burden and make the transition as smooth as possible.

Q: I am an agency foster parent. What should I do?

A: We will work with you to make the transition as smooth as possible. You will need to determine which network you wish to transition too, and initiate the request to that network, but we will help support the transition.

- Research the network agencies and apply with the one that will best fit your needs. You may only apply to one network for transfer at a time.
- Please let us know if you intend to transfer or withdraw and provide us with a signed release of information so that we can respond to the network with whom you apply.

Q: How long will this process take?

A: The transfer process takes approximately 75 days from the date you apply to a network to transfer your license. Within 15 days of the date HCJFS receives your signed release of information and we are notified that you have applied, we will provide your Foster Care Record to the network. The network has 60 days to work with you and complete the transfer process.

Q: Will I need to do anything to complete the transfer process after I apply for transfer?

A: The network agency you have selected will contact you to:

- Schedule a home visit/meet with all members of your household,
- Arrange for new criminal background checks for all caretakers/adult members of you household,

- Solicit three new personal references (must not be related to you or live with you)
- Conduct a new Safety Audit

Q: Will I still have a Foster Care Support worker?

A: Foster Care staff will begin to be reassigned beginning February 1, 2010, so you will not continue to be supported by your foster care support worker. But, some staff will not be reassigned for a period of time to help support your transition.

If you have a placement in your home, you will still be visited by the child's Children's Services worker at least monthly.

Q: What if I want to adopt?

A: Hamilton County will still handle adoptions. One of the benefits of this is it allows the agency to focus in on things that provide permanency to children. If you are seeking approval to adopt or have already adopted, you will continue working directly with Hamilton County. If you are approved as an adoptive home and certified as a foster parent but do not have a child placed in your home, you should transfer your foster care certification to a network provider as all foster care placements will be made through network providers.

Q: Can I still receive foster care training through Hamilton County?

A: Ongoing training will be available on a space-available basis for existing foster parents. Also, the county will continue to offer "lightning rounds" of training for prospective foster parents who want to quickly obtain their license. Please visit www.ocwtp.com/swortc.htm and register as you have done in the past.

Q: If we have more questions, whom do we call?

A: Margie Weaver is the agency's contact person on this. She is available through at 946-1666.